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POLITICS | RESEARCH ARTICLE

Malaysia's crisis of political legitimacy: Understanding the 2020 power transition and 'Sheraton Move' polemics through the 'eyes' of Malaysian political science graduates

Mohd Irwan Syazli Saidin^{1,2*}

Abstract: This empirical study examines the reactions of 114 political science graduates in Malaysia, through a questionnaire-based survey on the power transition crisis that took place February 23rd to 1 March 2020. Throughout these “seven long days”, there was little opportunity given to university students, who were concerned with the Malaysian political affairs, to share their views in light of the “Sheraton Move” polemics and the formation of a new government (Perikatan Nasional, PN). Various responses from the students in the survey have been recorded among these are: the attitudes regarding the polemics of PN’s “backdoor government”; the conspiracy of the opposition’s political parties to topple the Pakatan Harapan (PH) leadership; the prospect of Mahathir’s unity government; the proposal for parliament dissolution and re-election; and the lessons behind the crisis. This study establishes that the 60.6 percent of the respondents rejected the power transition as it was during the political crisis, as well as supporting the criticisms on the formation of PN as betraying the people’s mandate. Respondents (86.0 percent) also agreed that the Majesty King (Yang di-Pertuan Agong) had played an effective role during the turmoil and proposed re-election and dissolution of the parliament at the expense of justice for all. The lessons derivable from the “Sheraton Move” is that the real politics approach is not relevant in the context of modern democracy, in Malaysia; there is the need to retain the spirit of consociational politics and the importance of political education for the youth in Malaysia, in particular, the future new voters.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Subjects: Asian Politics; Government; Political Behavior and Participation

Keywords: Sheraton Move; Pakatan Harapan; Perikatan Nasional; Prime Minister; power transition; Malaysia political science graduate

1. Introduction

This study examines the views of political science graduates in Malaysia, with regard to the issue of the “Sheraton Move” political turmoil and the power transition crisis that took place from February 23rd to 1 March 2020. Throughout these period, marked by a series of dramas and surprises, I found that there was not much opportunity for the youth in Malaysia, particularly university students, to voice their opinions about the “Sheraton Move” polemics that led to the formation of a new “controversial” government called Perikatan Nasional (PN). During these “seven long days”, I noticed that most mainstream media such as Radio Televisyen Malaysia (RTM), the Media Prima, Bernama and Astro Awani channels had a tendency to champion discussion concerning the power transition polemics by airing the views of “political analysts” - whether they held academic positions in education institutions or came from independent organisations such as think-tanks and NGOs.

Consistent with the PH government’s new policy in July 2019 that agreed to reduce the voting age to 18 years, I firmly believe the roles and views of Malaysian youth should be considered as much as possible every time the country faces political turmoil at national level. This can be a yardstick to see the extent of maturity of Malaysian youth (in this case students in higher education institutions) in comprehending the national political landscape, before they cast their votes that will steer the direction of the country. Moreover, youths were previously a “favourite” target electoral campaigns, in an attempt to gain support in the 2018 General Election (Waikar, 2020). The majority of youth in higher education institutions are aged 19 to 23 years old (for undergraduate programmes) and are seen as first-time voters for the future General Election. For students who learn politics at university, there is the opportunity to apply theories, concepts, ideas, lectures and criticisms learned in the “lecture hall” to the “Sheraton Move” case study.

This article is divided into three main sections. The first section focuses on the methodology and selection of the sample whereas the second section elaborates on the chronology of the power transition that has happened since the event at Sheraton Hotel Petaling Jaya and the main actors involved. The third and last section analyses the study findings, based on the outcome of the questionnaire given to the respondents. Several themes and conceptual frameworks relevant to the political science discipline such as the concept of power, democratic principles, election and constitutional monarchy are associated with the case of the “Sheraton Move” crisis, based on respondents’ perspectives.

2. Methodology and study sample

This study aims at contributing to body of knowledge and data on the Malaysian youth attitudes, particularly among higher education students, related to contemporary political and state issues, by building on the scarce academic literature that has previously studied these trend and phenomenon using quantitative (survey) or qualitative (interview) method (see, among others, Ann & Shuib, 2011; Basori & Besar, 2020; Besar et al., 2012; Hed, 2017; Jali et al., 2009; Razali & Ayob, 2018, Hed, 2017 & Razali et al., 2016; Ting & Ahmad, 2021; Weiss, 2005, 2011). Objectively, my analysis relies on respondents’ attitudes to explore the nature of the relations between knowledge and understanding on fundamental political science concepts and perspectives towards the issues of legitimacy of the new PN government, while observing other narratives on the “controversial” Mac 2020 political transition in Malaysia (see, for instance a recent work by Noor, 2022 and Tayeb, 2021 on the Malaysia’s democratic regression).

The study was conducted quantitatively through a questionnaire based-survey of 114 respondents comprising of political science undergraduates in Malaysia. Why did the study select political

science students? For so many political scientists, the ability to approach the questions of power at its core have been pivotal and truly empowering (Weiss, 2021). Based on the aim to gather the views of the younger generation who are deeply concerned and interested in the political affairs in Malaysia, especially with regard to the 2020 “Sheraton Move” crisis, the selection of university students from politics-related courses would be deemed the most relevant and practical. Quoting Weiss (2005, pp. 287–289):

Malaysian students have a long history of activism around a range of sociopolitical issues, dating back to the late colonial period ... Student activism in Malaysia has been particularly intriguing on account of the variations in its manifestations over time; the depth and pervasiveness of racial, religious and partisan political differences among students; the changing stature of the university and students in this rapidly developing state; and the semidemocratic government’s use of both “carrots” and “sticks” to deter students from engaging in oppositional political activity. While observers today are quick to note the relative paucity of political activism among Malaysian students, apathy has not always been the norm, and even now, is often overstated.

