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GDP constant prices are now expressed in 2015 prices

Malaysia’s economy contracted 5.6 per cent in 2020

State Socioeconomic Report 2019

Home » Statistics » By Themes » National Accounts » State Socioeconomic Report 2019

Release Date : Thursday 06, August 2020 1200

PERFORMANCE OF GROSS DOMESTIC PRODUCTS (GDP) BY STATE 2019

In 2019, the Malaysia economy grew at a moderate rate of 4.3 per cent as compared to 4.8 per cent in the previous year. All sectors posted positive growth with the exception of Mining & quarrying. In momentum point of view, Agriculture and Mining & quarrying posted a better growth while other sectors registered slower performance than the previous year.

A total of 72.3 per cent of Malaysia’s total GDP was contributed by six main states. Selangor sustained as a major contributor to Malaysia’s economy with a share of 24.2 per cent, followed by W.P. Kuala Lumpur (16.4%), Sarawak (9.6%), Johor (9.4%), Pulau Pinang (6.7%) and Sabah (6.0%).

In general, seven states grew at a faster pace than the national growth (4.3%). Selangor topped the list with 6.7 per cent while W.P. Kuala Lumpur stood at 6.0 per cent. Kelantan rose to 5.3 per cent, W.P. Labuan (5.2%) Negeri Sembilan (5.1%), Kedah (4.6%) and Perlis (4.6%).

The country's economic growth is shaped by the economic performance at the state level. Diversification in the concentration of production between states has given a different impact on overall GDP performance. Seven states recorded better growth as compared to the preceding year, namely Kelantan 5.3 per cent (2018: 2.6%), Negeri Sembilan 5.1 per cent (2018: 4.2%), Kedah 4.6 per cent (2018: 4.0%), Perlis 4.6 per cent (2018: 3.3%), Pahang 3.7 per cent (2018: 3.0%), Terengganu 3.3 per cent (2018: 2.5%) dan Sarawak 2.5 per cent (2018: 2.2%). On the other hand, lower external demand scenarios have affected investment and export-oriented activities and products in Malaysia. Thus, the other eight states recorded slower growth as against to 2018 with a total contribution of 71.7 per cent to national GDP.

In terms of GDP per capita, six states recorded GDP per capita above national level (RM46,450) namely W.P. Kuala Lumpur (RM129,472), W.P. Labuan (RM77,798), Pulau Pinang (RM55,243), Selangor (RM54,995), Sarawak (RM53,358) and Melaka (RM49,172). In general, GDP per capita value is influenced by production performance and price factors. The year 2019 has seen a decline in prices for the country's major commodities, especially palm oil, crude oil and natural gas.

CONSUMER PRICE INDEX

Consumer Price Index (CPI) grew by 0.7 per cent compared to 1.0 per cent in 2018. In 2019, three states surpassed the national inflation rate namely W.P Kuala Lumpur (1.2%), Pulau Pinang (1.2%) and Selangor & W.P. Putrajaya (0.9%).

LABOUR FORCE

Labour force in Malaysia increased by 2.0 per cent to approximately 15.6 million persons in 2019 as compared to 15.3 million persons in the previous year. Labour force participation rate (LFPR) rise 0.4 percentage points to 68.7 per cent as compared to 68.3 per cent in 2018. At the state level, an increase in LFPR was recorded in eight states, amongst them are W.P. Kuala Lumpur, Johor, Sabah, Sarawak and Melaka. On the other hand, eight states also posted lower unemployment rate, amongst them are Terengganu, Johor, Pulau Pinang, Sarawak and W.P. Putrajaya. Melaka recorded the lowest unemployment rate in 2019 with 1.1 per cent.

GRADUATES STATISTICS

The number of graduates in Malaysia was 5.3 million persons in 2019, increased by 6.9 per cent from 4.9 million persons in 2018. The highest number of graduates was recorded by Selangor (1.65 million persons), Johor (493.1 thousand persons) and W.P. Kuala Lumpur (446.7 thousand persons). Graduates labour force participation rate (GLFPR) was 83.5 per cent, decreased 0.1 percentage points as against 83.6 per cent in 2018. Selangor and Sabah recorded the highest GLFPR in 2019 at 86.5 per cent followed by W.P. Putrajaya at 85.9 per cent and Sarawak 85.3 per cent. On the other hand, the lowest GLFPR recorded by Perlis with 76.1 per cent.

HOUSEHOLD GROSS INCOME

In 2019, the mean income in Malaysia was RM7,901 while Malaysia’s median income amounted to RM5,873. In terms of growth, the median income in Malaysia grew by 3.9 per cent per year in 2019 (2016: 6.6%) while the mean income rose at 4.2 per cent in 2019.

