

## The Civil Society Engagement in Malaysian National Education System: How the Organizations Should Be Seek Justice in Multi Racial Society?

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### Abstract

*Civil society exists due to a democratic state system, which guarantees freedom of movement, gathering and voicing aspirations. The role of civil society in national development has become an important element, especially in the education sector. This article discusses the influence and involvement of civil society in the country's education policy. The focus of the study is to see the extent of the role and expectations of civil society in Malaysian National Education Policy. The research methodology is qualitative by using face-to-face interview as a research method. The informants were selected from civil society experts and representatives who advocated national education. The results of the study found four main influences of the involvement of civil society in changing the national education policy. First, civil society acts as a social control and balancer of government decisions in the education system. Second, a role in the structural improvement in the education system. Third, as a change agent of education policy, and finally it acts as a driving force for social justice in the education system in Malaysia. In conclusion, civil society plays an important role in changing the country's education policy. That role has become a check and balance on any policy making and implementation related to national education issues.*

**Keywords:** Civil Society; NGO; National Education; Malaysia; Policy.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The involvement of the personnels in the administration of a country is frequently emphasized in a democratic country. Based on discussions among political science scholars on the definition of democracy, it is possible to analyze the primary reason why many countries worldwide have chosen to adopt a democratic form of governance. President Lincoln defined democracy as a government of the people, by the people, for the people<sup>1</sup>. Meanwhile, Sammy Finer, a political science expert who has written a lot about government administration, defines democracy as the direct involvement of the people in the administrative system.<sup>2</sup> The definition presented by Lincoln and Finer was developed by Holden<sup>3</sup> when he defined democracy as a government by the people in which the people not only have the power to choose leaders, but they have an interest in influencing the formation of public policy. Holden's definition is

1 R.A. Epstein, "Direct Democracy: Government of the People, by the People, and for the People," *Harvard Journal of Law and Public Policy*, 2011, 819.

2 J.E.S. Hayward, "Finer's Comparative History of Government," *Government and Opposition* 32, no. 1 (1997): 114-31.

3 B. Holden, *The Nature of Democracy* (Nelson Education Ltd, 1974).



explained in detail in the study of Dye and Zeigler<sup>4</sup> by stating that democracy emphasizes the principle of individual participation in decision-making and that all decisions made by the individual will have an impact on the country. Therefore, individual participation has become an important element as it can connect an individual with the political environment to influence the decision-making process carried out by the government<sup>5</sup>.

This participation can be done through a civil movement, known as civil society. Civil society is indeed an institution whose governance is beyond the control of a government. However, they always fight for people's rights and justice.<sup>6</sup> The role of civil society covers community life in various cultural, political and economic contexts that are mobilized in private or voluntary forms which are beyond the control of the government.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, the involvement of parents and the community in education sector can directly and indirectly affect the cognitive, emotional and physical development of children's achievements in school as well as changes in national policy. The behavior of parents and the community, along with the NGOs in giving views and comments on the national education policy is one of the involvements of civil society in the national education administration system.<sup>8</sup>

Razak's Statement 1956 and Rahman Talib's Report 1960 became the basis for the formation of National Education System and Policy as written down in the Education Act 1961. These three documents affirm unity as the main goal of the country. The goal of education is to produce good citizens who have the characteristics of being united, disciplined and trained. Furthermore, the report describes the characteristics of a good citizen. Hence, to succeed in the formation of disciplined and ethical citizens, modifications are also made in the curriculum to find and fulfil the desire to produce citizens who can contribute to the country. In line with the development of the world community, Malaysian society is also experiencing a rapid and challenging development process.<sup>9</sup>

Therefore, the objective of this article is to examine the role and influence played by civil society in fighting for the national agenda, especially in the field of education in Malaysia. Significantly, the effectiveness of the civil society roles in the aspects of national education system might be able to improve and enhance the work that need to be done by the institutions involved to ensure the quality of national education.

### 1.1 Background of The Study

It is essential to study on how civil society influences the nation's educational policies, particularly considering the numerous changes and reforms implemented by the government in the field of education between 1981 and 2008. During Tun Dr. Mahathir's governance, a new educational policy was introduced, which is Teaching Science and Mathematics in English (PPSMI). The purpose of this policy is to strengthen the proficiency of the English language among the Malaysian community. However, in 2009, the Ministry of Education announced that PPSMI would be completely

4 T.R. Dye and H.L. Zeigler, *The Irony of Democracy: An Uncommon Introduction to American Politics*, 11th ed. (Brook/Cole Publishing, 1996).

5 Ahmad Syed, *Pengantar Sains Politik (An Introduction of Political Sciences)*. Kuala Lumpur (Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, Kementerian Pelajaran Malaysia, 1995).

6 S.M. Delue and T.M. Dale, *Political Thinking, Political Theory and Civil Society*, 5th ed. (Routledge, 2021).

7 A. Leftwich, "Governance, Democracy and Development in The Third World," *Third World Quarterly* 14, no. 3 (1993): 605–24.

8 J. Bakker and E. Denesson, "The Concept of Parent Involvement: Some Theoretical and Empirical Considerations," *International Journal of Parent in Education* 1 (2007): 188–99.