The history and tradition of the Political Science Programme in Malaysia’s universities founded as early as 1976 is renowned for producing and tapping the talent of political activists and student leaders who are critical towards the ruling regime. One of the cases that sparked controversy nationwide occurred in 2010 when four political science students from the National University of Malaysia (or commonly known in Malay as *Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia/UKM*) were charged with an offence under section 15(5)(a) of the University and College University Act/*Akta Universiti dan Kolej Universiti* (AUKU), as they were allegedly involved in the opposition party’s campaign (People’s Justice Party/*Parti Keadilan Rakyat* or PKR) prior to the Hulu Selangor by-election. This AUKU section imposes a disciplinary action on tertiary students or groups of students who take part in any political parties or workers’ union without written approval from the university’s Vice Chancellor. This case called “UKM 4” received widespread coverage to the point that it involved a direct intervention from UKM’s top management, opposition MPs, NGOs and the ruling BN government with the final verdict of the High Court resting on the plaintiff’s side (Muhammad Ismail Aminuddin, personal communication, 31 October 2020; Mstar, 2011). This incident had a significant impact on the demand for the AUKU to be abolished and this was finally considered by the PH government and was made effective beginning 2019 (Mohd, 2018). This indirectly proves that political science graduates are consistently active in their involvement in national contemporary politics.

The composition of the respondents by study year, age category, gender and affiliation with off-campus politics is as follows: A total of 44 respondents (38.6 percent) represent first year students, whereas 23 respondents (20.2 percent) are second year students and 46 respondents (40.4 percent) are from the third year group or the final year of study. Only one respondent represents the fourth year and he is an extended student. The majority of the respondents (87.7 percent) are 21 to 23 years of age (totaling 100 students). The rest are younger or older students 18–20 years of age (9.6 percent – 11 students), 24–26 years of age (0.9 percent—one student) and 27 years and above (1.8 percent – 2 students). In terms of the gender difference, there are more female respondents than male respondents. A total of 70 female students (61.4 percent) and 44 male students (38.6 percent) participated in the study.

The data gathering process was conducted from the end of April until early May 2020 through the application of a Google Form online survey. The questionnaire distributed contains two sections, namely Section A about the respondents’ backgrounds and Section B containing 13 closed-ended questions and 15 open-ended questions concerning respondents’ attitudes towards the power transition event in February–March 2020. The Likert scale of five answer-options, namely—strongly disagree, disagree, not sure, agree and strongly agree—were applied in Section B. The initial plan of the study was to get half of the total number of political science undergraduate students in one of the public universities in Selangor, Malaysia which is 87 out of 173 students.

However, due to encouraging participation in the study, the data obtained exceeded the planned number and it really helps this study in the sense that the data source fits with the representative sample and study population as recommended by the work of Krejcie and Morgan (1970).

Data from the Google Form survey was then transferred to the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 7.0 software for the data analysis process via exploratory description through frequency procedures and crosstabulations. Apart from the questionnaire, this study applied a qualitative method by conducting two non-structured interviews (with a Malaysian politics expert and a former UKM4 activist) and employed content analysis techniques using information from social media such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Instagram. Official media statements from the main actors and institutions involved with the “Sheraton Move” polemics were collected, analysed and organised in order to provide a complete chronological order between February 23rd and 1 March 2020.

3. Pakatan Harapan consensus and the issues of the Prime Minister’s power transition

Pakatan Harapan’s maiden success in General Election–14 in taking over the ruling power from Barisan Nasional (BN) came as a shock to various parties. Since Malayan Independence on 31 August, BN (also known as the Alliance Party until 1973) had won the majority of the parliamentary seats in all 13 series of general election competitions, based on Malaysia’s simple majority system or “first past the post” (Chin, 2020; Noor, 2018). Among the factors seen to contribute to the unprecedented victory of PH in GE–14 in 2018 was the ability to unite two major political enemies under the same “camp” - Mahathir and Anwar Ibrahim (Abdullah, 2019; Lemi re, 2018). Nonetheless, this cooperation started to shatter when the issue of the Prime Minister’s power transition began to be openly speculated, debated and challenged among the PH component parties and an internal crisis was sparked (Chin, 2020). Anwar Ibrahim admitted this through his official statements below:

I went to see the Prime Minister in Putrajaya after I returned from Port Dickson. In that meeting, Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad and I had discussed power transition. I raised the issue because there were efforts by PAS, a minority from UMNO and a small number of people from KEADILAN itself, who are believed to be trying to get signatures supporting Tun Dr Mahathir’s leadership until the end of the term. The Prime Minister is not involved in that, and he even repeated his firm statement that he would release the position as he has promised. I am more inclined towards him leading the country until after the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation Summit (APEC). Yet, this can only be finalised in the PH Presidential Council Meeting this 21 February. I also informed the Prime Minister that since there were already signs of conspiracy, PH leadership and several others will continue to stand by the PH Consensus agreement sealed on 7 January 2018, which is to firmly support his position as the 7th Prime Minister and myself as the 8th Prime Minister. I also reminded him that throughout the two years of PH, the consensus has never been tampered with by any affiliated parties - KEADILAN, DAP, AMANAH and PPBM. (Anwar Ibrahim, 2020)

Observing closely the content of PH’s consensus agreement, there is indeed a statement that explicitly touches on the issue of the PM’s power transition. However, it is maintained that the content of the agreement does not state the expected dates or duration of time over which the power transition will take place. The fifth paragraph (no.2) of the PH Consensus document stated that:

To strengthen the leadership of Pakatan Harapan and consolidate the collaboration among the member parties, the legal process to get the Royal Pardon to release Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim will be undertaken soon, after Pakatan Harapan has taken over the administration, so that Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim can quickly assume a role in the federal Government and subsequently name the candidate for the position of the 8th Prime Minister. (Content of PH consensus agreement, in Rafizi, 2018)

Considering this situation, Mahathir had given a different reaction during the press conference following the post-PH Presidential Council Meeting on 21 February 2020. He asserted that the PM's power transition would be decided after the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation Summit (APEC) in November 2020, with the absolute decision fully placed under his personal consideration. This statement ignited dissatisfaction and frustration among the majority of PH parliamentary members, especially those from PKR who are concerned about the possibility that Mahathir will not grant power to Anwar Ibrahim, as agreed in the PH consensus agreement.