At the state level, W.P. Kuala Lumpur recorded the highest median income with RM10,549 followed by W.P. Putrajaya (RM9,983), Selangor (RM8,210), W.P. Labuan (RM6,726), Johor (RM6,427), Pulau Pinang (RM6,169) and Melaka (RM6,054). W.P. Putrajaya had the highest compounded annual growth rate of median income at 6.3 per cent over the period of 2016 to 2019, higher than the national median growth rate (3.9%).

STATE GOVERNMENT & LOCAL AUTHORITIES’ STATISTICS

In 2018, eight state governments recorded an increase in revenue collection. Sarawak’s state government recorded the highest revenue amounted to RM7.2 billion, followed by Sabah’s state government Sabah (RM4.2 billion) and Selangor (RM2.0 billion). Out of 14 city council, 10 city council recorded the highest financial position which involving W.P. Kuala Lumpur, Selangor, Johor, Perak, Pulau Pinang, Melaka, Sabah and Sarawak.

On the other hand, ten district councils which recorded the highest financial position involving local authorities in Selangor, Kelantan, Johor, Terengganu, Sabah and Perak. All of the district councils recorded better financial position except Majlis Daerah Penampang and Majlis Daerah Kota Tinggi. Majlis Daerah Hulu Selangor recorded the highest revenue of RM108.3 million in 2018, followed by Majlis Daerah Kuala Langat (RM80.8 million) and Majlis Daerah Kuala Selangor (RM64.1 million).

Detailed information and technical notes are included in the publication of the State Socioeconomic Report 2019. This publication can be accessed and free download through the eStatistik on the DOSM website, www.dosm.gov.my.

Keynote

With Autocrats on the Defensive, Can Democrats Rise to the Occasion?

[Image: Kenneth Roth]

Kenneth Roth

Executive Director

Faced with political instability, the Malaysian government resorted to heavy-handed tactics, investigating, and arbitrarily arresting those critical of the government and its policies, pursuing a hardline anti-migrant policy, and threatening enhanced action against lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people. In August, Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin resigned and was replaced by Ismail Sabri, but there was little change in the government’s approach to human rights.

Attacks on Human Rights Defenders

The government continued to use a range of broad and vaguely worded laws, including the Sedition Act and section 233 of the Communications and Multimedia Act (CMA), to prosecute critical speech.

On April 23, 2021, police arrested graphic artist and activist Fahmi Reza for a Spotify playlist he had created as a satirical response to a controversial tweet by Malaysia’s queen. After a four-month sedition investigation, the police dropped the case. Reza was arrested again on October 4 in connection with a caricature of the Malaysian prime minister.

In May 2021, the authorities opened an investigation into political cartoonist Zulfikar Anwar Ulhaque, known as Zunar, for alleged violations of the CMA and penal code section 505(c) for a satirical drawing that mocked the Kedah state chief minister.

In July, the authorities opened investigations into the creators of a short animated film depicting the abuse that one boy said he suffered in police custody, for criminal defamation and other violations of the penal code. The same month, authorities formally charged activist Heidy Quah with violating the CMA for a June 2020 Facebook post alleging poor treatment of refugees at an immigration detention center.

Those participating in peaceful protests have also been the target of police investigations.

On April 24, authorities arrested activist Mukmin Nantang and six others for protesting the 14-day extension of strict movement control orders in a village in Sabah. On July 6, police announced they were investigating for sedition and other offenses the “black flag” campaign, which urged people to display black flags to voice their disappointment with the government. At least 31 people who participated in a black flag vehicle convoy on July 24 were summoned for questioning.

On July 21, a youth coalition announced it would hold a protest on July 31 against the government’s handling of the Covid-19 pandemic. On July 29, police arrested youth activist Sarah Irdina at her home. On the same day, police questioned three coalition members under the CMA and a penal code section criminalizing “making statements conducive to public mischief.”

On August 19, 31 people who were holding an outdoor candlelight vigil for those who died of Covid-19 were forcibly detained by police. At least one participant subsequently filed a police report over physical injuries allegedly caused by the police.

Freedom of Media

Freedom of the press declined during the year. On February 18, the country’s highest court held online news portal Malaysiakini in contempt of court for five comments posted by readers, even though the portal removed the comments shortly after being notified of their presence. The court imposed a fine of RM500,000 (US$124,000). The authorities opened a contempt investigation into the outlet’s editor-in-chief, Steven Gan, for commenting on the court’s ruling.

In May, the police summoned two Malaysiakini journalists for questioning about their coverage of allegations that police brutality was the cause of a death in detention. In July, they summoned Boo-Su Lyn of health care news portal Code Blue for questioning over an article about a Covid-19 outbreak at a vaccination center.

On July 2, the Federal Court upheld a defamation ruling against Malaysiakini in a decision that narrowly construed the common law public interest defense, posing a serious risk to media freedom. The case, brought by Raub Australian Gold Mining Company, related to articles and videos posted by Malaysiakini about the possible impact of air pollution from a gold mine.

