

Asia-Ready Webinar Series

Malaysia: Tackling COVID-19, Politics and Opportunities for Youths

The Asia-Ready Webinar Series is co-curated with various partners to allow youth to gain a better appreciation of the regional developments and a greater awareness of Singapore's interconnectivity with the regional markets.

Sat, 23 Jan 2021

11:00 AM - 12:00 PM

Online Event



About the Webinar

Speakers

Mr Syed Saddiq bin Syed Abdul Rahman – Malaysian Politician and Activist

Mr Soh Yi Da – ASEAN Youth Fellow and Vice President (Investor Relations), UOB

Synopsis

The political scene in Malaysia over the last few years have highlighted the complexities and multi-faceted nature of Malaysian democracy. The fall of the Pakatan Harapan government in March last year coupled with the COVID-19 pandemic, have pushed Malaysian politics into uncharted territories.

Youths, who form about 43% of Malaysia's population, have traditionally been underrepresented in Malaysian politics. The formation of the Malaysian United Democratic Alliance (MUDA), Malaysia's first youth-centric party in September 2020, sets the stage for Malaysian youths to be more involved in politics than before.

For many countries, kick-starting the economy will be a priority going forward. What are the key issues youths in Malaysia are concerned about in the post-pandemic recovery? What is Malaysia's role in ASEAN and what are the prospects and areas for future collaboration between Malaysia and Singapore?

This webinar was brought to you by the National Youth Council (NYC) and the Singapore Institute of International Affairs (SIIA).

What We've Learnt

Politics in Malaysia

Back in February 2020, Malaysia was thrown into a period of crisis and political uncertainty with the collapse of the Pakatan Harapan (PH) government and Dr Mahathir Mohamad's shock resignation as Prime Minister. One year on, even as the external situation has changed drastically with the COVID19 pandemic, Malaysian politics remains in turmoil. The King recently declared a state of emergency and movement control orders (MCO) were reintroduced in several states as the country confronts a spike in cases. The emergency declaration is widely viewed as a move not to deal with the pandemic, but to keep the current government in power and to prevent further defections. As it stands, Muhyiddin's government is in a precarious position, as it lost its majority in Parliament on the same day that the state of emergency was called. Under the state of emergency, all parliamentary legislative processes are suspended.

Sentiment on the ground: Some Malaysians welcome the political stability created by the state of emergency, particularly amidst the worsening COVID-19 situation where the country is ill-positioned to confront more political jostling or the prospect of a general election. On the other hand, there are constitutionalists who believe the declaration of the state of emergency goes against the constitution and will weaken Malaysian democracy in the long run, setting a bad precedent for future instances where the sitting Prime Minister expects to lose the majority in Parliament. The second round of MCO is also taking a heavy toll on the people. In comparison to the first round of MCO, there are less cash handouts, no more blanket moratorium for small businesses and many are struggling with depleted savings as the pandemic drags on.

Singapore-Malaysia Bilateral Relations

In a poll conducted during the webinar, 86 per cent of participants see Singapore-Malaysia relations as being very important. The COVID-19 pandemic has, in fact, underscored the interdependency between both countries. The Singapore and Malaysia governments have been working closely together to ensure minimal disruption to the flow of goods between both countries, even as the movement of people has been necessarily curtailed. While the recent termination of the Kuala Lumpur-Singapore High Speed Rail (HSR) project appears to be a setback, the two governments recently inked a clearcut deal on the Johor Bahru-Singapore Rapid Transit System (RTS), which will cut travel time between Singapore and Malaysia to just 5 minutes upon completion in 2026.

Engagement of Youths in Malaysia Politics

Youth engagement with politics was drastically underestimated in polls prior to the last general election in Malaysia. When election day came, young people defied the odds, showing up to the polls in droves and voting heavily against the ruling government. One can expect youth involvement in Malaysian politics to grow even more in the coming years with a series of constitutional amendments coming into effect. The voting age in Malaysia was recently revised from 21 to 18, the minimum age of candidacy is set to be reduced from 21 to 18, and the automatic voter registration of about 4.2 million unregistered young voters is expected to happen by July 2021. This will grow the youth voter pool to a staggering 7.8 million. Considering that the last general election saw a total voter turnout of roughly 15 million, it is clear that the youth voice will become an influential and defining force in Malaysian politics in the near future.

Mr. Syed spoke briefly on his decision to start his own political party, the Malaysia United Democratic Alliance (MUDA). Disenchanted with the mass defections from the Pakatan Harapan (PH) government back in February 2020, he nearly quit politics. However, he believes there is a need for a strong disruptive force in Malaysian politics, filled with young, fresh faces, that is multi-racial and policy-centered in nature. He criticised opposition blocks for continuing to engage in power struggles for the position of Prime Minister, rather than focusing on crafting policies and a fresh narrative to unite the nation and move Malaysia out of the current crisis.

Questions Answered

By Mr Syed Saddiq and Mr Soh Yi Da

Are Malaysian youths generally engaged in politics and what are the issues that they care strongly about?

Malaysian youths are very much engaged in politics. Engagements in politics does not necessarily mean knowing in-depth the political parties and leaders, but rather it is about being in tune with day-to-day issues. For example, there was recently an outcry when the government limited food delivery hours to 8pm, which affected a lot of small businesses and frontline workers who would only finish work after 8pm. This led to a hashtag movement,

largely led by the youth, that was tweeted by more than 50,000 people in under 24 hours. The Malaysian government capitulated and extended hours to 10pm. In terms of issues that youths care strongly about, the number one issue is the lack of employment opportunities, specifically opportunities of a skill and income level that reflects one's level of education. Other issues include cost of living, in the areas of housing and public transportation, and concerns around corruption and abuses of power.

In view of the voting age in Malaysia being lowered from 21 to 18, is there any value to reviewing the voting age in Singapore?

It makes sense to review the voting age in Singapore to empower young people to vote and have the ability to choose their representatives, considering that 18-year-olds are able to serve in the military and take on the responsibility of carrying arms as part of their National Service commitments. In recent years, we have seen growing interest from young Singaporeans in politics. They are more aware and concerned with causes they want to champion, and actively seek out people who can champion these causes.

What advice would you give to this generation of youths in order to prepare themselves for the next 20-30 years?

Treat your youthfulness as an asset rather than a liability. Do not be afraid to make mistakes but be bold in entering new territory and taking on new challenges. You will fall and fail occasionally but you will get back up stronger! Having the courage to be bold and disruptive and the ability to think out of the box will help undercut your lack of experience and connections compared to those who are older.

While you are still in school, take the chance to learn a Southeast Asian language. Venture out of your comfort zone and beyond the pursuit of traditional internships domestically to find internship opportunities in the region. Immerse yourself in a different culture and develop lifelong friendships with people from other countries. There is a lot we can learn from one another.