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Transliteration Table: Consonants

Arabic	Roman		Arabic	Roman
ب	b		ط	ṭ
ت	t		ظ	ẓ
ث	th		ع	‘
ج	j		غ	gh
ح	ḥ		ف	f
خ	kh		ق	q
د	d		ك	k
ذ	dh		ل	l
ر	r		م	m
ز	z		ن	n
س	s		ه	h
ش	sh		و	w
ص	ṣ		ء	’
ض	ḍ		ي	y

Transliteration Table: Vowels and Diphthongs

Arabic	Roman		Arabic	Roman
◌َ	a		◌ًا، ◌ًى	an
◌ُ	u		◌ٌو	un
◌ِ	i		◌ٍي	in
◌َا، ◌ٰ، ◌َى،	ā		◌َوْ	aw
◌ُو	ū		◌َيْ	ay
◌ِي	ī		◌ُوّ	uww, ū (in final position)
			◌ِيّ	iyy, ī (in final position)

Source: ROTAS Transliteration Kit: http://rotas.iium.edu.my

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'The Politics of Fear': How Does It Affect Youth Political Participation in Malaysia?

Norhafiza Mohd Hed*

Abstract: This article explores the impact of political repression on youth political participation in Malaysia, particularly on how the regime's efforts to 'depoliticise' and criminalise dissent have shaped youth engagement. Using a mixed-methods approach through data obtained from in-depth interviews and analysis of data from the Asian Barometer, the findings reveal that 'the politics of fear' has a negative effect on youth involvement in conventional activism. At the same time, unconventional participation shows no significant differences. Qualitative insights highlight a pervasive 'culture of fear,' deterring most young Malaysians from political involvement, with only a small, courageous group willing to challenge the status quo, given the high risks associated with political activism in the country.

Keywords: repression, political participation, Malaysia, youth, depoliticise.

Abstrak: Makalah ini menyelidiki kesan penindasan politik terhadap penglibatan politik belia di Malaysia, khususnya bagaimana usaha rejim untuk 'menyahpolitikkan' dan menghukum para demonstran telah membentuk penglibatan belia. Dengan menggunakan pendekatan campuran melalui data yang diperoleh daripada temu bual mendalam dan analisis data sedia ada dari Asian Barometer, dapatan kajian menunjukkan bahawa 'politik ketakutan' memberi kesan negatif terhadap penglibatan belia dalam aktivisme politik konvensional. Dalam masa yang sama, penyertaan dalam kegiatan politik bukan konvensional pula tidak menunjukkan perbezaan ketara. Dapatan kualitatif turut menekankan tentang kewujudan 'budaya ketakutan' yang meluas, sekali gus menghalang kebanyakan belia Malaysia daripada terlibat dalam politik, tetapi hanya sebilangan kecil golongan berani yang sanggup mencabar *status*

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quo, memandangkan risiko tinggi yang dikaitkan dengan aktivisme politik di negara ini.

Keywords: penindasan, penglibatan politik, Malaysia, belia, nyahpolitik.

Introduction

In recent years, numerous democratic states that uphold civil liberties such as freedom of expression, assembly, and human rights have increasingly suppressed legitimate dissent, particularly among young people (Bessant, 2016; Fernandez, 2008). Pre-emptive tactics, including anti-terror laws, crowd control measures, and non-lethal weapons, have been used against young protesters in established democracies. For instance, the Anti-Lockdown protests in the UK and the Yellow Vest movement in France witnessed confrontations between protesters and police, resulting in mass arrests. However, these instances are relatively minor compared to those in authoritarian regimes, where repression has been a long-standing tool to maintain power, even before youth-led movements advocating for democratic reforms, such as the Arab Spring in 2011 and the Hong Kong pro-democracy protests, authoritarian regimes increasingly targeted and suppressed young people (Lucan, 2014). Many scholars categorise semi-democratic regimes, which blend both democratic and autocratic features, as "hybrid" or "authoritarian" regimes (Levitsky & Way, 2010). In these regimes, democratic institutions like elections and citizen participation often serve as a façade, concealing more authoritarian practices like limited civil liberties and frequent human rights violations. According to Fein (1995), semi-democratic regimes are the most repressive, facing greater threats than either fully democratic or autocratic states. As a result, such regimes are more likely to employ political repression, including strict legal measures and violent tactics, to limit political engagement, especially among youth.

Despite this, research specifically examining the effects of 'the politics of fear' on political participation in Malaysia remains limited. Malaysia presents a unique case in which young people must navigate the challenges of pursuing democratisation while contending with a government determined to suppress such efforts. This was especially evident in the late 1990s, during the Reformasi movement, when the

government utilised various repressive mechanisms, including criminal laws, political imprisonment, and violence, to stifle reform (Ruijgrok, 2021). This paper seeks to investigate the extent to which political repression affects youth political participation in Malaysia, focusing on how the government has sought to depoliticise and undermine youth engagement through repressive actions.

Political Repression and Political Participation

Political Repression

Many scholars of social movements tend to focus more on political mobilisation and collective action, with fewer addressing the issue of state repression. Within the literature on state repression, three main perspectives can be identified. The first group of scholars examines the policing of protests, focusing primarily on actions such as imprisonment or the use of violence against demonstrators (e.g., Soule & Davenport, 2009). The second group explores violations of personal integrity, including mass killings, torture, and disappearances (e.g., Harff, 2003). Lastly, some scholars are concerned with negative sanctions and the restriction of civil liberties, such as political bans, censorship, and limitations on freedom of expression (e.g., Hibbs, 1973). Among those studying state repression, Tilly (1978) offers a detailed conceptual framework, defining repression as a key element of the political opportunity structure. Tilly (2006) views repression as actions or processes that increase the costs of collective action. Strategies used by governments to suppress opposition include banning political parties, censoring media, arresting dissidents, and, in extreme cases, employing torture and mass killings. Tilly's understanding of repression, while rooted in social movement and contentious politics, is broadly applicable to the study of political participation as a whole.