Police Abuse and Impunity

Police abuse of suspects in custody continues to be a serious problem, as does a lack of accountability for such offenses. The standard of care for those in detention is problematic, with detainees dying of treatable illnesses. According to the home minister, as of August, 42 people had died in custody, with 28 of those deaths in immigration detention centers.

Refugees, Asylum Seekers, and Trafficking Victims

Malaysia has not ratified the 1951 Refugee Convention. Over 179,000 refugees and asylum seekers, mostly from Myanmar, are registered with the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) office but are not granted legal status and remain unable to work or enroll in government schools.

The government has denied UNHCR access to immigration detention centers since August 2019, and the home minister has rejected calls for access. Malaysia’s Home Ministry reported that, as of October 26, 2020, 756 children were being held in immigration detention facilities nationwide, including 326 from Myanmar who are detained without parents or guardians. In May, the Suhakam child commissioner expressed concern that Rohingya girls who had been trafficked to Malaysia as child brides were being detained in an immigration detention center. In February, Malaysia deported 1086 Myanmar nationals just weeks after a coup overthrew that country’s elected government.

The immigration authorities conducted repeated raids and detained thousands of undocumented workers, despite concerns that doing so would discourage them from seeking vaccination or treatment for Covid-19.

The United States downgraded Malaysia to Tier 3 in its annual Trafficking in Persons report, noting that the government was “not making significant efforts” to eliminate trafficking.

Freedom of Religion

Malaysia restricts the rights of followers of any branches of Islam other than Sunni, with those following Shia or other branches subject to arrest for deviancy.

In March, the government appealed a High Court ruling that struck down a 1986 directive forbidding non-Muslims from using the word "Allah” and other Islamic words.

In September, the government announced it was drafting a new law to restrict the propagation of non-Islamic religions in the Federal Territories.

Criminal Justice

Malaysia permits the death penalty for various crimes and makes the sentence mandatory for 11 offenses.

Malaysia detains individuals without trial under restrictive laws. The Security Offenses (Special Measures) Act, or SOSMA, allows for preventive detention of up to 28 days with no judicial review for a broadly defined range of “security offenses.” On September 1, the home minister stated that individuals “issuing statements that could incite others to the point of causing public fear” could face action under SOSMA.

Both the 1959 Prevention of Crime Act and the 2015 Prevention of Terrorism Act give government-appointed boards the authority to impose detention without trial for up to two years, renewable indefinitely, to order electronic monitoring, and to impose other significant restrictions on freedom of movement and association. No judicial review is permitted for these measures.

Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

Discrimination against LGBT people remains pervasive in Malaysia. Federal law punishes “carnal knowledge against the order of nature” with up to 20 years in prison and mandatory whipping. Numerous state Sharia laws prohibit both same-sex relations and non-normative gender expression, resulting in frequent arrests of transgender people. In February, the Federal Court ruled that section 28 of Selangor’s Shariah Criminal Offences Enactment, which criminalizes sexual intercourse “against the order of nature,” was invalid.

Authorities have proposed a range of changes to Sharia regulations that, if passed, would negatively impact LGBT people. These include harsher sentencing for same-sex conduct and gender expression. In September, the Perlis state fatwa committee announced that those in gender-nonconforming clothing were banned from entering mosques.

In January, Islamic authorities arrested Nur Sajat, a cosmetics entrepreneur and social media personality, on charges of “insulting Islam” by dressing in clothing typically associated with women at a religious event. On February 23, after she failed to appear in court, the Sharia court issued an arrest warrant for her. On February 25, the Islamic authorities announced the deployment of at least 122 law enforcement officers “to find and arrest Nur.” In October, Malaysia filed extradition requests for Nur with Thailand and Australia. On October 18, Nur Sajat announced that she was in Australia, where she has been granted asylum.

Women’s Rights

In September, the High Court ruled children born overseas to Malaysian mothers and foreign fathers are automatically entitled to Malaysian citizenship, overturning a discriminatory practice in which only children born abroad to Malaysian fathers were entitled to citizenship. The government appealed the decision.

Female students have described being subjected to “period spot checks” in some schools to prove that they are menstruating and can be excused from fasting. A student who reported on social media that her teacher made jokes about rape in class was threatened with expulsion, harassed on social media, and investigated for "intentional insult with intent to provoke a breach of the public peace."

Children’s Rights

Malaysia continues to permit child marriage under both civil and Islamic law. Girls ages 16 and 17 can marry with the permission of their state’s chief minister. For Muslims, most state Islamic laws set a minimum age of 16 for girls and 18 for boys, but permit marriages below those ages, with no apparent minimum, with the permission of a Sharia court. Widespread school closures due to Covid-19 may have increased risks of child marriage, as research shows that leaving education is highly correlated with girls being married off.