This issue was seen to be “hijacked” by PAS and UMNO as they gathered representatives of parliamentary members from the opposition parties and a minority of the PKR members on 23 February 2020 and signed the “secret oath” or statutory declarations (SD) expressing their open support for Mahathir's leadership as PM until the end of his term. This incident, also labeled as the “Sheraton Move” became the stepping stone for the transition of power that happened seven days afterwards. The next section establishes the background behind the controversy by detailing the relevant timeline, chronology of facts and the significant actors involved between February 23rd and 1 March 2020.

4. The chronology of the ‘Sheraton Move’ crisis and the beginning of a long seven-day episode

Table 1 below narrates a brief chronology of the political crisis that took place between 23 February 2020 and the appointment of Muhyiddin as PM on 1 March 2020.

5. What do the ‘Sheraton move’ and Malaysia's power transition crisis mean for local political science graduates?

Looking at the political turmoil that had taken place in the country during February 2020, I raise three main issues. First, to what extent did these “seven long days” win the attention of the younger generation in Malaysia, especially the tech-savvy and educated youth (in this case the UKM political science students)? Secondly, what are their reactions and thoughts about the actions of the main actors—the opposition parties, the monarchy and the PH government during the “Sheraton Move” crisis and the subsequent events following the crisis? Thirdly, what is their level of acceptance and what are their hopes regarding the new Perikatan Nasional government?

I discovered that all 114 respondents involved in this study had indeed followed closely the development of the power transition crisis that had taken place in the period between February 23rd and 1 March 2020. The respondents' sources of information regarding the crisis were social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram (111 respondents/97.4 percent), followed by discussions with peers (79 respondents/69.3 percent) and lecturers (78 respondents/68.4 percent). Other sources like television (63 respondents/55.3 percent), mainstream papers, political talks or forums (31 respondents/27.3 percent), family and political party's website (both 24 respondents/21.1 percent) also recorded significant use, but not as much as the main three sources stated above. These diverse sources of information facilitated the understanding of the respondents about the political crisis that had taken place during February-March 2020. Table 2 below displays detailed frequencies and percentages for every information source mentioned by respondents regarding the “Sheraton Move” crisis. The next section will discuss their attitudes and views concerning the three aforementioned questions.

5.1. Power struggle, Pakatan Harapan internal crisis or opposition's conspiracy?

“Politics is a struggle for power”. This popular saying was introduced by the famous political scientist, Hans Morgenthau (1949) in his book entitled *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace* that narrates about a state's actions before, during and after the Second World War. Although his arguments rest on the scope of political realism at the global level, where state actors have the tendency to manifest various methods and capabilities to achieve the goals of obtaining, retaining and expanding political power, Morgenthau's statement is very relevant when applied in the context of local politics, including regarding the power transition crisis in Malaysia.

Table 1. The chronology of the “Sheraton Move” crisis 2020

Date	Event
23 February 2020	Several vehicles were seen to have entered the premises of Istana Negara following the rumours about the formation of a new government. BERSATU President, Muhyiddin Yassin; PKR Deputy President, Azmin Ali; UMNO President, Ahmad Zahid Hamidi; and PAS President, Abdul Hadi Awang were reported to be the individuals who were present to meet the YDP Agong.
24 February 2020	Following the speculation about the formation of the new government, Mahathir had resigned as Prime Minister and BERSATU chairperson. This was followed by an announcement by BERSATU about leaving Pakatan Harapan. YDP Agong had agreed upon Mahathir's resignation and appointed him as interim Prime Minister until a new appointment took place. DAP and AMANAH had issued separate official statements expressing their support for Mahathir's leadership as Prime Minister.
25 February 2020	Mahathir announced the proposal of a unity, “non-opposition” government by combining PH component parties and the opposition parties in the cabinet of the Board of Ministers. BN and PAS decided to withdraw their support for Mahathir following the proposal to form a unity government involving DAP. In the Istana Negara, the first group, comprising 90 MPs, had gone to see the YDP Agong for personal interviews in light of their support for the Prime Minister's candidate.
26 February 2020	The second group of 131 MPs was present in the Istana Negara to continue the interview process with the YDP Agong. The first message delivered by Mahathir as the interim Prime Minister concerned the political crisis occurring since February 24th.
27 February 2020	Mahathir was present at the Istana Negara in the morning for a meeting with the YDP Agong to discuss the appointment of the 8th Prime Minister.
28 February 2020	A meeting between BERSATU MPs and Mahathir was held at Yayasan Al-Bukhari. The majority of members suggested Muhyiddin Yassin as a candidate for Prime Minister.
29 February 2020	PH through an official media statement announced its support for the new prime ministerial candidate, Anwar Ibrahim. Istana Negara had issued a media statement concerning YDP Agong's approval for the appointment of Muhyiddin as Prime Minister.
01 March 2020	Muhyiddin was present in the Istana Negara for the swearing-in ceremony and subsequently appointed as the 8 th Prime Minister. Mahathir through an official press conference held in Yayasan Al-Bukhari emphasised that the YDP Agong had rejected his request when presenting the list of names of PH MPs who supported his candidacy as the 8 th Prime Minister.

Source: Cited from original postings of reports on social media (*Facebook*) and official portals by several individuals and organisations such as Anwar Ibrahim (2020), Muhyiddin Yassin (2020), Mahathir Mohamad (2020), Azmin Ali (2020), Annuar Musa (2020), Pakatan Harapan (2020a), Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (2020), Democratic Action Party (2020), Parti Pribumi BERSATU Malaysia (2020), Parti Amanah Negara (2020), Parti Keadilan Rakyat (2020), Istana Negara (2020), Astro Awani (2020a, 2020b, 2020c), Sinar Harian (2020a, 2020b), Malaysiakini (2020), FMTNews (2020), Barisan Nasional (2020), Harits (2020), Hasniza (2020), Hasimi (2020) and Luqman and Ilah (2020), between February 23rd and March 1st 2020.