Goldstein (1978) further defines state repression as the use of physical sanctions, whether actual or threatened, against individuals or organisations within a state's jurisdiction, to impose costs or prevent activities perceived as threats to the regime. In essence, when the government employs force to control individuals or organisations for political reasons, it is engaging in state repression. Non-state repression, by contrast, refers to actions or processes imposed by non-governmental actors that similarly raise the costs of collective action. In a political context, repression occurs when the government raises

the costs of mobilisation and collective action by limiting access to communication and resources for organisations (Tilly, 1978), thereby restricting individuals' freedom and participation in non-institutional efforts to demand political change (Earl, 2011). As dissident behaviour increases, so does the state's repressive response, as repression and dissent are closely linked and mutually reinforcing. Dissent represents efforts to challenge and change the existing power structures, while repression aims to suppress and stabilise these challenges. According to Davenport (2009), two main factors influence how governments respond to dissidents: firstly, the acceptability of the dissidents' actions, which includes the number of challenges, their duration, geographic scope, and level of violence; and secondly, the acceptability of the dissidents' group, which includes its ideology, objectives, members, and relationship to the existing power structure. In general, dissidents who use unacceptable tactics or directly challenge the government are more likely to face repression.

In addition to repression, Tilly (1978, 2006) also discusses two other strategies that governments may use to control citizens: facilitation and tolerance. Facilitation involves actions that reduce the costs of collective action for groups, such as granting publicity, legalising membership, or incorporating dissident leaders into the government. Tolerance, on the other hand, refers to the government's passive acceptance or inaction in response to dissent (Davenport, 2009). It is important to recognise that state repression often involves a combination of these elements—governments may repress some groups while facilitating others. Tilly (1978) further argues that different institutions exhibit varying patterns of repression. For instance, repressive governments may repress many groups and actions, but facilitate only a few, particularly those viewed as unacceptable. This is often associated with authoritarian systems. In contrast, totalitarian regimes tend to repress fewer dissidents than repressive governments, while also tolerating or facilitating some groups. Democracies, which are more tolerant regimes, generally tolerate and facilitate a broader range of groups and actions. As a result, democratic governments are less likely to rely on repressive mechanisms and seek to minimise the threat posed by dissent (Davenport, 2009). While Tilly focuses on state actions aimed at altering the costs of collective action, Snyder (1976) offers a different typology of state repression, based on two dimensions: the level of violence used (violent vs. non-violent) and

the timing of the state's response (pre-emptive vs. reactive). Khawaja (1993) adds another criterion: the nature of the targets, distinguishing between actions directed at individuals (participants) and those aimed at collectivities, including bystanders (collective punishment). For this study, all these typologies will be used to assess how the government raises the costs of participation for those challenging its authority, whether individually or collectively.

What are the effects of repression? Repression can have both positive and negative outcomes. Individuals assess the costs and benefits of their actions, choosing to participate only when the expected benefits outweigh the risks—a cost-benefit analysis (Clarke et al., 2004). As repression intensifies, it may deter dissent by creating barriers to collective action, leading to disengagement and defection. In simple terms, greater repression typically reduces participation. However, deprivation theory presents a counterargument. Gurr (1970) suggests that repression may lead to 'collective frustration,' which can increase the desire for dissent and pressure the regime. Similarly, Tilly (2006) posits that repression may foster division among elites and heighten the determination to resist. Others argue that state repression often has a curvilinear effect (Khawaja, 1993) or pushes dissenters toward alternative forms of political expression (O'Brien & Deng, 2015). Honari (2018), however, critiques much of the existing literature on state repression for its focus on macro-level analyses, which overlook how individuals respond to repression. Without understanding these individual responses, scholars risk underestimating key outcomes of repression. As this study examines the effects of repression on political participation, it is crucial to consider individual reactions to repression.

Political Participation

Most of the literature on political participation tends to focus on democratic practices (Van Deth, 2014), rather than on authoritarian systems. Verba et al. (1995, p.38) define political participation as "an activity that has the intent or effect of influencing government action, either directly by affecting policy-making or indirectly by influencing the selection of policymakers." Similarly, Ekman and Amna (2012, p. 289) describe political participation as "...all actions aimed at influencing governmental decisions and political outcomes." While various scholars offer different definitions and interpretations of political participation,

the core ideas remain consistent (Brady, 1999). Four main elements can be identified from these definitions: activity, citizen, influence, and political decisions.

'Activity' refers to how citizens engage in political actions, such as voting, protesting, or attending meetings. Given the wide variety of activities available, the term can be somewhat broad (Grasso, 2016, p.13). Additionally, individuals often specialise in specific activities that align with their goals (Verba, Nie & Kim, 1978). Some scholars also include informal political engagement, like discussions or following political news, as forms of participation, though Van Deth (2014) argues that watching television or merely expressing concern about politics does not qualify as true participation.

The second element, 'citizen,' emphasises that political participation is primarily carried out by the general public, not by politicians, civil servants, or professional lobbyists (Burns, Scholzman & Verba, 2001). The third element, 'influence,' refers to the voluntary nature of political participation, meaning it should not be coerced or mandated by law (Brady, 1999). However, even in cases of compulsory voting, such participation is still considered meaningful, as it has a significant impact (Van Deth, 2014). The fourth component, 'political decisions,' refers to participation aimed at influencing how the government allocates resources and public goods, targeting the broader political system rather than just specific policymakers. The concept of political participation has expanded over time, evolving from a one-dimensional focus on electoral activities to a two-dimensional model that incorporates unconventional methods, such as protests. Barnes and Kaase (1979) argue that protest-oriented activities do not fit neatly into a one-dimensional model, as participation in one form does not necessarily lead to participation in others (Keil & Gabriel, 2013). This led to the classification of political involvement into two categories: conventional and unconventional participation.