Children in Malaysia were unable to attend in-person classes due to Covid-19 restrictions for most of the year. The government began a phased reopening of school starting in October. The prolonged closure exacerbated existing inequalities, as many underprivileged students did not have the tools to access online learning.

Key International Actors

Malaysia was one of the first countries to call for the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) to play a role in resolving the crisis in Myanmar, and strongly supported the decision to exclude the Myanmar commander-in-chief from the annual ASEAN summit in October. Malaysia has also been supportive of calls for equitable distribution of Covid-19 vaccines. The country has been elected to a seat on the United Nations Human Rights Council for the 2022-2024 term.

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13 May 2022

The Malaysian economy grew by 5.0% in the first quarter (4Q 2021: 3.6%)

The Malaysian economy registered a positive growth of 5.0% in the first quarter of 2022 (4Q 2021: 3.6%). This was mainly supported by improving domestic demand as economic activity continued to normalise with the easing of containment measures. The improvement also reflects the recovery in the job market, with the unemployment rate declining further to 4.1% (4Q 2021: 4.3%), as well as continued policy support. Strong external demand amid the continued upcycle in global technology provided further lift to growth. On the supply side, services and manufacturing sectors continued to drive economic growth, expanding by 6.5% and 6.6% respectively. On a quarter-on-quarter seasonally-adjusted basis, the economy grew by 3.9% (4Q 2021: 4.6%).

Headline inflation moderated to 2.2% during the quarter (4Q 2021: 3.2%). This mainly reflects the smaller contribution from the dissipating base effect from lower domestic retail fuel prices last year, and the absence of the base effect from electricity tariff rebates implemented in 2020. Core inflation increased to 1.7% during the quarter (4Q 2021: 0.8%). This reflects price adjustments amid the higher costs and improving demand conditions, with price increases being more noticeable specifically for food items due to supply-related factors such as higher global commodity prices.

Exchange rate developments

The ringgit depreciated by 0.7% against the US dollar in the first quarter of 2022 (YTD as at 11 May 2022: -4.7%), broadly in line with the movement of regional currencies (1Q 2022: -0.8%; YTD: -3.4%). This was due to the broad US dollar strength, driven by higher US interest rates, global risk-off sentiment given the conflict in Ukraine and expectations of modest growth in China. High commodity prices and Malaysia's recovery prospects had also cushioned the downward pressure on the ringgit from these external factors. Going forward, while domestic financial markets are subject to periods of high volatility, spillovers to domestic financial intermediation are expected to be contained. Malaysia’s strong external position and resilient banking system enable the economy to withstand external shocks.

Financing conditions

Net financing to the private sector grew by 4.5% (4Q 2021: 4.7%) amid lower growth in outstanding corporate bonds (4.6%; 4Q 2021: 5.4%). Outstanding loan growth was sustained at 4.4%. Business loan growth moderated to 4.3% (4Q 2021: 4.8%), reflecting lower growth in outstanding working capital loans amid continued high repayments growth. Growth in working capital loan disbursements, however, remained strong during the quarter (21.2%; 4Q 2021: 32.8%) in line with the recovery in economic activity. For households, outstanding loan growth increased across most purposes (4.8%; 4Q 2021: 4.2%), with robust growth in loan disbursements (12.7%; 4Q 2021: 9.5%). This reflects the continued demand for loans among households, particularly for the purchase of houses and cars. Household resilience continues to be supported by sound debt servicing capacity and healthy financial buffers at the aggregate level, with lending underpinned by prudent underwriting standards and loan affordability assessments by banks.

The Malaysian economy is expected to improve further in 2022

Commenting on the outlook for 2022, Bank Negara Malaysia Governor Tan Sri Nor Shamsiah said, “The domestic economy is expected to improve further this year, with growth projected at 5.3% to 6.3% as announced in March 2022. This is underpinned by stronger domestic demand, continued expansion in external demand, and further improvement in the labour market. Growth would also benefit from the easing of restrictions, reopening of international borders and implementation of investment projects”. Nevertheless, risks to Malaysia’s growth momentum remain. These include a weaker-than-expected global growth, further escalation of geopolitical conflicts, worsening supply chain disruptions, adverse developments surrounding COVID-19 and heightened financial market volatility.

For 2022, in an environment of high input costs and improving demand, headline inflation is projected to average between 2.2% and 3.2%. Underlying inflation, as measured by core inflation, is also expected to trend higher during the year, averaging between 2.0 to 3.0%. Several key factors are expected to partly contain upward pressure on prices, namely the existing price control measures and the continued spare capacity in the economy. Nonetheless, the inflation outlook remains subject to commodity price developments, arising mainly from the military conflict in Ukraine and prolonged supply-related disruptions. The outlook is also contingent on domestic policy measures on administered prices.

Six important issues for young Malaysians

by Lim May Lee

Filed under Editorial.

Tagged Invest Malaysia 2015, Najib.

WHEN some of Malaysia’s brightest young minds get together to discuss solutions to the country’s issues, you know something awesome is gonna go down.

