



# Challenges of the Urban Malay Youth: Zooming in on Kuala Lumpur

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## Challenges of the Urban Malay Youth: Zooming in on Kuala Lumpur

*By Nik Nazmi Nik Ahmad*

### SYNOPSIS

*Kuala Lumpur's Malay youth is becoming the city's most important political constituency. With the conservative opposition recently gaining ground among Malay youth through social media, the progressive multiracial parties must better address their economic concerns.*

### COMMENTARY

It has long been assumed in Malaysian discourse that Malays are the minority race in urban areas (including in the capital city of Kuala Lumpur), with the Chinese being the majority. This demographic, a legacy of colonial policy in the early years after Independence, is no longer true. Its denouement was the racial riots of May 13, 1969, which mainly occurred in Kuala Lumpur. One perspective to the tragedy was the state election in Selangor that year, resulting in a hung assembly. The opposition Chinese-majority Democratic Action Party (DAP) and Parti Gerakan Rakyat Malaysia (Gerakan) had made gains in Kuala Lumpur at the expense of the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO)-led Alliance Party. Kuala Lumpur was subsequently carved out of Selangor and placed under direct federal control as a Federal Territory.

### Demographic Background

In Kuala Lumpur, Bumiputeras – comprising Malays (mostly) and indigenous groups – constituted 33 per cent of the population in 1980, compared to 52 per cent Chinese and 14 per cent Indian. By 2020, it was 48 per cent Bumiputera, 42 per cent Chinese, and 10 per cent Indian. Nationwide, the Bumiputera population also grew more rapidly, driven by higher birth rates and lower emigrations than those of the Chinese and Indians. Industrialisation and the New Economic Policy – affirmative action for

the Bumiputeras introduced after the 1969 riots – attracted Bumiputeras from across the country to the capital.

In 2025, Kuala Lumpur had a population of 1.98 million. However, with its vibrant commercial and service sectors, the daytime population is estimated at around 3 million. The city is also ageing and has the highest male-to-female ratio in the country.

For Bumiputera youth in Kuala Lumpur, bread-and-butter issues are a major concern. Economically, it leads the country and has already achieved high-income status with a monthly mean household income of RM13,985 (about US\$3,600), far exceeding the national mean of RM9,155 (about US\$2,400). However, substantial challenges remain. From 2019 to 2022 (largely during the COVID-19 pandemic and its aftermath), Kuala Lumpur experienced a significant 2.5 per cent decline in real median household income. Inflation is also more pronounced in Kuala Lumpur, and there is less of a family support system to rely on than in many rural areas. Homes are small and expensive, and work commutes are long.

Many Bumiputera youth in Kuala Lumpur continue to live with their families in cramped, low-cost public housing. The most affected are young men, as parents and female siblings are prioritised in terms of privacy. Like many other countries, Malaysia is experiencing male underachievement with a pronounced impact on society. Yet, while female empowerment has grown, the men are still expected to fulfil traditional gender roles.

Although the minimum wage was raised to RM1,700 (about US\$440) in 2025, this has had limited impact on many youths in Kuala Lumpur who demand wages above that level. In 2018, Bank Negara had estimated that a single adult in Kuala Lumpur would require a wage of RM2,700 (about US\$700) to sustain a decent standard of living. The current government has raised salaries in the public sector and government-linked corporations. There has also been a trial of a progressive wage mechanism, where the government provides wage subsidies to small and medium-sized businesses to boost salaries at the lower end. The impact remains to be seen.

While monthly earnings from food delivery and ride-sharing have fallen to about RM3,000 (about US\$780) from a peak of RM4,000 (about US\$1,000) during the COVID period, they still exceed the pay for many entry-level positions. Many young Malays in Kuala Lumpur, including graduates, have therefore joined the gig economy, taking jobs that offer higher monthly income but do not provide skill enhancement, social safety or job security. Graduates face the additional burden of student debt. In 2025, nearly 2 million, or 35.5 per cent, of all employed diploma and degree holders were underemployed in low or semi-skilled work, highlighting a serious misalignment between the economy and the education system.

Bankruptcies have also surged, mainly affecting young people and residents of Kuala Lumpur. Malaysians have been relying on personal financing, including “buy now, pay later” facilities and credit cards to cope with low wages, unstable income, and high living costs. But that only delay their misery.