Recent literature goes further by promoting a multidimensional approach, where individuals engage in various forms of political participation, including membership in political parties, social movements, and electoral activities (Norris, 2002). Civil activities such as volunteerism and social engagement are also considered part

of political participation. The rise of these new channels has blurred the traditional left-right political spectrum, signalling a need to broaden the understanding of political participation beyond mainstream activities. As political engagement continues to evolve, it is essential to reconceptualise participation to include a wider range of actions that extend beyond conventional politics. Based on these conceptual frameworks, this article aims to examine the impact of political repression on youth political participation in Malaysia. Specifically, the hypotheses are:

H1: Political repression has a negative effect on youth political participation in Malaysia.

H2: Young males who feel repressed are more likely to be engaged in unconventional politics than young females.

H3: Young Educated Malaysians who feel repressed will be more engaged in unconventional political activism.

'The Politics of Fear' in the Malaysian Context

Malaysia can be described as having a hybrid political system that blends elements of both democracy and authoritarianism (Razali, 2017). Within this hybrid regime, the political structure incorporates democratic institutions such as competitive elections, separation of powers, multiparty participation, citizen involvement, federalism, and executive authority, alongside authoritarian features like limited civil liberties, gerrymandering, a dominant political party, and patron-client relationships. These democratic and authoritarian attributes function together to "uphold and sustain the regime" (Razali, 2017, p. 378). The presence of democratic institutions provides a source of legitimacy for the regime to maintain power. Some argue that Malaysia operates as a competitive authoritarian state, where political parties and elites are allowed to contest elections, but the playing field is highly skewed in favour of the dominant party, rendering elections neither free nor fair (Levitsky & Way, 2010; Case, 2002). Even though Barisan Nasional (BN) lost its two-thirds majority and was defeated for the first time in the 14th General Election, many still contend that the election was not entirely fair (Thomas, 2019; Tsu Chong, 2018). While public participation is permitted, the opportunities are often constrained and

closely monitored by the regime. As Malaysia is considered semi-authoritarian, the government restricts citizen participation and represses numerous groups and activities. Over the years, Malaysians have faced various repressive mechanisms, including the use of legal force, cyber surveillance, censorship, and, at times, violence.

Legal Force

The most potent tool of 'the politics of fear' frequently employed to suppress political dissent in Malaysia is the enforcement of draconian laws such as the Sedition Act of 1948, the Internal Security Act (ISA) of 1960 (later replaced by the Security Offences (Special Measures) Act of 2012), and the Universities and University Colleges Act (UUCA) of 1971. These laws were heavily enforced following the 1969 ethnic riots, marking a turning point that transformed Malaysia's political landscape—from democratic to what some scholars term 'semi-democratic' (Crouch, 1996), 'authoritarian democracy' (Case, 2002), 'soft authoritarianism' (Means, 1996), and 'quasi-democracy' (Zakaria Ahmad, 1989). For instance, the 1975 amendments to the UUCA aimed to 'depoliticise' students by prohibiting them from joining or supporting political parties or trade unions, participating in off-campus activities, and dissolving all student organisations (Weiss, 2011). The government replaced the student union with a weaker entity, the 'Students Representative Council,' effectively ending the student movement as a significant political force in Malaysia. However, Section 15 of the UUCA was amended in 2012 to permit students to join political organisations, including political parties outside of campus (Wan, 2019).

During Mahathir's tenure as prime minister, media freedom was further curtailed through an amendment to the Printing Presses and Publications Act (PPPA) of 1984, which required both domestic and international publishers and printing firms to obtain annual permits. Under this law, the minister had 'absolute discretion' to approve or reject permits, and decisions to revoke or suspend permits could not be challenged in court (Milne & Mauzy, 1999, p. 113). This gave the government the authority to prohibit any news deemed 'malicious' and a threat to national interest and security. Defamation laws were also frequently used against journalists and media outlets critical of the government, leading to widespread self-censorship. The government's

firm control over mainstream media stifled opposition voices and restricted the public's right to publish.

In 1987, Mahathir carried out a large-scale implementation of the ISA in an infamous crackdown known as *Operasi Lalang* (Weeding Operation), during which 106 political and civil rights leaders were detained without trial. The operation took place amid challenges to Mahathir's leadership and ethnic tensions concerning language and education issues. *Operasi Lalang* instilled a pervasive culture of fear, as Mahathir used detention to consolidate his position within the ruling party (Hwang, 2003, p. 154). Similarly, the ISA was deployed to arrest former Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim and his supporters during the 1998 Reformasi movement. Despite growing calls for the ISA's abolition, the government continued to detain dissidents under the law, including blogger Raja Petra and opposition MP Teresa Kok in 2008. However, following public pressure, the government repealed the ISA, replacing it with the Security Offences (Special Measures) Act of 2012, designed to maintain public order and national security.

In addition to the ISA, another frequently used tool for silencing government critics, both online and offline, is the Sedition Act of 1948. The Sedition Act criminalises any speech, actions, words, or publications deemed to have a 'seditious tendency.' This includes inciting hatred or disaffection against any ruler or government and promoting hostility between different ethnic or social groups (Sedition Act 1948, Section 3 (1) (a)). Although the Act remains in effect, the government has proposed replacing it with the National Harmony Act. Notable individuals charged under the Sedition Act include student activists Adam Adli and Safwan Anang for making seditious statements at a political forum in 2013, and university lecturer Azmi Sharom, who was charged over statements on the 2009 Perak constitutional crisis (Nair, 2017; Tan, 2017). More recently, political cartoonist Fahmi Reza was charged under the Sedition Act and the Communications and Multimedia Act of 1998 for depicting Prime Minister Najib Razak as a clown, a caricature widely shared on social media (Human Rights Watch, 2016). Another law affecting protest rights and freedom of association is the Peaceful Assembly Act (PAA). While the PAA allows peaceful rallies without requiring a permit, organisers must notify the police at least 10 days in advance. Failure to adhere to the regulations renders the rally unlawful, and organisers may face charges.