And that’s exactly what happened at Invest Malaysia 2015’s millennials session, organised by Bursa Malaysia on April 23 at the Mandarin Oriental Hotel, Kuala Lumpur.

Now Invest Malaysia is actually a platform to showcase Malaysia’s capital market, so you’d expect things to be all economics and finance.

But for the millennials session, Bursa made it a point to bring together a diverse range of young leaders (R.AGE did help nominate 15 participant. Just sayin’…). The issues we discussed ranged from talent mobility to the importance of art and culture in nation-building.

We didn’t just talk about problems though. The faciliators advised us to follow a simple three-step process (the one you see on our cover image) – Discuss the issues, Dream about the ideal outcome, and Deliver an actionable solution.

Our solutions were then pitched to two very important people – Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak, and CIMB Group Holding Bhd chairman Datuk Seri Nazir Razak, during a dialogue that lasted close to an hour. Here are some of the main issues discussed:

[Image: Nazir Razak, CIMB, Bursa, Invest Malaysia, Dialogue, Najib, Prime Minister]

Nazir taking a wefie with the participants of the dialogue. He spoke candidly about his career, and gave his thoughts on some of the issues important to young Malaysians.

1. The disconnect in students’ skill sets and employers’ expectations

President of Nottingham University’s Bursa Young Investors Club (BYIC), Ben Tak, 22, represented a group of five BYIC members from different universities. They unanimously agreed Malaysian students are equipped with knowledge – they just don’t know how to apply it in the real world.

“We need practical skills in order to solve problems when we are employed,” he said. “This is something we need to look into. Universities need to be able to equip students with the skills employers are looking for.”

Tak’s group recommended giving more freedom and trust to Malaysian students to learn on their own, instead of spoonfeeding them.

“If you compare our education system with that of Britain or Australia, those countries have a one-hour lecture per week (per subject), while we have three-hour lectures and a lot of tutorials,” he said.

“Instead of teaching us how to do it from A to Z, maybe they could guide us from A to C, and let us figure out the rest on our own.”

[Image: The young people at Invest Malaysia 2015, organised by Bursa Malaysia, were a lucky bunch as they attended a closed-door session with Nazir and Najib, which no one else at the event had.]

The young people at Invest Malaysia 2015, organised by Bursa Malaysia, were a lucky bunch as they attended a closed-door session with Nazir and Najib, which no one else at the event had.

2. Inequality in the education system

Also at the session were young people from the Kalsom Movement, which works to improve education inequality in the country.

Many rural schools in Malaysia are so isolated that the students aren’t aware of scholarships and grants available to them.

Kalsom Movement’s solution is to organise “inspiration camps” for schools classified as “underperforming” by the Education Ministry. There, the students are given the information – and inspiration – they need to further their studies.

University Tenaga Nasional’s Kalsom Movement volunteer Khairul Izzuddin Sulaiman said: “We hope the Government will help us because we are also helping them achieve their goals – the education blueprint plan states that by 2020 we should have bridged the gap between urban and rural schools.”

3. Turning Malaysia into an arts and culture hub

Kuala Lumpur is currently ranked 34th on the list of top 20 liveable cities, compared to 78 back in 2011, so things are definitely improving.

However, Azimy Wan Ahmad, 36, strategic events and communications manager at the My Performing Arts agency, believes there is still no consistent support of arts and culture as part of the strategy to break into the top 20.

“If you don’t want to be a country full of robots, you need to think outside the box and have more arts appreciation programmes,” he said.

Azimy’s proposed solution is for the Government to introduce arts appreciation programmes at primary school level.

“We’re not really expecting big things – the government obviously has a lot of other priorities, but in terms of education, an arts appreciation programme in primary schools, could make a difference in the lives of Malaysians,” he said.

“Kids that grow up appreciating the arts are inclined to grow up as creative thinkers and people with soul, not just all about numbers and success.”

4. Support for local content creators

[Image: Bursa, Invest Malaysia, Najib, Reem Shahwa, Jay Walia, Teoh Mei Ying]

YouTube sensation Reuben Kang (top right corner) was one of 15 bright young Malaysians nominated by R.AGE for the dialogue with the Prime Minister. Here we are posing with some of our awesome nominees.

Local YouTuber Reuben Kang brought up a topic close to his heart – local content.

“About 10 years ago there was support from the Government called Made In Malaysia, where they made it compulsory for 70% of ads on TV to be produced by Malaysians,” he said.

Sadly that initiative has now been scrapped, leaving local content creators to work without governmental support.

“Now, there’s not enough national pride in terms of content and people look for foreign content,” he said.

Though Kang believes Malaysians are very supportive of local content, many content producers still don’t have the funding to get their work out there in the first place. Kang’s solution would be to establish more governmental agencies like MDEC and MaGIC to support small independent filmmakers, and not just the large companies.

