

## IN THE ENIGMA OF EMPOWERMENT - WHERE DO MALAYSIAN YOUTH STAND IN THE CURRENT MALAYSIA'S FOREIGN POLICY?

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### ABSTRACT

*With the recently launched Focus in Continuity: Framework for Malaysia's Foreign Policy in A Post-Pandemic World, Malaysia has demonstrated its current priorities in its current foreign policy which include revitalizing the economy, health, and cultural diplomacy, multilateralism efforts, and security. However, there is a lack of youth presence embodied within the said document thereby, poses a question of where Malaysian youths stand in the current Malaysian foreign policy. This article aims to analyze the role of Malaysian youths in current Malaysia's foreign policy with reliance on primary documents namely the aforementioned document, Foreign Policy Framework of the New Malaysia, Ministry of Foreign Affairs Strategic Plan 2021-2025, the Twelfth Malaysia Plan (2021-2025), and the Shared Prosperity Vision 2030. This article is significant within the literature on Malaysia's foreign policy analysis to have an in-depth understanding of the capacity of Malaysian youths to be key players within the public diplomacy spectrum. Additionally, this article provides possible opportunities for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Malaysia and its agencies to further empower Malaysian youth within the scope of its ever-so-developing foreign policy.*

**Keywords:** Malaysia's foreign policy; youth empowerment; youth-led diplomacy; youth involvement and participation

### INTRODUCTION

In international relations, state actors play a significant role when it comes to formulating and executing the State's foreign policy. However, with the advancement of technology and globalization, the youths have become emerging actors, shaping the conduct of a country not only on the domestic level but also on the international outlook. Bearing in mind youths fall in the range from fifteen to twenty-four years old, this group has made up 18 per cent of the population in Malaysia with 5.862 million people (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2021). Considering the high level of participation from the youths deriving from various forms and approaches poses a higher level of good governance portrayed by the country, it is pertinent to allow such force to take place in the case of Malaysia. This could act as a positive precedent to illustrate how foreign policy should capture the essence that the Malaysian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) tries to exhibit, which is an inclusive-based foreign policy.

Thereby, this commentary intends to discover the role of Malaysian youth within the spectrum of Malaysian foreign policy by depicting the aspiration and

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responsibility, which governs the Malaysian youths in the present time. This is about critical main documents produced by the Government of Malaysia namely, Focus in Continuity: Framework for Malaysia's Foreign Policy in A Post-Pandemic World, Foreign Policy Framework of the New Malaysia, Ministry of Foreign Affairs Strategic Plan 2021-2025, the Twelfth Malaysia Plan (2021-2025), and the Shared Prosperity Vision 2030. Undoubtedly, the responsibility shared by the Malaysian youth concerning Malaysian foreign policy has been minimal. Therefore, the analysis is on the pertinent question of what, and to what extent the role of youths is significant in Malaysia's foreign policy.

In contrast with her counterparts in Indonesia and the Philippines for instance, Malaysia does not necessarily groom youths to encapsulate and present themselves as an extension of MOFA - diplomatic opportunities are limited and participation of these youths does not truly embody and reflect the agenda put forth by MOFA. Henceforth, this commentary aims to highlight possible ventures that the MOFA and its agencies could further empower Malaysian youths within the scope of its ever-so-developing foreign policy. Moving forward, this paper will answer these questions at hand, draw the correlation between Malaysian youths and foreign policy, and lastly, depict the entire picture to improve the situation better.

## **MALAYSIAN YOUTH ASPIRE TO MORE REPRESENTATION**

Despite the evolution of governing administration in Malaysia, the views and perceptions towards Malaysian youths from the government lens have remained similar throughout history. Overall, youths are often seen as part of the society that should be engrossed in improving their personal capital development and frequently embodying sentiments such as patriotism within their circle of influence. Even with the likes of globalization and technological advancement, these narratives remain the same - it is then a matter of how these tools are utilized to fulfil the Malaysian youth's moral obligations from contextualising to framing them. Before dissecting the level of participation among Malaysian youths delves into the current Malaysian foreign policy, it is necessary to illustrate the aspirations predetermined by them to comprehend the entire structure.