The consequences of the crisis have illustrated that power is a tool and goal of the majority of politicians irrespective of their party or position. Various strategies have been implemented by political players, be it in the short or long term, discreetly or openly, to gain the support of the people and thus continue to be seen as relevant at national level.

In order to understand the development of the “Sheraton Move” crisis, I researched several “conspiracy theories” emerging among netizens of social media based on the idea of a “power struggle”. Their claims are as follows. Firstly, the crisis began with the oppositions’ secret plan to drastically oust the PH government prior to the 15th general election. Secondly, there were efforts within BERSATU and Azmin Ali’s camp in PKR to stop Mahathir from releasing the PM position to Anwar Ibrahim. Thirdly, the poor relationship between BERSATU and DAP, and PKR’s internal conflict could not be “rescued” and this contributed to the fall of PH. Fourthly, the “Sheraton Move” was the strategy employed by UMNO and PAS to weaken DAP’s continuation “in power” for PH and to preserve the interests of the Malay-Muslim agenda in Malaysia. Fifthly, and finally, the “Sheraton Move” was linked with the effort to “save several UMNO leaders” who were, and will be, put on trial in court regarding money-laundering and power abuse issues. Whatever the

Table 2. Sources of information regarding the “Sheraton Move” crisis

Source	Frequency	Percentage
Television	63	55.3
Newspapers	31	27.2
Internet/Social Media	111	97.4
Lecturer	78	68.4
Family	24	21.1
Friends	79	69.3
Political Party’s Website	24	21.1
Forum/Seminar/Talk/Lecture	31	27.2

Source: Questionnaire survey, 2020.

conspiratorial ideas and claims that have arisen regarding the reasons behind the “Sheraton Move”, surely it will leave an impact on the perceptions, attitudes and acceptance of Malaysian people, especially social media users, regarding the crisis.

Through the questionnaires distributed in this study, I probed into the views and comments of respondents about the first two ideas (noted above) on the “conspiracy” related to the power transition crisis. A majority of 80 respondents (70.1 percent) supported the idea that the “Sheraton Move” was a confidential plan by several MPs and some politicians from the opposition parties to oust PH. 21 respondents (18.4 percent) chose to be neutral, while 13 respondents (11.4 percent) rejected the idea. For the second question, which was how far the “Sheraton Move” was a planned effort to thwart the prime ministerial transition of power from Mahathir to Anwar, respondents gave almost the same feedback as to the first question. The majority of respondents agreed (70.1 percent), while some others were not sure, (18.4 percent) and some disagreed (11.4 percent). Table 3 and Table 4 below detail the data obtained for both the questions.

When asked to justify their answers to the two questions above, a total of 78 respondents gave brief written explanations, which can be categorised into three main themes. Firstly, the view that supports that PKR does have an internal crisis and the weakness of PH in governing the country post GE-14 is the root cause for the power transition. Secondly, the assertive point of view that “accuses” the opposition parties at the time that did not go through the process of democracy to obtain power. Thirdly, the view that does not lean on PH and the opposition parties (BN & PAS) but emphasises the PM’s power transition as the main factor that contributes to the pre-“Sheraton Move” political crisis. The selected answers from the respondents representing all these three themes can be seen as follows:

I agree that it was a confidential move to bring down PH. This started with the internal conflict that happened within PH itself. The fragmentation in PKR had made PH leadership not only lose the trust of the people, but also lose trust among the members of the component parties, the grassroots and several party leaders. How can a ruling party with multiple internal issues govern well? This was worsened by Anwar Ibrahim who was so desperate to become PM that it became annoying to various parties including the party’s own members. (Respondent 37)

I think that in the beginning the “Sheraton Move” was also planned by some PH leaders to collectively form a new government with the opposition parties. Then, this continued as if it was a plot twist at the expense of securing their respective seats and positions. This confidential plan also aimed to remove Anwar from being the 8th PM by leaders of PH, and of course this was supported by BN & PAS. However, the “Sheraton Move” also contained reasons for the opponents to bring PH down as they thought that PH was no longer competent in leading the government. (Respondent 29)

Table 3. Respondents views that the “Sheraton Move” was a confidential plan to oust the Pakatan Harapan leadership

Category	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly Disagree	1	0.9
Disagree	12	10.5
Not sure	21	18.4
Agree	64	56.1
Strongly Agree	16	14.0
Total	114	100.0

Source: Questionnaire survey, 2020.

Table 4. Respondents views that the “Sheraton Move” was a confidential plan to thwart the effort of the PM’s power transition from Mahathir to Anwar

Category	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly Disagree	1	0.9
Disagree	8	7.0
Not sure	35	30.7
Agree	52	45.6
Strongly Agree	18	15.8
Total	114	100.0

Source: Questionnaire survey, 2020.

Because there was evidence of cracks in PKR where it was divided into pro-Anwar and pro-Azmin. Beginning in 2019 the National Congress had circulated rumours that Azmin would compete for the position of PKR President against Anwar; this did not materialize due to the fact that most of the grassroots still strongly supported Anwar. It was not surprising then, that the “Sheraton Move” is seen as one of the efforts to stop Anwar Ibrahim from becoming PM. (Respondent 18)

For me, this issue arose because of two factors. Firstly, there are some parties who blamed the issue of Tun Mahathir’s resignation as PM for the fall of PH. Secondly, there is the internal issue where some of the PKR members did not want Anwar Ibrahim to replace Tun Mahathir. (Respondent 93)

The fall of PH did not begin with the “Sheraton Move” but an internal problem that had been plaguing PH from long ago. The “Sheraton Move” was only the “final blow” or the “nail to the coffin” to the PH coalition which was like an accident waiting to happen. (Respondent 71)

5.2. “Politics is the art of the possible”

Considering the comments given by the respondents in the survey, clearly the issues of the power struggle and internal conflict within PH become the main argument for the presumed conspiracy that happened behind the power transition crisis in February-March 2020. In political science, the concept of power (definition, characteristics, importance, manifestation) has been discussed extensively through the writings of famous scholars like Lord Acton (1834–1902), Joseph Schumpeter (1883–1950), Harold Lasswell (1902–1978), Robert Dahl (1915–2014) and Samuel Huntington (1927–2008). Quoting the view of Schumpeter (1961) in his book entitled *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*, the main goal of a political party is none other than outperforming the opposition parties for the sake of power, position and status quo. Meanwhile, Dahl (1957) in *The Concept of Power* analogised the definition of power through human relationships, which is one’s ability to direct other individuals to do something that he or she might not do voluntarily. Some questions emerge—how is power obtained in politics? Is it through a legitimised election? Inheritance passed down from one generation to another?