Cyber Surveillance and Censorship

In Malaysia, the public was first introduced to the internet in 1992 when the country's first Internet service provider (ISP) was launched by the Malaysian Institute of Microelectronic Systems (MIMOS). Today, the internet plays an integral role in daily life, with people increasingly relying on it for communication and news dissemination. The internet penetration rate surged from 0.1% in 1995 to 87.4% in 2018 (Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission, 2018), though access remains largely concentrated in urban areas (Wok & Mohamed, 2017).

One of the most common online activities for Malaysian internet users is social engagement, particularly through social media. DataReportal (2024) reported that nearly 97.4% of internet users in Malaysia have social media accounts. Facebook is the most popular platform, with 97.3% of the country's 24.6 million social networking users holding accounts, followed by Instagram (57.0%) and YouTube (48.3%) (Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission, 2018). Despite the rapid growth of internet users and the government's ongoing efforts to expand internet access, freedom in Malaysia's cyberspace remains restricted.

This is due to government internet censorship and surveillance, implemented in part to prevent hate speech, defamation, or violent content. In a semi-democratic regime and a multiracial society like Malaysia, such measures are justified by the need to maintain security. To this end, the government has committed to limiting online freedom for security reasons and has invested billions of Ringgits in enforcing cybersecurity laws aimed at protecting national security and monitoring online activities. However, the Communication and Multimedia Act (CMA) 1998, particularly Section 233 (1)(a), which criminalises the transmission of any communication deemed offensive with the intent to annoy, threaten, or abuse another person, is perceived by young Malaysians as a tool for government surveillance and suppression of dissent, as it has frequently been used against the public (Mohd Hed, 2018).

For example, in 2015, Khalid Ismath was charged with 11 counts under Section 233 of the CMA and three additional counts under Section 4(1) of the Sedition Act for posting allegedly offensive comments on

Facebook about the Johor royalty and the Malaysian police (Amnesty International, 2016). Similarly, in 2016, graphic artist and activist Fahmi Reza was charged for posting a caricature of Prime Minister Najib Razak as a clown on social media, a depiction that was widely circulated online. As a result, Fahmi Reza's Twitter account was placed under police surveillance, and he faced two charges under the same section of the CMA, each carrying a maximum penalty of two years in prison or a fine of RM 50,000 upon conviction (Mohamad Fadli, 2017, January 18).

Furthermore, there is an issue of unequal media access, where opposition parties are legally allowed to operate but face significant hurdles, including restricted access to the media, as well as constant surveillance and harassment. The state maintains a monopoly over mainstream media, particularly television and radio, resulting in coverage that is heavily biased in favour of the ruling Barisan Nasional (BN) party while providing the opposition with limited media exposure. Many private media outlets are owned by individuals or companies closely linked to the BN government through patronage, cronyism, or proxy ownership (Mustafa, 2005). On the other hand, opposition parties are often portrayed negatively in mainstream media. As a result, Malaysians are deprived of the opportunity to make fully informed decisions when casting their votes (Mustafa, 2005).

Violence Against Civilians

For the Malaysian government, any form of protest, public rally, or social movement aimed at challenging the status quo is regarded as an 'unacceptable culture.' As a result, the government takes pre-emptive measures to prevent such activities by deploying excessive force, including tear gas, water cannons, mass arrests, and, at times, police brutality. This heavy-handed approach was notably evident during the 1998 Reformasi movement when thousands of demonstrators who had gathered illegally in front of the National Mosque were dispersed by police using tear gas and water cannons (Khoo, 2003). In response, the crowds retaliated by throwing rocks, water bottles, and iron rods at the police, leading to violent clashes. Hundreds of demonstrators were arrested, and many were injured after being beaten with batons. Since then, the government has continued to employ similar tactics to control

and disperse protesters in other major demonstrations in Malaysia, including the 2007 Hindraf rally and the Bersih rallies.[1]

Methodology

This article employs a mixed-methods approach, combining both quantitative (survey) and qualitative (semi-structured interviews) methods to examine the effects of state-led repression on political participation. The approach follows an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design, as outlined by Cresswell & Plano Clark (2011). It begins with the analysis of quantitative data to identify the patterns of participation, followed by a subsequent analysis of qualitative data to further explain and contextualise the quantitative findings. Both data sets are given equal weight in the analyses, with the integration of findings occurring at the interpretation stage. Although the two data sets are analysed separately, their findings are interconnected and integrated,

[1] The Hindu Rights Action Front (HINDRAF), also known as Hindraf Makkal Sakhti (People Power)—a coalition of Indian non-governmental organisations to preserve the Hindu community rights, led a massive protest against the BN government, mainly the MIC, for failing to address and serve the interests of Indians. The Hindraf rally was a new awakening of resentment among the Indians, which had never been seen before, showing their greater awareness and political consciousness to struggle for their rights. This also appeared to be a sharp decline in Indians' confidence towards the MIC and its leadership in the 2008 general election.