9 Abdul Halim Ali, *Dinamika Dakwah: Suatu Perspektif Dari Zaman Awal Islam Hingga Kini (The Dynamics of Preaching: A Perspective from the Early Period of Islam to the Present)* (Budaya Ilmu Sdn. Bhd., 2000).

abolished in 2012, due to the emergence of language problems, especially for the students who found it difficult to be proficient in Mathematics and Science subjects taught in English. However, for certain reasons, students who had already learnt those subjects in English remained as what had been taught. Nevertheless, PPSMI became a huge issue in Malaysian education because of the refusal to accept it especially from the Malay community<sup>10</sup>. This move generated significant constitutional critique, as detractors argued it violated Article 152 of Malaysia's Federal Constitution—which designates Bahasa Melayu as the national language—and the Education Act of 1996.<sup>11</sup>

Among the reasons for the refusal are: (1) the performance of Malay students particularly declines in the subjects of Science and Mathematics; (2) lack of trained teachers; and (3) opposition from Malay language fighters, scholars, academic figures, politicians, and NGOs who fight for the Malay language as the official language. Some people wonder why would these people would go against the implementation of PPSMI whereas it had been implemented for seven years? Could it be that the community, which has seen how the policy has affected their children's academic performance, has expressed their preferences in this way? Naturally, the pupils in rural areas tend to show poor results because it is evident that they are still lagging, especially in becoming proficient in English language. It is believed that the communities at rural areas are not fully ready to accept the implementation of PPSMI because they are worried about these pupils' future undertakings. Alas, the use of foreign language not only damages the position of the National Language but also the language of knowledge, and the reputation of these pupils. In the end, they are unable to master the subjects they are learning through a medium they do not comprehend, and the national education goals will likewise become unable to be met.

Another issue that has been going around is the admission to public universities through matriculation programmes. For the Bumiputras, this is not an issue to be magnified since it is their right. Nonetheless, the non-Bumiputras somehow argue about this because they believe that the admission to public universities should be based on merit. There has previously been a suggestion by some parties to allow admission to Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) for students regardless of races, whereby it has been stated since 1956 that this university policy is to cater for the Malays and Bumiputras only. According to the social contract and the Federal Constitution Bumiputras have the right to defend this university for the sake of education.<sup>12</sup>

Additionally, issues related to education also involve the use of the Internet. Globalisation and the age of borderless communication have made it simpler and faster to access information via computers and the Internet, webpages and other resources. The result is that moral problems become more complicated and challenging to answer, especially when societal values are involved. This phenomenon occurs when the values in the West or developed countries, which emphasize materialistic and individualistic aspects, are not compatible with Malaysian society.<sup>13</sup>

10 I. W. Hwang, *Personalized Politics: The Malaysian State under Mahathir* (Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2003).

11 A.L Hwa, *The Language Policy in Malaysia: Its Development, Implementation and Challenges*. (University of Malaya Press, 2011).

12 N. Mohamed and M. Turnin, "Organisasi Masyarakat Sipil Dan Pensiwaan Kesihatan Di Malaysia (Civil Society Organizations and Health Privatization in Malaysia)," *Journal of Business and Social Development* 2, no. 1 (2014): 83–93.

13 Hussin Sufean, *Dasar Pembangunan Pendidikan Malaysia: Teori Dan Analisis (Malaysian Education Development Policy: Theory and Analysis)* (Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, Kementerian Pelajaran Malaysia, 2004).

## 1.2 The Civil Society Studies : An overview

The concept of civil society in its pre-modern classical republican understanding is usually related to the early-modern thinking of the Age of Enlightenment in the 18th century.<sup>14</sup> However, it has a much older history in the field of political thought. Generally, civil society is referred to as a political association that regulates social conflict through the imposition of rules that prevent citizens from harming someone.<sup>15</sup> In classical times, the concept was used as a synonym for the good society and was seen as indistinguishable from the state. For example, Socrates taught that conflicts in society should be resolved through the views of society using ‘dialectic’, a form of rational dialogue to reveal the truth. He believed that society through ‘dialectics’ is very important in providing anything good to the government and the people.<sup>16</sup>

Meanwhile, Aristotle believed that the civil society is more *‘koinonia politike’* which is more collective. According to him, the Polis entity is an ‘association’ that allows citizens to participate in the noble task of ruling and being ruled.<sup>17</sup> In the context of Greek society, human lives are free through the rule of law. In comparison with the contemporary era, there are two views on civil society. First, the Marxist perspective taken from the thought of Hegel and Karl Marx which was later developed by Antonio Gramsci<sup>18</sup> through the theory of hegemony in explaining civil society as a tool for the government. Gramsci’s view considers that civil society should be free from getting any help from the government and play a role as a pressure on the government. This is because originally the civil society was considered as a link between the community and the government, but that role was seen to be quite ineffective. For that reason, civil society is urged to be a pressure group and not a balance to the government likewise in the Philippines, Thailand and Indonesia. The second perspective, through the neo-Tocquevallian approach, comes from the French writer named Alexis de Tocquevallian. This approach views civil society as an intermediary between individuals and the government. It was then later developed by Robert Putnam (1993), Francis Fukuyama (2001) and Larry Diamond (1994). These three writers saw that there is an interest in the existence of a strong and active civil society as a buffer to the government. Nevertheless, the formation of contemporary civil society is seen closer to the trend of neo-liberalism that separates the government and society.<sup>19</sup>

In the United States, pressure groups and interest groups have demonstrated their significant role and involvement in the policy-making process. These groups are particularly important when it comes to their involvement in the political process and their ability to influence the government or ruling party’s policy decisions. As a result, under some circumstances, these players can create policies in the policy-making process that best serve their interests and areas of interest. Usually, they will do some activities such as bargaining, negotiation, compromise, lobbying, etc. to get what they need.<sup>20</sup>

14 Hwang, *Personalized Politics: The Malaysian State under Mahathir*.

15 M. Edward, *Civil Society*, 3rd ed. (Polity Press, 2004).

16 B O, Cornell, *Civil Society: The Underpinnings of American Democracy* (University Press of New England, 1999).

17 Edward, *Civil Society*.

18 A. Gramsci, *Selections from Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci* (Lawrence and Wishart, 1971).

19 Takiyuddin Ismail and Shah Mohd Akmal Abdul Halim, “Pertimbangan Semula Masyarakat Tidak Sivil Di Malaysia,” *Journal of History, Politics and Strategic Studies* 49, no. 1 (2022): 87–113.