War? Coup d'etat? Manipulation? Efforts and competition for power are the reasons that lead to the idea that politics is the art of the possible.

The majority of the respondents (83.4 percent) agree that the “Sheraton Move” is a reflection of the famous quote of the former Chancellor of the German-Prussia Empire, Otto von Bismarck (1815–1898) where “politics is the art of the possible”. The political journey of Malaysia since PH ruled post GE–14 was indeed very hard to predict. If previously in social media, the hashtag “one-term government” addressed to PH was quite popular and frequently used on local political news portals, the “Sheraton Move” has unexpectedly transformed the hashtag to “a 22-month government” or “government of not quite half a term”. This power transition surprise has automatically embraced Bismarck’s view on the definition of politics as an art that is full of probabilities. Only a small number of respondents (5.3 percent) disagreed with this opinion and the rest (11.4 percent) were uncertain. Table 5 below details the respondents’ feedback for the questions related to the “Sheraton Move” polemic and “art of probabilities” prevalent in political science.

5.3. “The government of the people, by the people, for the people?”

When talking about the issue of democracy, the popular saying “government of the people, by the people and for the people” by the 16th American President, Abraham Lincoln (1809–1865) often becomes the wise adage in reflecting the form of democratic ruling that has been applied all over the world. According to the PEW Research Centre, the end of 2017 recorded a significant increase in democratic change in countries all over the world. 96 out of 167 countries with a minimum population of 500,000 were acknowledged as democratic (Silver, 2019). Democracy comes from Greek, “*demos*” meaning “people” and “*kratos*” meaning “ruling”. Both these words mean democracy as a government on behalf of the people; the government works on the basis that it represents the people and the government rules at the expense of the people. Briefly put, democracy is the political system that entrusts the people to determine, form and control the country’s administration.

I agree with Stoker (2006) that to define democratic governance as a political system, a state should meet the following three important criteria: 1) universal suffrage—that is, the right to vote in elections for all adults; 2) government chosen via a regular, free and competitive election; 3) the presence of a set of political rights to free speech and freedom to organize in groups or associations. In addition, Storm (2007) has introduced three major elements of democracy in accordance with the underlying principles of definitions of democracy. The first is reasonably competitive elections (RCE). It means that the holding of reasonably free and fair elections devoid of massive fraud and with broad suffrage is significant for a state to achieve democratic status. The second is respect for the basic civil liberties (BCL). The guarantee of basic civil rights from the authority such as freedom of speech, assembly and association is equally important to ensure that everyone can express their political views without any intimidation and restrictions by the government. The third is the existence of effective power to govern (EP), meaning that the elected government must not be subordinate to any non-elected elite (Storm, 2007).

Table 5. Respondents’ perception that the “Sheraton Move” is a manifestation that politics is “the art of the possible” as understood in political science

Category	Frequency	Percentage
<i>Strongly disagree</i>	0	0.0
<i>Strongly disagree</i>	6	5.3
<i>Not sure</i>	13	11.4
<i>Agree</i>	58	50.9
<i>Strongly Agree</i>	37	32.5
<i>Total</i>	114	100.00

Source: Questionnaire survey, 2020.

Looking at democracy this way facilitates our understanding that it is a dynamic concept that has been given many different definitions and its meaning remains subject to debate. Accordingly, all the definitions should be regarded as minimal conditions for a state and government to be counted as democratic. It is clear that democracy means being ruled by the people and that it is a better form of government than all others. More democracy would mean more responsive governments, more socially representative politicians and policies for the many rather than the few, as decided by majority rule. Political authority is accountable to the people through competitive elections, where the power will be legitimized by the nations (Weale, 2007).

Legitimacy, or in other word “rightfulness” is one of the keys to achieving political stability. It can be understood as the belief by citizens that the state operating over them is legitimate and proper. Legitimacy is viewed by political scientists as the citizens’ willingness to comply with any political systems or rule regardless of how the power is obtained (Heywood, 2013). There are two bases in which legitimacy can be achieved in any modern state. The first is by party politics, party systems and elections. The second relates to the existence of a state constitution (Heywood, 2013). Hence, democracy and legitimacy are undoubtedly the two concepts which have a strong relationship, as democracy contributes to the promotion of political legitimacy in several different ways such as participation in the political process, peaceful conflict resolution and effective political bargaining and negotiation within the framework of state constitution—which can be observed during the 2020 Malaysia’s Sheraton Move crisis and political transition from PH to PN.

According to James Chin (expert on Malaysian politics based in Tasmania, Australia), the status of Malaysian democracy post GE-14 is more appropriately seen as “hybrid” or “flawed”, where there is still an element of “authoritarianism” under Mahathir’s rule, especially related to sensitive issues involving religion and the Malays’ position (James Chin, personal communication, 4 May 2020). This statement seems in line with the words of other researchers such as Wong Chin-Huat, Sebastian Dettman and Meredith Weiss on a “competitive electoral authoritarian regime”, that is viewed as relevant to Malaysia’s current political circumstances (Chin-Huat, 2018; Dettman, 2020; Weiss, 2020). Although Malaysia has yet to achieve the status of full democracy, there are efforts that move towards democratic consolidation through the eradication of corruption and improved government policies after the change in the regime post GE-14. For example, there is the decision made by the Cabinet in June 2018 prohibiting ministers and their deputies from issuing letters of support for government projects and matters with financial implications (Malaysiakini, 2018). As a result, Malaysia has gradually improved its rank on the democracy index issued by the Economist Intelligence Unit (Rashvinjeet, 2020).