“We’re the ones who need help,” he said. “We get sponsorships from private companies but the industry will grow only if the Government steps in to help the small, struggling content makers.”

5. Talent mobility in the Asean region

Speaking on behalf of a group of her colleagues, Celine Bow, 24, from CIMB’s treasury department, believes talent mobility in the Asean region is crucial for economic and talent development.

“I have been rotated to Indonesia, and it was an eye-opening experience,” she said. She thought it would be easy, given our cultural similarities, but working there is a completely different ball game. Being immersed in other cultures would give young people an idea of the opportunities that could arise from a unified Asean region.

Her solution: To create common qualifications and regulations so it will be easier for talents to cross borders and work anywhere within the region. “With a common platform, people like myself can work in different cultures and get the exposure and experience we need. A broader perspective is added value in any talent.”

6. News literacy

[Image: Spot the R.AGE editor! Ian Yee proposed news literacy programmes in primary schools as a solution to the dropping levels of news literacy in Malaysia.]

Spot the R.AGE editor! Ian Yee proposed news literacy programmes in primary schools as a solution to the dropping levels of news literacy in Malaysia.

Another issue brought up, this time by R.AGE editor Ian Yee, was the lack of news and media literacy among young Malaysians.

Despite the incredible amount of news content Malaysians are exposed to every day, there’s very little education on being responsible consumers of that content, or how the media operates.

The solution? Simple. The R.AGE team proposed a news literacy programme for primary school students, and also a grant to support deserving school editorial boards.

Yee said: “News literacy doesn’t just help us become more informed and capable of engaging in positive discourse – it also empowers us to use the media for good causes.”

What do you think about these issues? Would you have discussed something else if you were at the dialogue? Drop us a comment below or tweet us at @thestar\_rage!

[Image: Bursa, Najib, Prime Minister, Invest Malaysia, Dialogue]

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About Lim May Lee

Literature grad-turned-journalist who loves our R.AGE team karaoke nights a little too much. While her literature background has left her with a slightly twisted sense of humour, it has also given her a passion for writing on social issues.

Tell us what you think! Cancel reply

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Championing children’s education

by Samantha Chow

Education director-general Datuk Dr Habibah Abdul Rahim speaks on the importance of empathy-based education, the challenges of adapting education policies in light of the Covid-19 situation, and her “dream” education system.

September 15, 2020

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I lost my mother to the Japanese war

September 20, 2019

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Whenever Allied planes bombed Sandakan town as part of its campaign to liberate Borneo, Daniel Chin Tung Foh’s grandfather would rush the whole family into a bomb shelter behind their house. During its heyday, the British North Borneo Company had developed Sandakan into a major commercial and trading hub for timber, as well as […]

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A witness to the Double Tenth revolt

September 13, 2019

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Chua Hock Yong was born in Singapore, but his grandfather moved the family to British North Borneo (now Sabah) to establish their business in 1939 when he was a year old. The Japanese invaded Borneo shortly after, but the family continued living in their shophouse in Gaya Street, Jesselton, now known as Kota Kinabalu. […]

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An encounter with victims of the Sandakan Death Marches

August 30, 2019

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When the Second World War came to Borneo, Pelabiu Akai’s mother moved the family back to their village in Nalapak, Ranau. Although the Japanese were known to be ruthless and brutal conquerors, they left the villagers to their own devices and Pelabiu had a largely uneventful life – until she came across gaunt-looking Allied […]

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Sarawak’s only living child prisoner of war

August 16, 2019

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Jeli Abdullah’s mother died from labour complications after giving birth to him and his twin brother. To his Bisaya tribe, this was seen as a bad omen, and his father did not know what to do with the twins. Fortunately, an Australian missionary couple decided to adopt the newborns. But misfortunate fell upon the […]

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Lest we forget

August 16, 2019

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AFIO Rudi, 21, had never thought much about his grandfather Jeli Abdullah’s life story until an Australian TV programme interviewed the 79-year-old about being Sarawak’s last surviving World War II child prisoner of war (POW). The engineering student then realised that despite living in Sarawak all his life, he also didn’t know very much of […]

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A native uprising against Japanese forces

August 13, 2019

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﻿ Basar Paru, 95, was only a teenager when his village in the central highlands of Borneo was invaded by the Japanese Imperial army. “The Japanese told us not to help the British. They said Asians should help each other because we have the same skin, same hair,” Basar recalled. “But we, the Lun Bawang […]

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Left behind in wartime chaos

August 13, 2019

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﻿ Kadazan native Anthony Labangka was 10 years old when the Japanese Imperial Army invaded Borneo during World War II. Sitting in the verandah of a modern kampung house on a hot afternoon in Kampung Penampang Proper, where he has lived his whole life, Anthony recalls the hardships of the Japanese Occupation. The villagers were […]

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[Image: Kajai R.AGE Wan Ifra Journalism Documentaries Digital Media Awards]

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January 29, 2019

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In Malaysia, young people find their voice amid a pandemic

A burgeoning youth movement is seeking reform and vying for political leadership.