The name BERSIH was derived from the name of its organiser, BERSIH (Coalition for Clean and Fair Elections), a coalition of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and the opposition parties. The idea of organising the BERSIH movement was developed by the opposition parties after they were defeated in the 2004 General Election, and was supported by a coalition of civil society groups. They formed a committee called the Joint Action Committee for Electoral Reform (JACER), intending to reform the electoral system to ensure clean, free, and fair elections. At the early stage of BERSIH's formation, it was affiliated with political parties. Later, there was an initiative to re-launch BERSIH as a non-partisan social movement (Khoo, 2014). BERSIH held its first rally in 2007, and this was followed by another four street protests in 2011 (BERSIH 2.0), 2012 (BERSIH 3.0), 2015 (BERSIH 4.0), and 2016 (BERSIH 5.0). Support for the BERSIH movement grew rapidly, with thousands of young people from different ethnic groups joining the demonstrations. See Khoo (2014) for further discussion.

providing a comprehensive understanding of 'the politics of fear' and its impact on political participation.

Phase 1: Re-analysis of Existing Data Survey

The quantitative method used in this research is the re-analysis of existing survey data from the Asian Barometer, specifically from Waves 2 to 5 (2005-2019). The Asian Barometer survey was selected because it offers a comprehensive range of political actions and variables, addressing a variety of political topics that are well-suited to the region's characteristics. The total sample size for young Malaysians aged 18 to 30 includes 570 respondents in Wave 2, 493 in Wave 3, 601 in Wave 4, and 1009 in Wave 5. This study follows the Malaysian Youth Policy's 2018 redefinition of youth, reducing the age range from 15-40 years to 15-30 years. The broader youth category was chosen to capture a larger segment of the population with diverse political interests, attitudes, knowledge, and experiences. The survey data were analysed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 23, using descriptive statistics such as cross-tabulations and comparison of proportions tests.

For regression analyses, two dependent variables were created: 'conventional participation' and 'unconventional participation.' Conventional participation was measured on a scale from 0 to 1, where 0 indicated no participation in any activities, and 1 indicated participation in all activities such as voting, party membership, attending party meetings, and contacting politicians. Similarly, unconventional participation was measured on a scale from 0 to 1, where 0 indicated no participation in activities, and 1 indicated participation in all activities, including signing petitions, demonstrating, boycotting products, and using force or violence for political reasons.

Both conventional and unconventional participation variables passed principal component analysis (PCA) tests. The Bartlett's Test of Sphericity (Bartlett, 1954) was significant (0.000) for all items, and the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) value was 0.80, surpassing the recommended threshold of 0.6 (Kaiser, 1974), confirming the suitability of the data for factor analysis. The conventional politics items loaded on a single component with an eigenvalue greater than one (e=1.50, explaining 53.03% of the variance), while the unconventional participation items also loaded on a single component (e=1.57, explaining 55.53% of the variance).

The independent variables included elements of repression such as free and fair elections, trust in government, freedom of speech, political freedom, media control, government transparency, and equality. These variables were coded as 1 for yes and 0 for no. Socio-demographic variables were coded as follows: youth (1 for ages 21-40, 0 for ages 41-70), male (1 for male, 0 for female), urban (1 for urban areas, 0 for rural areas), and university education (1 for university degree, 0 for others).

Phase 2: Semi-structured Interviews

The qualitative component of this study involved conducting face-to-face semi-structured interviews. This method was chosen as it enables a deeper exploration of the lived experiences of young Malaysians and their diverse perspectives on politics, allowing for close interaction between the researcher and the participants. A total of twenty Malaysian youths aged between 18 and 30 years were purposively selected to reflect a diversity of backgrounds. This includes those who were actively participating in political parties, social movements, and non-governmental organisations, as well as those who had not participated actively in politics (those not registered as voters and not affiliated with any political parties or organisations), ensuring ethnic representation (Malay, Chinese, and Indian), gender balance, and geographic variation (urban and rural areas). This heterogeneity aimed to capture a broad spectrum of youth political experiences under state-led repression. The interviews were conducted between November 2021 and April 2022, either face-to-face or via online platforms, depending on informants' location and accessibility. The qualitative data were then analysed using thematic analysis. The coding process followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework for thematic analysis. After transcribing the interviews verbatim, the data were read multiple times to ensure familiarity. Initial codes were then generated inductively, capturing meaningful units related to fear, repression, political engagement, and resistance. These codes were reviewed and grouped into broader categories based on recurring patterns and conceptual relevance. Themes were then refined, named, and validated by comparing them across participants to ensure consistency and representativeness. NVivo software was used to assist in organising and managing the coding process. Therefore, the analysis generated four key themes:

1. Culture of Fear – Many respondents linked their political disengagement to fear of state surveillance, arrest, or legal punishment. This widespread anxiety helps explain the low levels of participation seen in the quantitative data.
2. Disillusionment with Electoral Institutions and System – Several participants expressed scepticism toward the transparency and fairness of Malaysia's electoral process. This disillusionment aligns with the low rates of party membership and political contact revealed in the survey.
3. High Perceived Cost of Participation – Respondents viewed political activism, especially protests as carrying personal risk, which contributes to their avoidance of political engagement.
4. Motivated Resistance and Political Awakening – Despite the general trend of disengagement, a small group of participants reported increased political involvement due to feelings of injustice. These individuals align with the subset of youth who continue to engage in unconventional participation.

These themes offer a deeper understanding of the statistical findings and illustrate how state repression influences young people's perceptions, fears, and motivations, ultimately shaping their political behaviour.