Following the establishment of the PN government post “Sheraton Move”, that combined BERSATU, UMNO, PAS, MCA, MIC, Gabungan Parti Sarawak (GPS), Gabungan Bersatu Sabah (GBS) and Bebas (formerly PKR), several PH MPs began to question its legitimacy. Anwar Ibrahim, Khalid Samad, Saifuddin Nasution and Lim Guan Eng were among the individuals who were very vocal in calling the coalition the “backdoor government”, undemocratic and a form of betrayal of the people’s mandate (Media Conference of PH Presidential Council, in Pakatan Harapan, 2020b). There were also hundreds of PH supporters and advocates of Bersih 2.0 who took to the streets and assembled on the night of 29 February 2020 at the Dataran Merdeka with the slogan “*demokrasi mati, ayuh turun ke jalan*” (democracy is dead, let’s take it to the streets) as a protest against Muhyiddin’s appointment as the eighth Prime Minister (Malaysia Gazette TV, 2020).

Judging from the pressure directed at the Muhyiddin-led government post-“Sheraton Move”, I attempted to obtain the reactions and comments of the respondents regarding two issues. The first was the feasibility of the “Sheraton Move” in the context of parliamentary democratic practice in Malaysia and the second one, the issue or sentiment of “betraying the mandate” and the “backdoor government polemics” associated with PN. Regarding the first issue, 32 respondents (28.1 percent) viewed that the move of the opposition parties and some of the PKR members who signed the SD in supporting Mahathir was very unreasonable, along with the act by PH of leaving

BERSATU. 37 respondents (32.5 percent), shared a similar view that it was unreasonable, whereas 20 respondents (17.5 percent) did not have any certainty over this issue. Only 5 respondents (4.4 percent) strongly stood by the “Sheraton Move” motive to topple PH, along with 20 respondents (17.5) who felt that it was a reasonable act. For the second issue, 28 respondents (24.8 percent) emphasised that the criticism launched at PN as a “traitor to the people’s mandate” was very relevant, along with 38 respondents (33.6 percent) who answered that it was relevant. 15 respondents (13.3 percent) chose to be neutral due to their uncertainty, while the remaining 21 respondents (18.6 percent) rejected the criticisms by saying that it was not relevant. Only 11 respondents (9.7 percent) thought that it was a very relevant move. Table 6 and Table 7 below show the reactions of all respondents.

In general, both the tables above indicate that the majority of respondents, around 60.6 percent, disapproved of the way the process of transition happened during the political crisis in February–March 2020. More than half of the respondents (58.4 percent) also supported criticisms over the formation of the PN government post-“Sheraton Move” as disrespecting the voice and mandate of the people. The justifications provided by the respondents and related to the data noted in Table 7 and Table 8 revolve around the issue of value and the principle of democracy, the role of the YDP Agong and the weakness of PH’s government. Most of the respondents emphasised that PH had a valid mandate through its victory in the previous GE–14. Although its administration was marred by some weaknesses, the act of sabotage was deemed unreasonable and seen as violating the country’s parliamentary democratic practice. Most of the respondents praised the commitment of the people who cast their votes in May 2018 and fully supported the leadership selection mechanism through the general election.

There were also comments that noted the role of the YDP Agong that had given a fair deal to both PH and Muafakat Nasional so as to establish a government based on the selection of their respective head of government. Thus, it is not fair to “label” PN’s administration as the “backdoor government”. The following quotes displays the justifications and the comments of the

Table 6. Perception of the respondents regarding the “Sheraton Move” appropriateness in the context of parliamentary democratic practice in Malaysia

Category	Frequency	Percentage
Really Unreasonable	32	28.1
Unreasonable	37	32.5
Not sure	20	17.5
Reasonable	20	17.5
Really Reasonable	5	4.4
Total	114	100.0

Source: Questionnaire survey, 2020.

Table 7. Respondents’ views towards the polemics of the formation of the PN government as a form of betrayal of the people’s mandate

Category	Frequency	Percentage
Very Irrelevant	11	9.7
Irrelevant	21	18.6
Not sure	15	13.3
Relevant	38	33.6
Very Relevant	28	24.8
Total	113	100.0

Source: Questionnaire survey, 2020.

respondents with regard to criticisms about the feasibility of the “Sheraton Move” and the polemic of betrayal of the people’s mandate by Muhyiddin’s leadership.

The action by PN is thought to betray the mandate of the people because in GE-14, PH had won over BN and PAS. If a government can be formed through party-hopping and betrayal, then what is the function of the GE? Clearly this move has left a negative impact on young people who wanted to vote for the first time. (Respondent 110)

Those politicians who had collaborated to form the current Perikatan Nasional government are really the betrayers of the rakyat. This is a very special case for Malaysia. Never in our history did we see a coalition of political parties which managed to form a government without going through a general election. The rakyat have the rights to choose their representatives and government, based on the spirit of democracy but this situation has totally abandoned our rights in determining the government that we want. (Respondent 36)

The PN government was set up due to PH’s failure in continuing to govern. Clearly there was a dispute in the party that caused Tun Mahathir to resign. But to say that it is “the backdoor government” would be unreasonable as the YDP Agong himself approved of the establishment of the PN government. That said, in terms of the mandate, it is really disappointing because the rakyat do not have the right to choose the government that they want. (Respondent 114)

Although the current government is not the government chosen by the rakyat through the GE, what they have done in the “Sheraton Move” does not violate the Federal Constitution which is the highest law in Malaysia. (Respondent 71)