20 Lester and Jr. Stewart, *Public Policy Analysis* (Faculty of Administrative Science Brawijaya University, 2000).

However, these pressure groups and interest groups only influence the government in relation to their interests and do not involve in the political process or how the power of the government is exercised. This is because these people are able to act and influence the government by simply giving warnings about the benefits, and the effects of a certain policy that will be implemented by the government<sup>21</sup>. Sabitha (1997) also gave her opinion on this pressure group. She sees this pressure group as a structured organization that seeks to place its members in formal government positions. Sabitha's opinion is similar to what Sohaimi, A. (1995) said, which is that this pressure group only tries to strengthen or change certain government policies without wanting to be the ruling government. The way these pressure groups influence government policies are by sending protest memoranda to the government through campaigning, lobbying or by influencing the public to gain support that reinforces their proposals. In Malaysia, interest groups include the Malaysian Environmental Association (PASM) and pressure groups include the Malaysia Trade Union Congress (MTUC), Congress of Unions of Employees in Public and Civil Services (CUEPACS), and Consumer Association Penang (CAPS), among many others.

Kaldor<sup>22</sup> has divided civil society into several categories such as social movements, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), social organizations, and nationalist or fundamentalist groups based on several characteristics namely missions, activities, social composition and organizational forms. All these characteristics are different according to each actor although there is some overlap. Social movements, for instance, focus on organising protests and demonstrations; non-governmental organisations (NGOs) employ advocacy and service delivery strategies; social organisations engage in lobbying efforts; and nationalists or religious groups utilise social institutions like mosques and schools as well as the media to spread their message.

For Cohen and Arato<sup>23</sup>, civil society is a space of social interaction between the economy and the state. They think that among the elements contained between the two aspects are volunteer associations, social movements and public communication. According to Ismail, M. E and Tumin, M<sup>24</sup>, the view of civil society by Cohen and Arato shows that the role of the state is neutral in the space of the three related elements. The existence of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) as the main social movement actors in playing their role to create the widest space in communicating between the public and the government. In theory, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) serve as a conduit for public social and political engagement, hence fostering more fruitful interactions with the government. NGOs are also set up to aid in the execution of government programs; in fact, some are even government-created organisations with the dual purpose of advancing political agendas and facilitating policy implementation. Nonetheless, there are also NGOs that were founded for the purpose of challenging the government's weaknesses or offering alternative ideologies.<sup>25</sup>

The participation of civil society in the public policy process has the potential to influence directly from the aspect of accountability and transparency that can improve

21 M. Brahim, *Dasar Awam Di Malaysia: Suatu Pengenalan (Public Policy in Malaysia: An Introduction)* (IBS Publication, 2008).

22 M. Kaldor, "Civil Society and Accountability," *Journal of Human Development* 4, no. 1 (2003): 5-27.

23 J.L Cohen and A. Arato, *Civil Society and Political Theory* (MIT Press, 1994).

24 M.E. Ismail and M. Tumin, "Masyarakat Sivil, Gerakan BERSIH Dan Pendemokrasian," in *Masyarakat Sivil Di Malaysia: Isu Dan Cabaran*, ed. M. Tumin et al. (UiTM Press, 2022).

25 M.R. Othman and A. Fadlillah, "Perspektif Badan Bukan Kerajaan Islam Terhadap Dasar Penerapan Nilai Islam Dan Pendekatan Islam Hadhari (Perspectives of Islamic Non-Governmental Organizations on the Policy of Implementing Islamic Values and the Contemporary Islamic Approach)," *Jurnal Hadhari* 4, no.1, no. 1 (2012): 49-76.

public services and further improve the quality of delivery to the public. This demonstrates how civil society organisations can monitor the formulation and execution of public policies to enhance the quality of services provided to the community.<sup>26,27</sup> This is proven by the study of Devarajan et al. (2011) on the role of civil society in monitoring public policy in Africa. The study shows that there are positive results when the political leaders delegate the powers and responsibilities to public participation in government agencies and service providers. Similarly, a study by Malena, Foster and Singh (2004) on the impact of accountability initiatives in underdeveloped countries shows that the role of civil society organizations can improve the quality of governance and increase the effectiveness of development and highlight the empowerment of the community.<sup>28</sup>

Hikam (1999) also defines that the concept of civil society is defined as the vision of the elites in community life as a state system. The term civil society is just one of several other terms in the word Civil Society.<sup>29</sup> In addition to civil society, other commonly used words are civilized society or cultured society, and citizenship society. Civil society also certify that this civil society is a balance in the government and not an agent of political parties<sup>30</sup>. The judiciary also acknowledges the critical role that civil society plays in monitoring and regulating government acts. In the case of *Aizsardzibas Klubs vs Latvia*, the court found that government information that is not confidential and has no elements of secrecy should be disclosed to the public, and that this openness becomes something very important in a democratic country. This is because it allows civil society groups to control government actions and protect the interests of the public. The court acknowledged that civil society has made an important contribution in discussing matters of national and community interest.<sup>31</sup>

### 1.3 Research Methodology

Research methodology, according to Ahmad Mahdzan Ayob, is the set of actions used to accomplish all goals while conducting research activities in accordance with the scientific method.<sup>32</sup> The significance of individual subjective experiences that require qualitative analysis is emphasised by the qualitative method, and social reality has specific meanings that are subjective and unique to everyone<sup>33</sup>.

This study employs qualitative approach in which it is a way of studying phenomenon that is independent of statistics emphasises language over quantification while gathering and analysing data.<sup>34,35</sup> The purpose is to see the connection or explanation while providing an accurate picture of the characteristics found in a phenomenon. This has been supported by Creswell stating that qualitative approach aims to establish the meaning of the phenomenon.<sup>36</sup> The explanation for this qualitative approach is also

26 Shantayanan Devarajan et al., *Civil Society, Public Action and Accountability in Africa*, HKS Faculty Research Working Paper Series nos. RWP11-036 (John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, 2011).

27 T. Crothers and S. Brechenmacher, *Transparency, Participation, and Inclusion: A New Development Consensus?* (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2014).