Young people organised an anti-government rally - following COVID-19 protocols - in July to raise their concerns about the government's handling of the pandemic [Arif Kartono/AFP] =

By Emily Ding

Published On 28 Sep 2021

At the end of June, when Malaysians were grappling with a drastically worsening coronavirus pandemic, pictures of black flags, and people waving them from their cars or their homes, appeared on social media.

Hashtagged #lawan, which means “fight” in the Malay language, the flags became a rallying cry against the government’s failures in handling the outbreak. The discontent spilled onto the streets in a series of largely peaceful protests in July.

By that time, COVID-19’s toll had hit a new peak, with more than 20,000 new infections and 200 deaths daily, and the protesters demanded that then-Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin resign. As the protests continued, the police picked up at least 47 participants for questioning.

The black flag movement was initiated by a loose coalition of about 40 youth activist groups calling itself Sekretariat Solidariti Rakyat (SSR), which first came together in March to protest against the delay in implementing the lowering of the voting age from 21 to 18, which was passed in Parliament in July 2019.

Political analyst Bridget Welsh told Al Jazeera the government’s delay in implementing the legislation after it was passed was the catalyst for the disaffection felt by many young people.

Other factors include the high unemployment rate among 15 to 30-year-olds – almost double the national average – stagnating wages, unaffordable housing, and the lack of any real social safety net in a pandemic.

Dressed in black, young Malaysians took to the streets of Kuala Lumpur on July 31 calling for the resignation of then-Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin who had gotten the top job after a power grab within the ruling coalition that was elected in May 2018. He resigned the following month [FL Wong/AP Photo]

All this has been exacerbated by Malaysia’s political upheavals since the 2018 general election, which resulted in two changes in government since February last year, and the devastation wrought by the pandemic.

“There are young people who lost their family members. I know someone who, within a week, lost his grandparents, granduncles, and his uncles and aunts,” said Qyira Yusri, the 27-year-old co-founder of Undi18, an NGO that led the campaign to lower the voting age. “They’re just looking to our government and wondering what’s going on.”

While Malaysia coped with the first months of the COVID-19 pandemic relatively well – even after the power grab that brought Muhyiddin to power – the situation spiralled out of control after a snap election in the Borneo state of Sabah in September 2020.

In January this year, as politicians within his fragile coalition continued to jostle for power and coronavirus cases surged, Muhyiddin announced a state of emergency and suspended Parliament. Then came an extended lockdown.

Much of Malaysia turned to social media and young people found themselves thrust onto the front line of political activism at a time when older generations were more vulnerable to COVID-19.

Welsh describes the movement as largely urban, but one that aims to be inclusive by traversing geographic, class, and racial divides.

A few days after SSR’s protest on July 31, attended by as many as 1,000 people, Muhyiddin resigned as prime minister.

“While I can’t say for sure that the protests made a difference, what’s important is that it provided an avenue for people to articulate their frustrations,” Qyira told Al Jazeera.

Since then, Ismail Sabri Yaakob of UMNO, a scandal-tainted party that dominated the Barisan Nasional coalition that ruled Malaysia for decades and was voted out in 2018, has been named to the top job. Like Muhyiddin’s government, Ismail Sabri’s is not popularly elected.

Cultivating new youth leaders

The pandemic and the issues it raised have pushed youth activism well beyond the right to vote.

Youth groups are now campaigning for an array of causes – from refugee rights to climate change and decriminalising suicide – dissecting legislation and policies into more understandable and shareable forms across Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter.

Young Malaysians protested over the suspension of Parliament during the pandemic and defended the right to freedom of expression and assembly [File: Ahmad Yusni/EPA]

But their activities also attracted the attention of the Malaysian authorities.

Two days before the July 31 protest, Sarah Irdina, the 20-year-old founder of youth group MISI: Solidariti, was arrested for alleged sedition and detained overnight by the police, purportedly for tweeting about the upcoming protest.

Participants in earlier July protests had also been previously investigated, so SSR was prepared.

It used crowdfunding to pay off fines and cooperated with the Young Lawyers Movement (YLM) to ensure participants would have ready access to free legal representation should the need arise. YLM is itself advocating a minimum wage for legal trainees and a more effective mechanism for processing sexual harassment complaints within the profession.

Still, at a time when young people from Myanmar, Thailand and Hong Kong have taken to the streets to demand institutional reform, analysts say Malaysia’s young people have adopted a less confrontational approach.

“Their main aim is to give the youth a platform and make Malaysia a more inclusive place politically for them,” BowerGroup Asia analyst Darryl Tan told Al Jazeera. “What they believe in is that if you give the youth a political platform to air their views, you will also have other kinds of conversations happening.”