The Sheraton Move might be seen as undemocratic. But, the PH government was not performing at its best at the time and there were voters who regretted their decision in choosing PH, various promises and the manifesto have yet to be fulfilled. (Respondent 16)

Although the move might be seen as cruel to bring down the current government, the YDP Agong still listened to views from both sides. This automatically shows that no one party is neglected and it can be said that there is a “check and balance” manifestation in parliamentary democracy and the constitutional monarchy system in Malaysia. (Respondent 106)

The Sheraton Move is deemed reasonable seeing that the majority of the people have lost trust in PH due to its internal conflict and the weakness of its administration. It shows that

Table 8. Respondents’ views towards the best solution to end the “Sheraton Move” turmoil before the formation of PN

Proposed solutions	Frequency	Percentage
Dissolution of parliament and re-election	61	54.0
Mahathir continues to lead the country through the Pakatan Harapan government until GE-15	31	27.4
Mahathir releases the position of Prime Minister to give way to Anwar Ibrahim	20	17.7
Mahathir leads the country through the formation of a unified government until GE15	21	18.6
Following the consideration and discretion of the YDP Agong	62	54.9
Military rule	4	3.5

Source: Questionnaire survey, 2020.

democracy is not limited and not bound. The members of the parliament have the right to show their dissatisfaction of the leaders. When the coalition no longer wins the trust of the component parties, members have the right to leave the party. Leaving the party is also part of the element of freedom contained in the basic principles of democracy. (Respondent 37)

The setting up of the PN government is based on the approval of the YDP Agong and his task is to ensure that the national interest is preserved by the government and obtains the trust of the majority of the members of the assembly. (Respondent 34)

5.4. “Who gets what, when and how?”

In 1936, Harold Dwight Lasswell, an influential political scientist wrote a book entitled “Politics: Who Gets What, When, How”, a book that was thought to be a masterpiece in understanding the definition of politics. The three issues raised by Lasswell, which are who, when and how, are indeed very practical in the context of local and international politics. “Who” refers to the actors involved in politics, either directly or not, and from the smallest units such as individuals, voters, supporters, activists, and so on to the more significant units like political parties, civil movements, policy makers, the rulers and the state. The question of “when” leans more onto the scope of time or duration to get the “what” or something in politics, often associated with power, influence and position, whereas the question of “how” refers to the way or the *modus operandi* of the political actor in materialising his or her political goals.

With this definitive guide by Lasswell (1936), the case study of the “Sheraton Move” is indeed relevant to see the application of the three main issues discussed above. Mahathir, Anwar, PH, Muafakat Nasional and the YDP Agong were among the actors that became the centre of attention nationwide throughout the February–March 2020 crisis. It is generally acknowledged that the power transition had been kick-started with a number of controversies when Mahathir resigned as PM and the PH cabinet dissolved before its half-term was finished. That said, it ended with a unique event in the history of the nation when the YDP Agong was directly involved as the “facilitator” and determiner of the PM who is usually selected by MPs. Looking into the trajectory of the crisis, I probed into the views of the respondents on the solutions they thought to be relevant to end the “Sheraton Move” turmoil, if Muhyiddin’s appointment as PM was yet to be decided.

Based on the six choices of answers offered (respondents were allowed to choose more than one answer), the YDP Agong’s consideration and discretion was the most popular choice (54.9 percent), followed by support of the proposal for parliamentary dissolution and re-election (54 percent). There were also respondents who expressed the view that Mahathir should be given the chance to continue to lead the country until GE–15, either through the existing PH government (27.4 percent) or through the proposed unity government that combined both the opposition and ruling government (18.6 percent). As the “Sheraton Move” was also sensationalised by the PH’s internal conflict, a small number of respondents opined that Mahathir should release his position as PM to give way to Anwar Ibrahim (17.7 percent) as agreed in the PH consensus, whilst the rest of the respondents chose military rule (3.5 percent) as a way to end the political crisis in February–March 2020. Detailed information about the respondents’ views can be referenced in Table 8.

Every choice of answer from the respondents had its own rationale. Based on 60 written reviews from the respondents on the questionnaire forms, several issues proved to be points of consideration when choosing the solution to end the “Sheraton Move” political turmoil. For example, the debate around the rejection of the dissolution of parliament and the implementation of a re-election revolves around cost and financial impact, as well as health security amid the spread of the Covid–19 pandemic. Respondents stood by their opinion that notwithstanding the political crisis, it is nevertheless crucial for the country’s administration, political elite and members of parliament to maximise financial, labour and service resources, especially in assisting the health sector and national security. Thus, the dissolution of the parliament and the implementation of

a re-election were thought to be burdensome, distracting the focus off fighting against the pandemic and all in all, inappropriate given the current situation.

For those who supported the dissolution of parliament and a re-election, most arguments concerned respect for democracy and the role of the people as the determiner of the rise and fall of a government. Despite the exorbitant cost, the mechanism of an election was seen to be the fairest and most practical method to bring peace to the disputing parties in the long run. The selected government through a re-election would receive the highest form of respect from the people and simultaneously have the legitimacy to rule. Without parliament's dissolution, respondents shared the view that the people would continue to be mocked by a Muhyiddin-led government and PN as the "back-door government" or the "traitor". Thus, respondents maintained that the need for parliament's dissolution and re-election was inevitable, particularly so for a country that upheld the basic principles of democracy.

There were respondents who were not convinced about the effectiveness of government-without-opposition—which was Mahathir's idea on the premise that it did not open up any opportunity for a check-and-balance mechanism—and it had the potential to create an authoritarian rule, or "one-man rule" concept. Respondents felt that Malaysia had experienced semi-autocratic rule under Mahathir for 22 years (1981–2003) stemming from the absence of strong opponents. Thus, a government without opponents would be impractical other than producing a sense of responsibility among the members of parliament to bring forth and debate issues related to the grassroots and welfare of the people. Apart from that, the moderate size of the Cabinet, with the diverse interests and goals of various political parties might cause internal conflict and an uncompromising power struggle. Yet, there were respondents who countered this situation by stating that it had the potential to mitigate any racial, religious and ideological sentiments among the political parties in Malaysia, simultaneously instilling a sense of stability and harmony in the country.