28 Devarajan et al., *Civil Society, Public Action and Accountability in Africa*.

29 Hikam, *Metode Penelitian Agama: Perspektif Ilmu Perbandingan Agama* (Gunung Djati Press, 1999).

30 Hwang, *Personalized Politics: The Malaysian State under Mahathir*.

31 A Tsampi, *The Role of Civil Society in Monitoring the Executive in the Case-Law of the European Court of Human Rights: Recasting the Rule of Law*, 17, vol. 2 (2021).

32 Ayob, Ahmad Mahdzan, *Kaedah Penyelidikan Sosioekonomi: Suatu Pengenalan (Research Methods of Socio-economic: An Introduction)* (Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, Kementerian Pelajaran Malaysia, 1993).

33 Yusof, Rohana, *Penyelidikan Sains Sosial (Social Science Research)* (PTS Publications & Distribution, 2003).

34 Bryman, *Social Research Methods* (Oxford University Press, 2012).

35 G. Goertz and J. Mahoney, *A Tale of Two Cultures: Qualitative and Quantitative Research in the Social Sciences* (Princeton University Press, 2012).

36 Kvale, *Doing Interviews* (Sage Publications, 2007), <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781849208963>.

based on Piaw (2006) who explains that this approach is applied to study phenomena or behaviours that are difficult to measure with numbers. Simply put, it aims to explain information about a phenomenon that is happening; known as descriptive.

Interviews and focus group discussions were conducted with NGOs, as well as some local and community leaders. In answering the research questions, the data was also obtained through the informant interview method. The chosen form of interview is an in-depth semi-structured interview. This secondary approach was chosen for the study's implementation since it is the most suitable way to obtain comprehensive and in-depth data. This justification is based on the explanation by Schensul, Schensul and LeCompte (1999) who claimed that semi-structured interviews are the best to explain the factors and sub-factors in a study. According to Kvale (2007), there are seven levels of investigation in interview research which are conducting thematic, designing, interviewing, transcribing, analysing, verifying and reporting. In line with that, the questions for the interviews that are constructed need to meet the objectives of the study, and they do not need to be tested.<sup>37</sup>

There are two types of data that will be used, namely primary and secondary. Primary data is data obtained through interviews and focus group discussions. On the other hand, secondary data refers to information gathered from reading and study materials such as newspapers, periodicals, reports, library studies, journals, and others. The primary method's sample selection is based on civil society organisations, which include academics, NGOs, political parties, and others, that advocate for national education concerns. All the data and information obtained have been processed and analysed using a descriptive and analytical report, in which the important things obtained in the interviews will be collected and arranged according to the order of the theme (thematic analysis) based on the objectives and research questions set. These important contents are then presented through writing reports supported by facts and comprehensive discussions. This study uses case studies and newspaper reports as supporting data and the names used are pseudonyms.

## 2. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study have been divided into several roles associated with civil society as follows:

### 2.1 The Civil Society as a Social Control in the Education System

The study's results show that civil society is a very important part of Malaysia's national education system. It doesn't just act as a "social control" agent in the informal sociological sense; it also acts as a way for the public to keep an eye on things and hold people accountable. Social control refers to the mechanisms, strategies, and institutions through which society regulates individual and group behavior, aiming to maintain social order and conformity to established norms and laws.<sup>38</sup> Innes regards social control as "the organized patterns of social norms and the institutionalized means of enforcing them, aiming to regulate behavior and maintain social order".<sup>39</sup> In the legal context, social control refers to the use of laws, regulations, and formal institutions to regulate individual and collective behavior in order to maintain public order, protect

<sup>37</sup> Kvale, *Doing Interviews*.

<sup>38</sup> A. Giddens et al., *Introduction to Sociology*, 11 Eds. (W. W. Norton & Company, 2021).

<sup>39</sup> M. Innes, *Understanding Social Control: Crime and Social Order in Late Modernity*. (Open University Press, 2003).



rights, and uphold societal norms. It operates through formal mechanisms—such as statutes, court decisions, law enforcement, and administrative regulations—by which the state enforces compliance and resolves disputes.<sup>40</sup> Unlike informal social control (e.g., customs, traditions, peer pressure), legal social control relies on codified rules backed by the authority and coercive power of the state.<sup>41</sup>

Therefore, the key roles of social control in the civil society context are norm formation and maintenance<sup>42</sup>, accountability of power<sup>43</sup>, conflict mediation<sup>44</sup>, resistance to harmful practices,<sup>45</sup> and socialization<sup>46</sup>. Civil society actors, such as social movements, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), social organizations, and nationalist or faith-based groups, work together to watch and change education policies based on their missions, activities, socio-economic makeup, and organizational forms. Based on this premise, civil society mobilises to combat concerns related to social control in the education system. In this study, the government's ability to manage and implement new policies is the source of civil society's position as an agent of social control. Nonetheless, a few government-enacted policies are discriminatory or incomplete. As a result, these organisations must supervise government decisions in order to guarantee that all policies and programmes, particularly in the context of Malaysia's multicultural society, can effectively inform the whole community.

The concept of check-and-balance in the constitution emerged because of a branch in the classical theory regarding the division of power among the three main bodies, namely the legislature, the executive and the judiciary which can differentiate the power among each of them. Additionally, it will provide a check-and-balance mechanism to guarantee that the government's authority is not overreached and misused. Furthermore, this strategy can also be described as a constitutional restraint or policy, in which the government's several branches have limited each other's authority to prevent any of them from reaching the highest branch. One of the countries that practice this 'check-and-balance' system comprehensively is the United States of America based on provisions in its Constitution. For that reason, Shamrahayu (2014) regards the role of civil society as very important especially in the democratic system and for democratization of the country.<sup>47</sup> As such, it should act as a check-and-balance mechanism instead of becoming a tool of any political party. Therefore, it means that there is an existence of civil society as a link between the government and society.

