



RCAS Commentary

Dwindling Political Trust and Democratic Decline in Malaysia

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October 4, 2022

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About RCAS

RCAS is a non-profit research organization focusing on the maritime issues and regional integration in the Indo-Pacific region. It is a newly-established institution founded in February 2022 by Dr. Nian Peng, in Haikou, China. We, at the moment, have an international research team with resident/non-resident researchers from China and other Asian states.

RCAS seizes the opportunity that China is building Hainan Free-Trade Port in which the Hainan Island will become an important window for China's opening up to the Pacific Ocean and the Indian Ocean to become a leading research institute and think tank on maritime affairs in the Indo-Pacific region. So far, RCAS focuses on the maritime disputes and maritime cooperation in the Pacific Ocean and the Indian Ocean, and various regional cooperation mechanisms such as BRI, LMC, RCEP and so on. It is committed to promoting the maritime cooperation, regional integration and academic exchanges in the Indo-Pacific region at large.

RCAS has received a number of research funding from universities and foundations, and conducted research programs of the South China Sea(SCS) dispute, China-South/Southeast Asian relations, BRI in South/Southeast Asia, terrorism/anti-terrorism in Afghanistan, and so on. RCAS researchers have won various awards from the Chinese Ministry of Commerce and the Hainan government.

RCAS has published nearly 10 books in Chinese and English, and more than 20 papers on SSCI/SCOPUS/CSSCI-indexed journals. Recent English publications include *Populism, Nationalism and South China Sea Dispute: Chinese and Southeast Asian Perspectives*(Singapore: Springer Nature, 2022); *Crossing the Himalayas: Buddhist Ties, Regional Integration and Great-Power Rivalry*(Singapore: Springer Nature, 2021); *The Reshaping of China-Southeast Asia Relations in Light of the COVID-19 Pandemic*(Singapore: Springer Nature, 2021); *International Pressures, Strategic Preference and Myanmar's China Policy since 1988*(Singapore: Springer Nature, 2020); *A Preliminary Study on the Foreign Policy of the New Pakistani Government*(2022); *Managing the South China Sea Dispute: Multilateral and Bilateral Approaches*(2022); *Hedging Against the Dragon: Myanmar's Tangled Relations with China since 1988*(2021); *The Budding Indo-Myanmar Relations: Rising But Limited Challenges for China*(2019).

RCAS has also published hundreds of articles and been interviewed in various local and international media outlets such as Asia Centre in France, *The Diplomat* in the United States, *East Asian Forum(EAF)* in Australia, *Bangkok Post* in Thailand, *Lian He Zao Bao* and *Think China* in Singapore, *South China Morning Post(SCMP)* and *China-US Focus* in Hong Kong, *CGTN* and *Global Times* in China. RCAS researchers have actively participated in international conferences or study visits in the US, India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Myanmar, Cambodia, and other places. Welcome to visit our website: <http://www.rcas.top>.

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Introduction

Political trust, the extent to which citizens trust political actors or institutions to act in their interests, is imperative to the overall health of a political system. A high degree of political trust among voters would encourage them to participate in political and civic activities that are supportive of democracy. This, in turn, would foster accountability among politicians and the pursuit of the collective good of society.

Conversely, a low level of political trust could breed cynicism and political disengagement among the electorates. Left unchecked, a low level of political trust could lead to a downward spiral of democratic decline.

Over the past two years, electorates in Malaysia are showing a low level of political trust for politicians and government. A study conducted by Ipsos Malaysia in 2021 revealed that Malaysians have the lowest trust levels for politicians compared to professionals such as teachers, doctors, and scientists. Separately, in a survey conducted by Merdeka Centre in 2021 among Malaysian youths, it was found that 66 percent of young people think that politicians and public officials “don’t care what people think”. In the same study, more than two-thirds of the respondents expressed no interest to participate in politics. The 2022 Edelman Trust Barometer also found that many Malaysians expressed eroding trust in the government. Collectively, the results of these surveys show a worrying trend of dwindling political trust.

These survey results should not come as a surprise considering the political instability in the country over the past two years. In 2020, the political coup popularly known as the Sheraton Move saw the collapse of the Pakatan Harapan (PH) government when Partai Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia (Bersatu) – a component party of PH – and several members of Parliaments from Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR) withdrew their support from the coalition. The PH government was subsequently replaced by the Perikatan Nasional (PN) coalition, comprising the former ruling

coalition Barisan Nasional (BN) and the defectors from PH. After a short stint of 17 months, the PN government collapsed in a similar fashion when 15 lawmakers within its coalition withdrew their support.

The power jostling characterized by shifting alliances and loose coalitions has caused political instability in the country. What was worse is that all these unfolded amid the Covid-19 pandemic where the average voters were struggling with the double whammy of economic and health concerns. Such public display of power gives the impression that politicians are only interested in their own interests instead of public interests. Inevitably, it contributed to the growing political distrust of the general public.