Undi18 recently announced a new umbrella initiative called UndiNegaraku, which aims to cultivate 10,000 youth leaders nationwide by 2023, when the next general election will be held.

Last year, it organised Parlimen Digital, a mock online session with youths playing the roles of the 222 members of parliament, to show that sessions could continue virtually in a pandemic after the physical one was suspended. For this too, some of its participants were reportedly called in for police questioning.

Undi18 also coordinates several policy initiatives, collectively run by some 200 volunteers, that range from conserving the environment to getting more women in Parliament. “When you want to push for a cause you have to hyperfocus on issues, on certain legislation and reforms,” Qyira said.

The COVID-19 pandemic, which led to more than 25,000 deaths in Malaysia, fuelled young people’s interest in reforming Malaysia and getting involved in politics [File: Ahmad Yusni/EPA]

She wants to provide a platform for youths that prioritises understanding the issues they want to champion as a starting point, not toeing the line of any political ideology.

But that does not mean avoiding politics.

Qyira points out that Undi18 alumni have gone on to join different parties, from UMNO to Anwar Ibrahim’s Keadilan and MUDA (Malaysian United Democratic Alliance) – a new youth-centric party co-founded by Syed Saddiq, a 28-year-old member of parliament and former minister of youth and sports.

“We want to give them equal exposure to the political parties out there without undue influence from any of them,” Qyira said.

Some Undi18 alumni have also gone on to build their own activist groups.

Nineteen-year-old university students Rifqi Faisal and Izanna Azuddin founded MYER Movement in April to call for education reform – especially urgent during the pandemic when many students lack resources for online learning.

The two activists say they have seen whole families sharing just one device, taking turns to attend classes, while the government’s promise to provide several thousand laptops to underprivileged students remains unfulfilled. They also point out the lack of mental health counselling for students studying in isolation at home and the neglect of students in rural areas and those with learning disabilities.

“I feel like our government looks at our education as a one-size-fits-all system,” Izanna said.

Other young Malaysians are also making their voices heard. Junior contract doctors, who make up the bulk of medical workers handling COVID-19, went on strike in July as part of their fight for greater job security.

Malaysian teenager Ain Husniza, right, with her parents. The 17-year-old began a campaign against sexual harassment in schools after a teacher joked about rape, She was questioned by police in August [File: Lim Huey Teng/Reuters]

Ain Husniza, a 17-year-old student, is campaigning to make schools free from sexual harassment after one of her teachers made a joke about rape in class. Heidi Quah, a 20-something refugee activist, is challenging the constitutional validity of a law that has been widely used to criminalise “offensive” comments after being charged for a Facebook post describing the ill-treatment of refugees in detention centres.

“Obviously, there are some people who are very against the idea of youths speaking out. It’s that whole top-down culture, especially in Malaysia, where you have to respect your elders, and older people don’t really respect youths,” Izanna said.

As such, young people have had to demand that their voices be heard. “The surge of youth organisations in the past year has created enormous space for young individuals to begin doing work about the issues that they care about,” Rifqi said.

New activism and politics

Welsh describes the new activism as a grassroots movement.

“The youths do support young leaders like Syed Saddiq and MUDA, but there isn’t the direct involvement or leadership from political leaders,” Welsh said.

A former champion debater, MUDA’s Syed played a key role in getting the Undi18 bill to the attention of lawmakers when it was first proposed. But he is not himself part of the SSR movement.

MUDA, too, is promising a new future: eschewing the race-based politics that has long dominated Malaysian discourse and focusing on the potential of youth leadership although its application to register formally as a party has been rejected twice, with reportedly no reasons given.

Amira Aisya, who is 25 years old and one of the party’s 13 co-founders, tells Al Jazeera that the proof is in the diversity of MUDA’s central executive committee – not just in terms of ethnicity but also in education and profession. It includes Dr Thanussha Francis Xavier, a medical practitioner; Lim Wei Jiet, a lawyer; and Shahrizal Denci, a farmer. Amira herself worked at an educational think-tank.

Amira also emphasises MUDA’s aim to put young people on an equal footing to adults, allowing teenagers to join from the age of 15.

“Unlike other parties, we don’t have separate youth or women’s wings. If you are capable of becoming a part of the leadership of MUDA, you will be,” she said.

As the youth movement grows, Qyira feels that political parties of all stripes are watching closely what young people are saying and feeling.

Junior doctors also walked off the job in July demanding fairer treatment. The placard reads ‘I am a contract doctor’ [File: AP Photo]

A court has ordered the government to implement the new minimum voting age by December 31, which could mean 7.8 million new voters for the next general election.

The government on Monday said it would follow through on the directive.

“I think young people are growing more and more cynical about political parties and politicians, but we’re still able to articulate our visions for policies,” Qyira said. “And we will hold politicians accountable to them.”

Source: Al Jazeera