Civil society organisations will speak up against the implementation of any educational system that places undue pressure on students and teachers as it does not allow their honest feedback. According to (Informant #1), civil society has a significant influence on Malaysian education policy. This is the outcome of parent complaints and input regarding the educational inconsistencies their children are experiencing, which can occasionally have a negative or depressing impact on the sustainability of the educational program that GPMS will be fighting for. Meanwhile, the government, especially the Ministry of Education, is trying its best to change the education system according to the mainstream. However, sometimes there are shortcomings in its implementation that

40 D Black, *The Behavior of Law* (Academic Press, 1976).

41 S Vago and L. Nelson, *Law and Society*, 12th Ed. (Routledge, 2019).

42 R.D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (Simon & Schuster, 2000).

43 L Diamond, *Developing Democracy: Toward Consolidation* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999).

44 Cohen and Arato, *Civil Society and Political Theory*.

45 J. Keane, *The Life and Death of Democracy* (W. W. Norton & Company, 2009).

46 E. Durkheim, *The Division of Labor in Society*, W. D. Halls., Trans. (Free Press, 1984).

47 Aziz Shamrahayu A., "Masyarakat Sivil Sebagai Pengimbang, Bukan Ejen Parti Politik (Civil Society as a Balancer, Not an Agent of Political Parties)," *Berita Harian*, November 14, 2014.



have an impact on society, especially students, teachers and parents. This lack is what GPMS as an NGO or civil society in the education system is trying to fight for to ensure that all parties get full benefits. Hence, these inputs are also used by the government to further strengthen the implementation in the national education system.

Additionally, (Informant #2) argues social control is also done through activities carried out at school. Among the national programmes introduced by the government and accepted by various parties is educational TV. Educational TV programmes have a great impact on the growth of the country's education and improve the learning techniques of students including those living in rural areas. Electronic media has unquestionably become more significant in today's world of education, particularly for students. To guarantee that Malaysians can take advantage of social media and electronic media's benefits to enhance their learning abilities, social control is required. Furthermore, non-governmental organisations frequently combat the detrimental impacts of these two media platforms in order to enable the government to regulate these unhealthy manifestations and prevent them from continuing to afflict Malaysian society.

In short, the best way to understand civil society's role in Malaysia's education system is as a formal duty to keep an eye on things and hold people accountable, based on democratic theory and administrative law. Civil society does not just do "social control" in an informal way; it also helps keep the Constitution's checks and balances in place. This makes sure that educational governance stays open, responsive, and welcoming.

## **2.2 Civil Society as an Agent of Change and Structural Improvement in Malaysia National Education System**

Based on the results of the study, it is found that the main role of civil society in the education sector is as an agent of change in the country's education policy. The civil society organizations play a role as an independent entity and acts as an initial agent to change a policy in the education system. The organizations take risks that cannot be accepted by the government from the aspect of interest to students, parents and teaching staff. There are many innovations and changes that take place in the education system that were initiated by civil society groups that eventually adopted as the basis of national education. Asadullah argues that CSOs facilitate access to vital education-related data, amplify community voices, and inject accountability into a system often characterized by limited transparency.<sup>48</sup> Parallely, GERAK—a prominent academic movement—has pushed for institutional reform, advocating for the restoration of the National Council on Higher Education (NCHE) and the rollback of repressive laws like the Universities and University Colleges Act (UUCA) and Act 605. These reforms aim to restore academic freedom and reduce bureaucratic control over universities.<sup>49</sup>

According to the Association of Peninsular Malay Students (GPMS), the organization has contributed to making up the national education policy, such as in the issue of the less effective evaluation system in the formation of good human capital especially in the abolition of SRP, PMR, PT3 and UPSR. The GPMS has been fighting for a long time by giving various views until the government is clear with the goals that they want to achieve and finally they decided to abolish the evaluation system. Obviously, the civil society in the context of education has a strong voice to influence the government decisions. However, there are also proposals that are rejected for certain reasons.

<sup>48</sup> M.N Asadullah, "Managing Malaysia's Education Crisis," East Asia Forum, 2014.

<sup>49</sup> S.M Alatas, "Reform Our Universities and Their Myriad of Unresolved Problems," *Free Malaysia Today / Gerak Akademik*, 2023.

*“...In the education sector they have their own system that is efficient in formulating a policy. They have done research and discussed with many parties to implement a policy. When a policy is implemented and some issues arise, the GPMS will voice those issues so that the government sees and raises the issue as an agenda that needs to be refined more deeply....”*

*(Informant #1)*

The GPMS emphasizes that any proposal for changes in the national education system must be able to benefit all parties involved such as students, teachers, parents, administrators and the local community as stated:

*“...for GPMS any policy that is enacted should benefit to the students and teachers. An example of the policy that civil society agents are fighting was PPSMI, in the case of PPSMI the fought is not only from GMPS but also supported by NGOs and parents who in the end this PPSMI program was abolished from the school system in education in Malaysia...”*

*(Informant #1)*

This view is supported by an informant from Pusat Aspirasi Anak Perak (PASAK) who stated that PASAK frequently fights to uphold justice among teachers and students in Malaysia. In general, criticism from the civil society will be analysed with suggestions for improvement. Therefore, the government will use the suggestions submitted to improve policies that are not beneficial to the people.

*“To change a policy there needs to be a strong mechanism. In the context of NGOs, we will try to fight for an issue up to the top by making memorandums, forums, symposiums and so on to ensure that the government is aware of the issues being fought for. There is no doubt that the government will feel pressured by the actions of NGOs. But this action will eventually be able to change a policy or program implemented by the government that does not benefit the people. This situation makes NGOs one of the agents of policy change. Usually, criticism from NGOs will be followed up with suggestions for improvement, therefore the government will use the suggestions submitted to improve policies that are not felt to be beneficial to the people”.*

*(Informant #2)*

In providing views on the role of civil society as agents of change, informants from The Consultative Council of Malaysian Islamic Organizations (MAPIM) also agreed that the role can have an impact on the country's education policy. However, successful change is not an easy thing. The ongoing struggle of civil society with a particular issue—such as concerns pertaining to teacher placement, warden's allowance, teacher welfare, and so forth—plays a significant influence. To ensure that the government investigates and pays attention to the issue, constant issues must be brought forth. Informants from MAPIM expressed their disappointment because the space and opportunities given by the government to civil society are very limited while the issues brought up are significant for common prosperity likewise in the comment below:

*“NGOs should be part of the agents of change in the democratic system, however, the space and opportunities available are not wide for NGOs to voice the ideas of change. In every era of government from Tun Mahathir’s era, Pak Lah’s era and Najib’s era, the door is there but the space is small. Therefore, the government is advised to get more space and take into account the views expressed to the government”.*

(Informant #3)

It is in line with the analysis made by Simon K.D (2021) regarding the studies in several African countries such as Somalia, Kenya, Sudan and Ethiopia which portray potential community movements in influencing the national education policy process to improve the delivery system in terms of equality and quality of education to all parties, especially the vulnerable and marginalized.