Findings and Analyses: Quantitative Data

Table 1 presents the percentage of young Malaysians participating in political activities from 2005 to 2016. Analysing the four waves, we observe that the percentage of young people involved in political activism increased in Wave 3 but slightly declined in Wave 4, except for activities such as voting, attending party meetings, and demonstrating. Although there has been a slight rise in participation in activities like voting, attending campaign meetings, and demonstrations, the survey data reveal that less than half (50%) of young people engage in these activities, except for voting (53%). Notably, party affiliation among young people is low, as party membership dropped significantly from 12% in Wave 2, 5% in Waves 3 and 4, to just 3% in Wave 5. This supports findings by Pandian (2012, 9 June), who observed that young voters tend to be 'fence-sitters,' showing uncertainty toward party affiliation and instead voting based on issues such as unemployment, security, and corruption. Regarding unconventional political participation, the

percentage of young people involved in activities like boycotting, signing petitions, demonstrating, or using violence remains low, at less than 30%. Overall, the data suggest that young Malaysians are less likely to engage in political activities, whether conventional or unconventional. This finding contrasts with arguments by Norris (2002) and Dalton (2008), who suggest that young people are generally more engaged in unconventional forms of participation.

Table 1: Political Participation of Young People from 2005 to 2019

	Wave 2 (2005-2008)	**Wave 3 (2010-2012)**	**Wave 4 (2012-2016)**	**Wave 5 (2013-2019)**
	18-30 yrs (N: 570)	**18-30 yrs (N: 493)**	**18-30 yrs (N: 601)**	**18-30 yrs (N: 1009)**
Voted	45%	48 %	53%	58%
Party Membership	12%	5%	5%	3%
Attend a campaign meeting	24%	24%	25%	26%
Contacted Politician	30%	37%	17%	17%
Boycotted	12%	41%	29%	12%
Signing a petition	13%	21%	14%	18%
Attended a demonstration	5%	5%	6%	7%
Used force or violence for a political cause	2%	3%	2%	4%

It is important to highlight that while many political activities, such as signing petitions and boycotting, increased in Wave 3, they declined in Wave 5. This trend can be attributed to several factors. First, legislative reforms were introduced to create more democratic space for public participation. For instance, the amendment to AUKU (Section 15) allowed students to join political organisations outside of campus, and the Peaceful Assembly Act 2012 (PAA) permitted public assemblies without requiring a police permit, though organisers were required to

notify the police at least 10 days in advance. Second, the emergence of the 'Bersih' social movement heightened public awareness of democratic values through activities such as lobbying, signing petitions, and protesting. Third, social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter became powerful democratic tools, providing greater access to political information and enabling social movements to mobilise people for actions like signing petitions. However, between 2012 and 2016, the government intensified its crackdown on basic rights, restricted free speech, and arrested and charged opposition activists. In addition, human rights organisations such as SUARAM were subjected to hostile investigations by government-controlled media.

Table 2: Effects of 'The Politics of Fear' and Repression on Political Activism

	Conventional Participation		**Unconventional Participation**	
	Model 1	**Model 2**	**Model 1**	**Model 2**
N	1207	1207	1207	1207
R	0.143	0.247	0.189	0.275
R^2	0.020	0.061	0.036	0.076
Adjusted R	0.015	0.052	0.031	0.067
Standard Error	0.242	0.237	0.207	0.203
F	4.15	7.06	7.41	8.90
p-value	0.001	0.001	0.001	0.001
Constant	.366	.389	.235	.263
Free & fair Election	**.099***** (0.018)	**.089***** (0.018)	**.175***** (0.015)	**.167***** (0.015)
Trust for Government	-.005 (0.016)	-.004 (0.016)	-.050 (0.014)	-.041 (0.014)
Limited Freedom of Speech	-.037 (0.020)	-.041 (0.020)	-.027 (0.017)	-.017 (0.017)
Limited Freedom of Politics	-.003 (0.019)	-.003 (0.019)	.013 (0.016)	.003 (0.016)
Media Control	-.026 (0.027)	-.037 (0.026)	-.022 (0.023)	-.028 (0.022)

	Conventional Participation		Unconventional Participation	
	Model 1	**Model 2**	**Model 1**	**Model 2**
Transparency of Government	**-.099***** (0.014)	**-.089**** (0.014)	.048 (0.012)	.052 (0.012)
Young*Repression		**-.198***** (0.032)		0.061 (0.028)
Young*Male* Repression		**.116***** (0.028)		**.111***** (0.024)
Young*Female* Repression		**-.082**** (0.013)		**-.155***** (0.011)
Young*Urban* Repression		.020 (0.028)		-.027 (0.024)
Young*University education*Repression		.036 (0.042)		**0.091**** (0.036)

Key: ***p≤ 0.001 **p< 0.01 *p≤ 0.05
Items in () refer to standard errors

Table 3: Effects of 'The Politics of Fear' on Political Activism

	Conventional Participation					Unconventional Participation				
R	0.143					0.189				
R^2	0.020					0.036				
Adjusted R	0.015					0.031				
Standard Error	0.242					0.207				
F	4.15					7.41				
p-value	0.001					0.001				
Predictor	B	SE	β	t	p	B	SE	β	t	p
Constant	0.366	0.020		18.5	<0.001	0.235	0.017		13.985	<0.001
Free & fair Election	**0.061**	**0.018**	**0.099**	**3.426**	**<0.001**	**0.092**	**0.015**	**0.175**	**6.085**	**<0.001**
Trust for Government	-0.003	0.016	-0.005	-0.182	0.856	-0.023	0.014	-0.050	-1.681	0.093

Limited Freedom of Speech	-0.022	0.020	-0.037	-1.094	0.274	-0.014	0.017	-0.027	-0.799	0.424
Limited Freedom of Politics	-0.002	0.019	-0.003	-0.083	0.934	0.006	0.016	0.013	0.398	0.691
Media Control	-0.024	0.027	-0.026	-0.898	0.370	-0.018	0.023	-0.022	-0.784	0.433
Transparency of Government	**-0.049**	**0.014**	**-0.099**	**-3.429**	**<0.001**	0.020	0.012	0.048	1.676	0.094