Generally, Malaysian youth hope to have a Malaysia that is more inclusive of their voices be it through representation in Parliament and even in policies. This is supported by a survey conducted entitled Youth Aspiration Manifesto Survey with 63 per cent of the respondents believing that youth are not represented in politics (Undi100%, 2022). This finding is compelling as it indicates to us that the youth want more representation in politics so that they could be the agent to make and adopt policies. Such influence in agenda-setting and policy-making can ensure their voices are heard and they could improve their quality of life. As intersectional issues concerning youths namely economic opportunities, climate change and ethnic security have been highlighted prior in the document, it is important to note that such issues require the adoption of measures which goes both ways – domestic and international. Hence, youth involvement from the national point of view solely will not resolve the matter. Their inputs must be a channel in local and foreign policies to ensure that said policies can work together hand-in-hand in resolving the dilemmas that Malaysian

youth face (primarily the ones related to United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals) and ensuring their vision of a better Malaysia can be seen in the coming future.

Therefore, youth tend to channel their motivations and aspirations into volunteerism based on their interests and values (Siti, Turiman, Jasmin, Izmi & Azimi, 2016; Nur, Turiman, Izmi & Siti, 2018). As volunteering provides these youth with a platform to enhance their fundamental skills, this situation also implies the drive for them in the establishment of nation-building. Consequently, they find themselves doing activities that not only reflect their self-interest and values but also enable them to empower the community towards the agenda pushed by the government. This can be seen as an alternative method to address the concerns raised aforementioned over time. However, its effectiveness in structural matters has yet to be proven.

### **IDEALS VS REALITY: YOUTH PARTICIPATION IN MALAYSIA'S FOREIGN POLICY**

Scholars have long argued that greater participation of youths in politics indicates that there is a high level of democracy within the country and youth's voices are considerably represented in various means, especially in governance and politics (Weiss, 2020). Within the context of foreign policy, the youths tend to find themselves participating under the frame of youth-led diplomacy. Albeit the concept seems foreign to some, youth-led diplomacy has been emerging for a while now and is practised by many youths directly or indirectly internationally. Youth-led diplomacy can be defined as youths being the agent to spark, engage and lead dialogues between other actors within international relations. This form of diplomacy can be seen to be the grey area that overlaps traditional diplomacy and public diplomacy. While Melissen (2005) may argue that public diplomacy is often stimulated by economic motives, Nye (2008) provides an extension to the literature that governments engage with public diplomacy by the virtue of attracting societies and other actors by showcasing a favourable portrayal of the country to them. Thus, youth-led diplomacy in this accord claims youths to lead the practice of public diplomacy vis-a-vis as a tool of soft power and becomes an extension of a country's Ministry of Foreign Affairs to propagate the agenda brought forward not only towards the general public but also to government officials and other significant actors.

Bearing in mind the definition of youth-led diplomacy proposed above, we will now narrow the discussion within this article to the aspect of its application in Malaysia. The first role that youths play concerning Malaysia's current foreign policy will be in the spectrum of agenda-setting. Obtaining the information from the five primary documents aforementioned, we see MOFA engages youths in setting agendas through hosting dialogues and the youths, particularly students are invited to listen, talk and react to the information provided. For instance, two youth workshops on counter-terrorism hosted by Southeast Asia Regional Centre for Counter-Terrorism have been mandated within the Strategic Plan 2021-2025. This action allows one of MOFA's main agendas which is countering terrorism to be nurtured and grasped by the youths. Despite these attempts for youth participation, the extent of agenda-setting from the youths has been very limited as they are the ones seen to be executing the agenda set rather than vice versa.