As a result, the government ought to provide civil society with more avenues for advocating for issues that are crucial for the general welfare. These challenges may develop from the application of a policy that lacks a broad perspective. Civil society can identify shortcomings in a policy’s execution and will communicate such concerns through the proper channels. However, not all issues raised by civil society groups are heard by the government. In this case, the government needs to acknowledge that civil society is the biggest agent of educational policy change, and the government needs to give more space and opportunities to civil society to carry out its duties and functions.

Therefore, the civil society plays a role in improving the structure of the national education system. In general, any policy made by the government is beneficial to the public and hence it is easy for them to accept. However, with the observation and control carried out by some NGOs, the implementation is seen to be more effective. While this is going on, the government is continuously reviewing and improving the policies that will be put into effect, taking into account any problems that may come up throughout that process. NGOs in particular are part of the civil society and are frequently involved in fighting for problems pertaining to the community. The present scenario demonstrates the function of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in enhancing policies already in place. For instance, under the Education Development 2001-2010 initiative, the Malaysian Ministry of Education (KPM) guarantees that all educational establishments have adequate and high-quality infrastructure to facilitate the efficient implementation of curricular and co-curricular. Therefore, educational inputs that include teachers, financial allocations, teaching materials and equipment as well as support programmes will be fairly distributed to all schools to reduce the gap between advantaged schools and disadvantaged schools.<sup>50</sup>

Malaysian civil society movement has been successful in making good use of the country’s current civil space. Considering this trend, the movement employs several strategies to guarantee the organization’s long-term viability. Strategies including petitioning, dialoguing, organising joint workshops, lobbying, and fortifying ties with global non-governmental organisations are thought to be highly successful. Improving this system is a big task that needs to be carried out carefully and with the cooperation of many people to be effective. For that reason, UNESCO has identified that there are several methods that can strengthen the responsibility and framework of the

<sup>50</sup> Ministry of Education, Pembangunan Pendidikan, “Perancangan Bersepadu Penjana Kecemerlangan Pendidikan 2001-2010 (Educational Development 2001-2010: Integrated Planning Generates Educational Excellence).,” Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2001.

education system.<sup>51</sup> First and foremost, there must be clear and honest communication throughout the educational planning process. It is for this reason that a formal structure absolutely requires the participation of multiple stakeholders, particularly civil society organisations. Second, it is the responsibility of every civil society to find a way on how to access information related to education for every country. Third, in further strengthening the aspects of national education, civil society groups need to work with bureaucrats, law makers and politicians to identify any weaknesses and loopholes in the existing education policy. With this method, it can ensure that the national education sector can improve the delivery system, budget transparency, freedom of information and increase public participation in the making of the national education policy.

Structural changes in education policy occurred a long time ago, many changes have occurred because of intervention from civil society groups. If recalled, before the arrival of the British in Malaya, the education system of the Malays was based on the teachings of Islam, which is the holy Qur'an. At that time, *musolla* (small Islamic prayer building) and mosques were built not only to worship Allah but to learn the Qur'an as well. During those times, lessons were learnt through memorizing the verses of the Qur'an, prayers, and learning about Islamic teachings. All this was done by referring to imams and religious teachers. At that time also, the government system was monarchy so, there was no problem with the power struggle to rule. Nonetheless, this gradual change occurred without unconsciously due to formal and informal pressure from civil society groups. Among the views from informants are as follows:

*“Examples such as the SRP, PMR and PT3 evaluation systems. If in the past students studied only to sit for exams, based on the exam results the students were labelled with levels of excellence without considering other factors such as manners and morals. After the abolition of the examination-based assessment system, it was replaced with the PBD (Classroom Assessment) system where students are assessed in every aspect and not just learning alone. The mechanism of the civil movement to manage the activities of the organization to achieve the desired goal has used various approaches such as lobbying, petitions, dialogue, collaboration workshops, and strengthening local and international networks making the discourse of the civil movement more mature and effective. It is important for the government to appoint a panel as an acting body to formulate a policy”.*

*(Informant #1)*

The development of education in Malaysia has undergone many changes, especially from the colonial period to the post-independence period. The development of society goes hand in hand with the development of national policies which are constantly being improved to ensure that the needs of the people are protected. The changes in the education sector become an important essence in strengthening the unity of the country in a better direction because education is the leader in the formation of society. In order to improve the administrative structure of the country's education policy, the informants who were interviewed were of the view that the government needs to provide a clear platform for civil society to work together to strengthen the country's education system.

51 “Global Education Monitoring Report, 2016: Place: Inclusive and Sustainable Cities - UNESCO Digital Library,” accessed July 31, 2025, <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000246230>.

### 2.3 The Civil Society as an Agent of Social Justice in the Education System in Malaysia

social justice is closely related to conflict theory and struggling for an interest or right for a society or institution.