Key: ***p≤ 0.001 **p< 0.01 *p≤ 0.05
Items in () refer to standard errors

Table 4: Effects of Repression on Political Activism

	Conventional Participation					Unconventional Participation				
R	0.208					0.209				
R^2	0.043					0.044				
Adjusted R	0.039					0.040				
Standard Error	0.239					0.206				
F	10.8					10.9				
p-value	0.001					0.001				
Predictor	B	SE	β	t	p	B	SE	β	t	p
Constant	0.353	0.100		33.8	<0.001	0.274	0.009		30.521	<.0.001
Young* Repression	**-0.181**	**0.033**	**-0.204**	**-5.574**	**<0.001**	-0.045	0.028	-0.059	-1.605	0.109
Young* Male* Repression	**0.095**	**0.028**	**0.116**	**3.364**	**<0.001**	**0.067**	**0.024**	**0.096**	**2.777**	**0.006**
Young* Female* Repression	**-0.033**	**0.013**	**-0.086**	**-2.623**	**0.009**	**-0.056**	**0.011**	**-0.170**	**-5.203**	**<0.001**
Young* Urban* Repression	0.018	0.028	0.024	0.631	0.528	-0.017	0.024	-0.026	-0.695	0.487
Young* University education* Repression	0.050	0.042	0.039	1.197	0.231	**0.107**	**0.036**	**0.096**	**2.945**	**0.003**

Key: p≤ 0.001 **p< 0.01 *p≤ 0.05 ***
Items in () refer to standard errors

Table 2 displays the results of several regression analyses for the effects of 'politics of fear' such as free and fair elections, trust in government, limited freedom of speech, restricted political freedom, media control, government transparency, and equality among people, across different forms of participation (conventional and unconventional). These analyses incorporate socioeconomic predictors and repression, including repression*young, repression*young*male, repression*young*female, repression*young*urban, and repression*young*university. Notably, the inclusion of repression-related interaction terms in Model 2 significantly improved model fit for both types of participation. The findings in Table 2 reveal that free and fair elections have a positive and significant impact on conventional activism and unconventional activism. This relationship is especially strong in the context of unconventional participation, and even when controlling for socioeconomic and repression factors, suggesting that youth who perceive the electoral process as fair are more likely to engage not only in formal political channels but also in activism beyond traditional platforms. These results support the literature (e.g., Weitz-Shapiro & Winters, 2008), confirming that people are more likely to engage in conventional politics when they perceive the voting system as fair and free, and vice versa. Moreover, government transparency negatively affects conventional activism, indicating that when youth view the government as opaque, they may become disillusioned with formal political engagement. Interestingly, this same perception does not have a significant effect on unconventional forms of participation, highlighting a possible divergence in how different participation types respond to political cues. As shown in Model 2, the negative effect of being young*repressed on conventional activism aligns with findings in the literature (Tilly, 1978), showing that young Malaysians who feel repressed are less likely to participate in formal political activities. However, there are no significant differences in unconventional participation. Additionally, being male and feeling repressed has a positive effect on both conventional and unconventional political activism, confirming previous research (Karp & Banducci, 2008; Norris, 2002) that repression appears to mobilise young males to participate in political activities, both formal and informal, whereas young females tend to disengage from both conventional and unconventional participation in response to repression. As expected, controlling for socioeconomic factors shows that having a university education and feeling repressed

positively influence unconventional participation, indicating that educational exposure may provide tools or confidence for political expression in non-traditional arenas. By comparing the models across Tables 3 and 4, it becomes evident that the 'politics of fear' operates along deeply gendered and educational lines. While general political conditions, such as free and fair elections, encourage participation, they are insufficient on their own to explain the differentiated responses to repression. Only when repression is examined with age, gender, and education, as done in Table 4, does the complexity of youth political behaviour under semi-authoritarian rule come into full view. This reinforces the argument that fear is not a universal deterrent; rather, it is a selective force that suppresses some while provoking others into action.

Overall, the quantitative analyses confirm that 'the politics of fear' operate unevenly across demographic groups. While repression may mobilise some segments, it simultaneously silences others, particularly young women. The analysis confirms Hypothesis 1 (H1), showing that political repression negatively affects youth participation in conventional political activism in Malaysia, though it has no significant effect on unconventional participation. The study also supports Hypothesis 2 (H2), finding that young males who feel repressed are more likely to engage in both conventional and unconventional politics, compared to young females. Similarly, the study confirms Hypothesis 3 (H3), showing that young Malaysians with a university education who feel repressed are more inclined toward unconventional activism. Several key findings emerge from this study. First, state-led repression in Malaysia, particularly perceptions of electoral fairness and government transparency, has a stronger influence on conventional political participation than on unconventional forms. This aligns with O'Brien and Deng's (2015) argument that repression often drives individuals to pursue alternative modes of political expression, such as protest. Furthermore, individuals with higher levels of education who perceive themselves as repressed are more inclined to engage in unconventional political activities.

Findings and Analyses: Qualitative Data

As discussed earlier, political engagement in Malaysia has shown a downward trend in both conventional and unconventional participation,

except for voting. To explore the impact of state-led repression on political engagement, we asked the interviewees whether such repression has a positive or negative effect on Malaysians' political participation. Through in-depth interviews with 20 individuals, including those who refrain from voting or disengage from political and civic activities, as well as political activists, the majority (18 out of 20) expressed that state-led repression, such as the use of legal force and violence against civilians, negatively affects political participation. The main reason for this disengagement is the 'culture of fear' created by oppressive laws, such as the Sedition Act of 1948, the Official Secrets Act of 1972, and the Universities and University Colleges Act of 1971, which stifle political rights and freedoms. These laws, many of which date back to colonial times, give the regime central authority to suppress citizen participation and undermine the democratic process. As one interviewee (Informant 2) remarked, "I think we are not completely free to participate in politics because there are still barriers that restrict our freedom and political rights." Similarly, Informant 15 noted, "the violent repression used by the government on dissidents scared not only me but Malaysians as a whole from getting involved in politics."