The second level of participation in Malaysia's foreign policy will be policy formulation and consultation. Arguably, the nature of diplomacy has been rather elitist, especially in the policy formulation and consultation level have been of a closed-door nature. Fortunately, some of the officers in the Policy and Strategic Planning Division, MOFA consist of youths but the extent to of their input is incorporated into the formulation and consultation process poses another doubt with such matter. Aside from within the formal structures themselves, Civil Society Organizations have raised concerns and matters of discussion worthy of the attention of the ministry. Some notable organizations which have been acknowledged by MOFA and comprised of youths are inclusive of United Nations Association of Malaysia Youth and SUHAKAM. Despite this acknowledgement, the weight of their input is not persuasive enough and requires a more formidable assertion to be heard. In addition, the establishment of two Consultative Council on Foreign Policy under the premiership of YB Dato' Saifuddin Abdullah, Minister of Foreign Affairs lacked representation from the youths. To counter such a narrative, Saifuddin has mandated the establishment of The Youth Taskforce on Foreign Affairs and Diplomacy in 2019 including Malaysian Youth Diplomacy and several other youth organisations. However, the consultation that took place was short as the task force was dissolved later in 2020. Nevertheless, there were attempts seen to incorporate more youth participation in Malaysia's current foreign policymaking.

The last role that youths are seen to execute concerning Malaysia's current foreign policy is the implementation of the aforementioned policy. Unlike the first two roles, this angle has been dominantly more active as the implementation transcends localities and levels of participation which can be executed either by MOFA and its agencies or independently by Civil Society Organizations and universities. This implementation can be seen in the conduct of forums, events and dialogues hosted namely by the Department of Multilateral Affairs MOFA, Department of Communications and Public Diplomacy MOFA and local universities. The discourses focus on providing clarification to the foreign policy, understanding how it is implemented and how could it be performed not only from the domestic level but internationally too. Oftentimes, youths are attracted to be included in such programs - occasionally being the speaker and sometimes being the audience.

## **WAYS TO MOVE FORWARD IN MAKING MALAYSIA'S FOREIGN POLICY MORE YOUTH-INCLUSIVE**

Although the nature of MOFA has been rather conservative, over the years the ministry has started to open its arms to engage with the youths. This is evident with the increment of engagements made over the past decades. However, past engagements were rather dialogue-based rather than legislative-based. Accordingly, the first way MOFA could overcome this is to acknowledge the power of the youths. Rather than looking at the youths as a threat, the ministry should view them as an extension of MOFA by grooming them to be capable leaders be it within their local community, university or industry to understand the aspiration pushed forward by the government. Should the MOFA be able to nurture the upcoming line-ups of leaders (not fairly limited to opportunities like Perdana Fellow), the youths can equip the skillsets of diplomacy, negotiating and charisma which reflects a positive outlook for MOFA.

Secondly, MOFA should include more youths in the decision-making process through multi-approach systems. Although current efforts are commendable it is still rather subpar from our peers in the Philippines, Singapore or Indonesia to say the least. To merely include youths as an additional round of consultation can be seen as tokenistic, and this will reflect poorly on MOFA's image who happens to always act as an inclusive ministry. As such, programs should be conducted beyond merely dialogues and forums too, preliminary focus group discussions and surveys to ensure youths' voices are properly heard from the beginning to the end of the foreign policy-making and implementation process.

## **CONCLUSION**

Taking a look back to the past, Malaysia's current foreign policy has undergone various transitions and it is safe to say have begun to be youth-friendly. Participation which was strictly only based on dialogues has now expanded to retrieving consultation and mandatory engagement from the youths to the ministry. Despite this, it is not sufficient enough for us to deduct that Malaysia's foreign policy has been pro-youth - it is otherwise. MOFA and its agencies should understand that youths are no longer confined to their traditional roles being merely students or young working professionals. With the transformation of technology and globalization, the youths can now easily go to international conferences and seminars which indirectly represent Malaysia. With the failure of equipping these bright minds, they might send a false representation of what Malaysia strives for in the international arena. From a domestic perspective, failure of making more room for youth participation in either formulating, decision making or implementing the foreign policy may create a situation of apathy thereby, making the subject even more elitist. As such, MOFA should seize the opportunity to build their identity revolving around the youths to better embody the agenda that they strive for.

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