This matter is often focused on favour of the interests of certain groups and directly against those groups who are considered as contradiction in term of ideology and idea. Social justice is one of the important components to succeed in a fair and trustworthy government model especially in public administration. In the education sector, a perfect school system is the approach used to ensure unity among the community. The implementation of social justice about teacher welfare, encompassing race, curriculum and political rights for the actors. Malaysia government also put the value of social justice for equality under Article 8 and linguistic rights under Article 152. However, the theme of unity in the school system is emphasized because it is only through unity that the goal of achieving Vision 2020 can be realized. From 2010 to 2020, the difference is only 10 years apart for Malaysia to become a developed country. However, given the current state of society and the country, the question of how to prepare for it emerges. For instance, there is still a need to improve community relations in Malaysia since there are still indications of their fragility. The educational system ought to be a catalyst for fostering communal cohesion. Yet, there are still issues with choosing the educational system since some groups favour keeping things as they are while others favour making changes.<sup>52</sup>

Furthermore, social justice in Malaysia's education system encompasses equitable access to quality education, fair allocation of resources, and the removal of structural barriers that disadvantage certain groups. The Malaysian Education Blueprint 2013–2025 emphasizes inclusivity, aiming to reduce disparities between urban and rural schools, as well as between socioeconomic and ethnic groups. Efforts include targeted financial aid, infrastructure upgrades, and special education programs.<sup>53</sup> However, challenges remain, particularly in addressing the digital divide, ensuring equal access to quality teachers, and balancing national language policies with the needs of vernacular schools.<sup>54</sup> Issues of social justice are also linked to broader socioeconomic inequalities, which influence students' academic opportunities and long-term outcomes.<sup>55</sup>

This situation shows that civil society movement is very important in being an agent of social justice for the community, especially in the cultural and political landscape of Malaysia, which is multiracial, multiethnic and multireligious. Every proposed policy needs to be carefully examined from difference aspects. This is so that the power dynamics between the people and the leaders may be balanced by civil society's initiatives in promoting social justice concerns in a variety of circumstances, including age, religion, race, culture, and so forth. Furthermore, it can guarantee that the government can execute all ideas and proposals that are rejected in the most effective manner.

In discussing the aspect of unity in the diversity of races in Malaysia, we cannot avoid discussing vernacular schools. It is found that there are various views of information on this issue whether to defend or dissolve these schools. Some informants argue that

52 Mahzan Arshad, "Sejarah Prinsip Asas Dalam Pendidikan Bahasa Melayu: Satu Penilaian," *Masalah Pendidikan* 24, no. 1 (2001).

53 Ministry of Education Malaysia, "Ministry of Education Malaysia. Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013–2025 (Preschool to Post-Secondary Education)," Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2013.

54 S.K. Gill, *Language Policy Challenges in Multi-Ethnic Malaysia* (Springer, 2014).

55 H Rahim and N. H. Jalaludin, "Education Equity and Social Justice in Malaysia: Policies and Practices," *International Journal of Educational Development*, 75 (2020): 102–75. *International Journal of Educational Development*, 75 (2020)

these schools should be disbanded because they lack equality in the education system which is not complied to the same specifications as national schools. Vernacular schools do not have an interpretation system likewise in national schools. Additionally, the student assessment process is different, and it is not in line with the national education system as given in the comment below:

*“...Vernacular schools do not emphasize Malay language as an intermediary language; instead, they use their mother tongues which are Mandarin and Tamil... this situation is finally difficult to implement the unity vision as what the ministry wishes.”*

*(Informant #2)*

The policy of vernacular schools makes students unable to be proficient in Malay language whereas it is clear that the official and the national language of Malaysia is Malay language. The Malay language is indeed being promoted as an international language by a civil society organisation that is working for this cause. The nation's educational system has been significantly impacted by civil society. This is because an individual cannot have influence in life without knowledge, making the educational system crucial to society. In relation to the issue of vernacular schools, there are informants who do not agree with the disbandment of these schools as they believe that some community groups should play the role of social control in harmonizing the multi-racial society in Malaysia. This can be seen in the comment below:

*“We, as an NGO that takes care of the Chinese education aspect, always attach great importance to the national language, which is the Malay language. We have no intention of a vernacular school wanting to eliminate the Malaysian language, but we want the students to be able to speak their mother tongue. Even now many Chinese people can't speak Chinese, they speak English because their parents send them to international school”*

*(Informant #4)*

According to Shamrahayu, in going through the aspects of diversity and racial differences such as in Malaysia, civil society needs to respect the diversity that has been enshrined in the federal constitution.<sup>56</sup> They cannot generalize a society that has a diversity of religions and beliefs based on universal principles.

According to some informants, social justice is the concept of a fair and equal interaction between individuals and society, particularly in the context of education. The nation's education policy's reliance on civil society as a catalyst for social justice. Though others were unaware of their movement and purpose, it was something that had been going on for a while. For GPMS, among the aspects that are often fought for are the teachers' placement system, teachers' recruitment, and the school curriculum as emphasized by them:

*“...After many years GPMS fought for the teachers' placement system, especially those who were paired and placed far apart. Now there is a glimpse of hope. The struggle of GPMS is not only focused on students, but GPMS also fights for issues related to teachers, especially those who face problems such as sexual harassment, teachers who are sued by*

<sup>56</sup> Shamrahayu A., “Masyarakat Sipil Sebagai Pengimbang, Bukan Ejen Parti Politik (Civil Society as a Balancer, Not an Agent of Political Parties).”

*disgruntled parents for unreasonable reasons and so on ...”*

*(Informant #1)*

Apart from the aspects of placement and recruitment of teachers that are being fought for, there are also civil society groups that are fighting for political freedom among teachers. This is because at the beginning of 2022, there was a decree made by the Malaysian Ministry of Education prohibiting teachers from being actively involved in holding positions in political parties. However, there are among the components of the government party who do not agree and in the end the Minister of Education and the Prime Minister must comply with the call as stated by the leader of a political party as follows:

*“The minister has a proposal to prohibit teachers from being actively involved in politics on the grounds that it will affect work performance. He has a hidden agenda because he wants to stop teachers who have served for a long time in our party from being active, while his party is new, so teachers may not participate. In the end the minister had to give in to the insistence of the party leadership”.*

*(Informant #5)*

The ban on involvement in politics was made during the era of Pakatan Harapan (PH) after succeeding in the 14th General Election and subsequently forming the government. The ban disallowed teachers and employees of the Community Development Department (KEMAS) to be actively involved in politics. However, in January 2022 the then Prime Minister, Ismail Sabri, had allowed KEMAS teachers and staff to get involved in politics as long as it did not affect work performance.<sup>57</sup>

In addition, issues related to oppression of students and teachers are often fought by NGO. According to (Informant #1), among them are excessive actions by parents who sue teachers for scolding and punishing their children. Similarly, the dignity of teachers and students who receive sexual harassment during the teaching and learning process is also taken seriously. Social justice for students and teachers needs to be upheld to ensure that the sustainability of the education system can be in good condition. If the teaching profession is not defended, this situation will weaken the national education system.