The study concludes that Malaysians exposed to state repression are more likely to become fearful and passive, leading to disengagement from both formal and informal political activities, including protest activism. This fear of government-imposed legal force results in a perception that political participation in Malaysia is high-risk or high-cost. These findings align with existing literature (Tilly, 1978; Davenport, 2009) suggesting that political repression increases the costs of collective action, which in turn diminishes individuals' willingness to participate. In addition, 10 out of 20 interviewees mentioned that political repression, particularly through the state's control over institutions and laws, has eroded their confidence in the political system, leading to political disengagement. Specifically, the government's control of the electoral process through the Electoral Commission has created a system perceived as unfair, particularly toward the opposition. The Commission has faced criticism for issues such as missing voters, phantom voters, gerrymandering, and the influence of money politics. Consequently, many Malaysians have lost faith in the political process, especially elections. As Informant 8 stated, "I sometimes doubt the voting system because it's not fully transparent. When the system isn't transparent, we can't expect much

change through elections." Similarly, Informant 5 commented, "voting can bring change, but it depends on the transparency and integrity of the electoral system. The more transparent it is, the more we can achieve change."

Although some interviewees have participated in protest activism, such as demonstrations and social movements, the majority (18 out of 20) believe that protest is an important part of democracy. They view it as a way to express dissatisfaction with the government or specific issues. As Informant 7 put it, "protest is a way to express our dissatisfaction with certain issues. We can demonstrate as long as it's organised properly and doesn't disturb the public." Informant 1 echoed this sentiment, stating, "protest is important to make our voices heard and to ensure the government pays attention to us." Despite this, many Malaysians see protest as a risky activity that could lead to negative consequences. As protest is seen as a threat to the government, the authorities continue to use legal and excessive force to suppress protesters, often claiming that such actions are "not in line with our culture" (Najib, 2016, November 18). This demonstrates the government's rejection of protest as a legitimate form of political participation. However, not all repressed young people are afraid to challenge the regime and demand political change. Despite increasing repression aimed at limiting citizen participation, a small group of Malaysians channels their frustration into political activism. This supports Gurr's (1970) theory that repression can generate 'collective frustration,' which may increase the likelihood of collective action. When interviewed, over half of the respondents (18 out of 20) said they were motivated to participate in activism due to feelings of deprivation, injustice, and indignation toward the repressive regime. As Informant 13 noted, "we can see that our country is not heading in a better direction. We are moving towards a 'failed state' in terms of the economy, politics, and society. So, we need a total change, not just small-scale reform." Similarly, Informant 16 commented, "we are fighting for a better Malaysia. This is not for us, but for the next generation."

Several movements in Malaysia have successfully influenced policy changes, such as the national campaign to abolish the Internal Security Act (ISA), led by a coalition of human rights NGOs under the banner of the Anti-ISA Movement (Gerakan Mansuh ISA, GMI) since 2001. After a decade of protests and resistance against indefinite detention

without trial, the government repealed the ISA in 2011. Furthermore, four interviewees mentioned that they had been arrested at least once during their political activism. As Informant 7 reflected, "I was arrested seven times as a student activist and twice when I worked for SUARAM." Despite repeated arrests, most of these activists expressed that they were not deterred, and the government's crackdowns only fuelled their determination to continue fighting for change. They cited the experiences of past political figures as a source of inspiration in their resistance.

Conclusion

This study highlights the impact of 'the politics of fear' on political participation in Malaysia by utilising a mixed-methods approach, combining both quantitative data and qualitative interviews from 20 young Malaysians. The quantitative results indicate a decline in various political activities among young people in Wave 5, with the exceptions of voting, attending campaign meetings, and demonstrating. Despite this downward trend in political engagement, the findings reveal that repressive measures, such as unfair elections, restricted freedom of speech and political expression, and government non-transparency, are particularly evident in unconventional political activities. The qualitative analysis further shows that 'the politics of fear' discourages political participation, especially among young Malaysians. The study concludes that repressive actions, including the enforcement of existing criminal laws and the use of violent repression, prevent Malaysians from actively engaging in politics. Specifically, state-led repression has a negative impact on young people's political involvement in Malaysia, fostering a 'culture of fear' that serves as a significant barrier to political activism. Given the risks and high costs associated with political participation in Malaysia, only a small group of highly determined and courageous young Malaysians are willing to challenge the status quo through channels like social movements and protest activism. The majority, however, remain politically inactive or limit their involvement to low-risk activities, such as informal political discussions. As a result, the widespread disengagement of young Malaysians from politics is slowing the country's transition to democracy and may make such a transition difficult to achieve in the future.

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In-text:
(i) Al-Bukhārī, 88:204 (where 88 is the book number, 204 is the ḥadīth number)
(ii) Ibn Hanbal, vol. 1, p. 1

Reference:
(i) Al-Bukhārī, M. (1981). *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*. Beirut: Dār al-Fikr.
(ii) Ibn Ḥanbal, A. (1982). *Musnad Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal*. Istanbul: Cagri Yayinlari.

The Bible
In-text:
Matthew 12:31-32

Reference:
The new Oxford annonated Bible. (2007). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Transliteration of Arabic words should follow the style indicated in ROTAS Transliteration Kit as detailed on its website (http://rotas.iium.edu.my/?Table_of_Transliteration), which is a slight modification of ALA-LC (Library of Congress and the American Library Association) transliteration scheme. Transliteration of Persian, Urdu, Turkish and other scripts should follow ALA-LC scheme.

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