At present, the Malaysian government is led by Prime Minister Ismail Sabri from United Malays National Organisation (UMNO). While some semblance of political stability is maintained, partly because of the memorandum signed between the ruling party and the opposition, the Prime Minister is pressured to call for an early general election. While it is uncertain when the election would be called, what is sure is that it has to be called by September 2023.

Challenges and Consequences of Dwindling Political Trust

Given the low level of political trust among the electorates, the immediate challenge for all political parties is a high voter turnout rate in the upcoming general election. After witnessing the changes of government that are void of an electoral mandate, it is perhaps safe to argue that many Malaysians are not incentivized to participate in the electoral process. They may feel that their participation would not make any meaningful impact and choose to abstain from voting. If there is a sizable population of voters who choose not to vote, electoral results stemming from a low voter turnout rate would not truly reflect the aspiration of the larger electorate.

In the mid-term, a low level of political trust in Malaysia would also have implications beyond electoral participation. The electorates may withdraw themselves from any kind of political or civic participation as they may feel that their participation may not have any meaningful impact. Consequently, it would lessen public pressure on the government. In tandem, elected politicians may be tempted to dictate agendas that may not necessarily serve the common good of the public but only the interests of particular groups.

In the long run, it will widen the existing inequalities and deepen the political distrust of the average voters. Furthermore, it would certainly lead to worsening governmental performance such as poorer public services. By contrast, involved citizens would demand transparency and accountability from officeholders, and strong public pressure will force elected politicians to take public interests seriously.

Growing distrusts of politicians and governments could also lead to a lack of interest and engagement in political discourse, which would in turn weaken healthy public debates. Without diverse views and inputs, it will be challenging for people to form objective opinions on politicians and governments. As it is, political narratives in Malaysia tend to pivot around race and religion and are being framed as a zero-sum game.

Yet in reality, policy debates are much more complicated. More often than not, compromises are necessary for the collective good of national interests. But this is not something that is commonly communicated to the public – it is rare for Malaysian politicians to ask their supporters to compromise. Instead, some if not all, would most likely prey on voters' insecurities to woo their support. Alternatively, they may make accusations against their opponents and resort to mud-slinging. An absence of healthy public debates or political discourse that is driven by factual and rational arguments would harden partisanship and entrench polarisation.

In gist, a low level of political trust could facilitate political disengagement from the electorates. It would widen the gaps between political elites and the average voters. In the long run, political distrust would also undermine the democracy of the country.

Measures to Mitigate the Dwindling Political Trust

Moving forward, there is a need to arrest this dwindling political trust among the electorates because the collective participation of the people is necessary for the democratic health of Malaysia.

To arrest this dwindling sense of political trust would require efforts from a spectrum of actors and institutions. First, politicians from across the spectrum should inspire voters to come out to vote. Rather than preying on voters' insecurities or mobilizing on identity politics, they should set the agenda for healthy policy debates. For example, they should refrain from unethical forms of campaigning such as propagating false information to manoeuvre public sentiments. Instead,

taking the lead in engaging in rational policy debates would help to evoke political interests among the electorates.

It would of course be naïve to imagine that all politicians will do so. In general, politicians in Malaysia are expected to toe the party line. If they don't, they may lose the opportunity to rise up in the ranks within their party. This means that political expediency will most likely overshadow principles. Yet, generational differences may provide some hope. The younger generation of political leaders who are socialized differently than their predecessors are less likely to be dogmatic with their views and remain subservient at all times. They are also more informed and even equipped to engage in policy debates. Hence, the younger cohort of politicians has much potential to revamp the narrative of the political discourse. Done right, it may even seal their status as a trustable politician, regardless of which party they are affiliated with. Second, there is a need to increase political literacy, especially among the youths. A recent study by University Tunku Abdul Rahman found that Malaysian youths mainly acquired political knowledge from family and friends. This is not ideal as youths would only remain in an echo chamber that is already somewhat biased. Therefore, political education should be introduced in schools and all higher education institutions. For example, theories and concepts of politics, variances of political governments, strengths, and limitations of democracy should be incorporated into the curriculum. Such effort is even more urgent now as it is expected that 1.2 million youths between the age of 18 to 20 are eligible to vote in the next general election.

Third, institutions such as the electoral commission, civil society organizations such as electoral watchdog and even political parties should exhort the idea that voters should think of electoral participation as fulfilling their role as citizens.

Conclusion

As intangible as it may seem, growing political distrust should not be taken lightly because it could contribute to the democratic decline in Malaysia. We need to realize that at the end of the day, the greatest danger to democracy in Malaysia is not a political coup or even unprincipled politicians, but the hopelessness of the millions who no longer believe their political participation matters.

The article was first published at Stratsea, <https://stratsea.com/dwindling-political-trust-and-democratic-decline-in-malaysia/>.

About Author



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