From the aspect of social justice in the national education policy, the unification of all multinational NGOs is necessary to ensure that every policy benefits to all races. It is necessary for the government to form an action body represented by all civil societies, namely NGOs from all races as emphasized by the following informant:

*“...This is important to ensure that every policy implemented will benefit all races in Malaysia, for example if it happens to abolish vernacular schools, the government may be able to implement national schools that give students the option to choose other languages as compulsory subjects such as Mandarin, Tamil and so on...”*

*(Informant #2)*

<sup>57</sup> Abd Rahim Nor Fazlina, “Guru Dan Petugas KEMAS Dibenarkan Berpolitik Kuatkuasa Serta Merta (KEMAS Teachers and Officers Are Allowed to Exercise Political Power Immediately),” *Berita Harian*, January 22, 2022.



In addition to promoting and preserving racial harmony, this circumstance will also help students of other races to study different languages. For instance, Malay students studying Mandarin and Tamil will gain benefits from being able to master three languages at once. It should be mentioned that there are not many NGOs that truly defend the causes they support. As a result, they may still be heard in the struggle for everything. From the aspect of social justice, the definition is very broad, what can be fought for are certain things that are important only as emphasized by an informant from Pertubuhan Pendidikan Umah Perak (PPUP):

*“...So what is often highlighted about how the school’s curriculum can enrich a student. Every student has their own talents and how these talents are developed by the school. It is a general issue that can be highlighted by all NGOs in education because the issue is not related to racial issues, for examples of racial issues are Jawi writing and so on...”*

*(Informant #6)*

The matter of race among students is the most significant social justice issue that the government ought to bring to light. Not to mention if vernacular schools emerged like mushrooms, there would still be a racial disparity in the national education system. Hence, the Ministry of Education must take this into consideration to use a common language to bring youngsters from different ethnic backgrounds together under one national education system.<sup>58</sup>

John Lowe argued that the Education Act of 1957 agreed on the principle of multi-stream schools and teaching in their respective mother tongues to be allowed.<sup>59</sup> Since Malay is officially recognised as the national or official language in Malaysia, History, Geography and Science subjects in vernacular schools must be taught in Malay, and other textbooks must be orientated towards Malaysia rather than other nations’ curricula like those of China and India. Nevertheless, Enloe<sup>60</sup> and Wan Hashim<sup>61</sup> have other views in the context of the unification. Both of them argued that apart from the purpose of unity, the Education Act 1957 has an economic motive, which is to ensure that Malay students would get a place in the country’s economic system by holding certain positions in future.<sup>62</sup> The issue of social justice is not only focused on the learning and schooling system of students, but it also includes issues related to teaching staff who also need social justice to ensure that the implemented system can run smoothly. Placement issues, workload, stress at workplace and stress with students’ behaviour are the issues that need to be looked after. These things are fought for by teachers’ associations and related NGOs for the well-being of all parties.

### 3. CONCLUSION

Based on the results and discussion of the study, the present research finds that the polite community in Malayan exerts imperative control over the patriotic guidance policy through the four key dimensions: policy advocacy (setting agenda and improving

58 Wan Hashim and Wan Teh, *Race Relations in Malaysia* (University of Michigan:Heinemann Educational Books (Asia), 1983).

59 J. Lowe, *The Malayan Experiment* (Fabian Society, 1960).

60 C.H. Enloe, *Political Ideology in Malaysia: Reality and the Beliefs of an Elite* (Yale University Press, 1986).

61 Hashim and Teh, *Race Relations in Malaysia*.

62 Mohd Zaini Abu Bakar, “Education Policy and Ethnic-Relations in Malaysia: The Socio-Economic Perspective,” *Journal of Educational and Social Research* 4, no. 2 (2014).

goals), monitoring and accountability (monitoring implementation and addressing policy shortcomings), architectural changes (recommending institutional transformations to improve regulation), and righteousness and equity (ensuring that helpless categories incorporated in distant sectors have identical entrance toward caliber education ). By prosecuting in accordance with the abovementioned positions, courteous social order not only deals with shortcomings in the development and implementation of education policies but also reinforces Malaysian Peninsula democratic approaches.

In order to operate competently, courteous social order requires adequate permissible and institutional space, in accordance with the fundamental freedom guarantee under Article 10 of the Federal Charter. However, restrictive legislation such as the 2012 CE Peaceful Assembly and the 1948 Sedition Act restricts its own democratic function in addition to time. Achieved by amending, for instance, legislation in order to improve its adaptability and democratic standards would contribute to a supportive environment for courteous community interaction.

The courteous community is working to ensure that the regime policies are safeguarded, from their conception to their implementation, to provide students, teachers, and caregivers with palpable support in the context of the learning system. A policy divide that could exert equally immediate and long-term influence on national progress is triggered by each defeat of the intended perks for which the aforementioned cohort is sought. Advanced procedures should be considered in order to respond to these challenges.

Changes have been authorized to remove undue restrictions on public engagement and to safeguard the rights of advocacy categories. An institutional mechanism similar to a formal advisory body involving a polite community representative in policymaking and assessment operations. A participatory governance standard within the Ministry of Education, which requires stakeholder involvement at all stages of policy development.

By taking the above steps, Malaya can ensure that respect for civilization's second duty in education policy is not only recognized but also operationalized, thus facilitating further transparent, fair, and democratic learning structures coordinated with the State's development.

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