## **The Political Significance of Bumiputera Youth in Kuala Lumpur**

Bumiputera youth in Kuala Lumpur constitute the city's largest and fastest growing demographic. They are caught at the crossroads of rapid urbanisation, a difficult economic landscape and increased religious and political identity formation. As Bumiputera numbers swell, the city, long seen as a stronghold of the People's Justice Party (PKR) and DAP, is likely to shift politically. Voting trends among Bumiputera youth today will offer insights into the future of Malaysian politics.

Following a constitutional amendment to lower the voting age from 21 to 18, many members of this cohort voted in the 2022 General Election. This led to an election where young voters favoured Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS) and Perikatan Nasional (PN), even in Kuala Lumpur. Four Malay MPs from Pakatan Harapan (PH)-PKR won in the 2022 elections there. In three of the seats, Setiawangsa, Wangsa Maju and Bandar Tun Razak, the candidate with the second highest votes came from PN. In the past, PKR had been most popular among younger voters. In 2022, it was the middle-aged and elderly who saw it across the line.

What explains how the youth voted? By its very nature, social media creates its own silos where users consume content only from their own circles. Malaysian youth, like their counterparts elsewhere, tend to rely on social media for news, commentary, and entertainment. PN was able to succeed on Tiktok, the social media platform most popular among younger Malaysians, by relying on third-party influencers. Perhaps this enabled them to reach the youngest voter segment.

This segment arguably has no fixed political stances, and PN's conservative Malay-Muslim ideology, combined with its "clean and stable" slogan, appealed to the demographic rather than PH's image of being too elitist, "liberal" and dominated by the Chinese-majority DAP.

Today's youth, even in Kuala Lumpur, are arguably less integrated than ever. In the past, English-medium schools, and then their successors – the national schools in cosmopolitan areas like Kuala Lumpur – were multiracial. Today, they are almost entirely Malay as Chinese and Tamil parents increasingly send their children to vernacular schools, while wealthy families enrol their children in private and international schools.

According to the National Youth Survey 2024 by Merdeka Centre, 12 per cent of Malay youth nationwide believed that a coalition comprising solely Malay parties should govern, while 49 per cent believed it should be a coalition led by a Malay party with other races represented by different parties. Thirty-two per cent favour a coalition of parties that represents all races with an equal say. (The figures for all Malaysian youth are 8 per cent, 33 per cent, and 54 per cent for the three scenarios, respectively).

## **Winning over Malay Youth**

While Malay youth, including university students, seem to value piety and religiosity as religion replaces race as the primary marker of identity, this is not separate from

their concerns about better wages, affordable housing and fighting corruption. At the same time, these socio-economic concerns have been exploited by PN by associating it with the racial-religious identity of Malay youth. PAS, which at different points in its history emphasised progressive Malay nationalism, Islamic universalism and a compassionate brand of politics, has now positioned itself as a conservative Islamist and Malay nationalist party.

Progressive parties need to engage better with voters in the social media war, a battle they had won during the heydays of Facebook and Twitter; address the concerns of young Malay voters in an accessible manner; and reassure them that their parties are not insensitive to the position of Islam and Malays. Young urban Malay voters experience economic anxiety, and are also concerned about reforms and governance.

PKR and DAP had traditionally been training their guns on UMNO and the earlier government coalition, Barisan Nasional (BN), and were allied with PAS during the Reformasi era and from 2008 to 2015. Going into the 2018 election, DAP, PKR, and PAS splinter AMANAH had focused on UMNO rather than PAS, while Bersatu (Malaysian United Indigenous Party) was allied to the new PH coalition until 2020. By the 2022 General Election, PAS had overtaken UMNO in Malay support, and PN continued to gain ground, including in Kuala Lumpur, at BN's expense. The 2022 electoral outcome likely arose from the Malay electorate's concerns about the PH-led governments and the perception of DAP's undue influence.

Nevertheless, while the ground may now be more challenging for progressive and multiracial parties, the door is not permanently lost or closed. A well-conceived electoral plan and consistent messaging with the right mix of candidates can help them score victory in forthcoming elections.

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