In light of the YDP Agong's involvement, the majority of respondents (86 percent) agreed that the Majesty King had exercised all his power and discretion allocated in the Federal constitution in terms of neutrality, to end the power transition crisis in February–March 2020. His effective role was evident through the effort of meeting all MPs and political leaders for the purpose of "procuring" direct feedback on the current situation. The respondents suggested that His Majesty's action had indirectly deterred any riots and chaos from taking place, at the same time proving that he was capable of being an epitome of unity for the country. In addition, the intervention of the Majesty as one of the executive powers had also successfully resolved the political crisis in a short time, without involving a re-election that would have adversely affected finances, time and energy.

In spite of the fact that His Majesty's decision did not rest on Mahathir and PH, most of the respondents argued that it is significant for the country to be led by a Parliamentary member who gained His Majesty's approval as a representative of the Royal Council and gained the support of the majority of MPs. His Majesty's wisdom in the effort to untangle the political crisis became an eye-opener for the people regarding the importance of the Royal Institution to ensure that the country continued to be peaceful, harmonious and safe. Table 9 below highlights the reactions of the respondents on the effective role of the YDP Agong in putting an end to the "Sheraton Move" crisis.

6. From Petaling Jaya to Putrajaya: Malaysian youth, future new voters and lessons from an 'unfinished' political transition

The political crisis that happened will surely impart some lessons to the political actors involved, be it those from PH, PN or the people in general. As youth concerned with the development of politics in the country, respondents opined that the lessons behind the "Sheraton Move" crisis must be considered from the following perspectives.

Table 9. Respondents' reactions towards the effectiveness of the role of the YDP Agong in ending the "Sheraton Move" crisis

Category	Frequency	Percentage
Very ineffective	1	0.9
Ineffective	7	6.2
Not sure	9	8.0
Effective	96	86.0
Very effective	0	0.0
Total	113	100.0

Source: Questionnaire survey, 2020.

Firstly, in politics, there are no permanent friends and enemies, only interests. Every competing political party will surely have different agendas, approaches, ideologies and goals. Shared interests (which are typically temporary) are the ties that bind the political elites into mutual cooperation. If interests are jeopardised, it is feasible that political elites or parties will begin to turn their backs and betray one another. The issues of "party-hopping", "backstabbing", dismissal and starting a new party, as shown during the "Sheraton Move" crisis, are clear testimony of this. Thus, respondents were of the opinion that people's interests must be the key concern that consolidates the cooperation of the elite and political parties, not personal agendas or interests. Every action taken must be seen in terms of the implications for people's welfare and national stability, as good governance lies in a leadership that prioritises the interests of the people, not only the power struggle between the competing political parties.

Secondly, the approach of "the end justifies the means" or real politics is irrelevant in the context of modern democracy. Despite the fact that political elites argued that the action undertaken seeks to preserve the people's interests, or those of a fraction of society, it should abide by the provision contained in the Federal constitution which is the highest law in the country. Rukun Negara, or the National Principles, especially loyalty to the King and country, the sanctity of the constitution and the sovereignty of the law should be understood, respected and empathised with by all layers of society in Malaysia, including the political elite and the ruling power. The February-March 2020 political crisis has also proven that the constitutional monarchy system practised in Malaysia through the role of YDP Agong, is still functional, relevant and effective in helping the country sustain political stability.

Thirdly, the sustainability of consociational politics has the potential to be affected if the political elite continue to manipulate religious issues and racial sentiments to get the sympathy and support of the people. As a country with a pluralistic society, the power sharing formula through a grand coalition introduced by Arend Lijhpart (1977) should be maintained amongst the political elite, be it PH or PN. The "Sheraton Move" case study has shown clearly how the Muafakat Nasional, from the combined UMNO and PAS, chose "Malay-Islam" as the rationale for their agreement in signing the SD supporting Mahathir and BERSATU. Whether the agenda needs to be implemented or characteristically rhetorical is still undetermined.

Fourthly, the political coalition needs to have a strong orientation and unity in its effort to maintain the power and mandate given by the people. PH's weakness in managing the chaos between the component parties has given room to the opponents to carry on the plan of taking over power. The saying "the enemy of my enemy is my friend" should become the lesson to political actors so that they are more cautious in every action and statement they make to the public. Referring to the "Sheraton Move" case, there were respondents who felt that it was time for parliament to enact laws that forbid (or otherwise punish) any MPs and State Legislative Assembly members changing party or party coalition before the end of the political term. This aims to preserve political stability, maintain the mandate given by the people after the election and prevent the situation from happening again in the future.

Fifthly, and last but not least, the political science discipline that prioritises voters' education and the basic principles of democracy such as people's participation, the ruling majority, the protection of the rights of the minority, freedom of choice, media openness, electoral justice and judicial transparency should be well publicised to Malaysian youth, especially first-time voters. Quoting a popular statement by Nikita Khrushchev (1894–1971), "Politicians are the same all over. They promise to build a bridge when there is no river" - this clearly reminds people about the need to act rationally and wisely in making choices when presented with sugarcoated promises and manifestos from politicians. The "Sheraton Move" taught a lesson to the respondents, as the youth and the "tech-savvy" generation exposed to an abundance of information within social media need to always be able to differentiate between facts and slander, rhetoric or rationale, arguments or fallacy. The efforts towards strengthening a top down democracy should also be implemented by the government to ensure that the country continues to move along a better democratic continuum.

7. Conclusion

The role of Malaysian youth, particularly students as the future agents of political change is unquestionably significant. Based on the case of 2020 "Sheraton Move" crisis and its aftermath development, this article reveals various critical responses and attitudes from the respondents which are: 1) the perceptions regarding the polemics of Perikatan Nasional (PN)'s "backdoor government" and the impact on moves towards democracy; 2) the conspiracy of the opposition's political parties to topple the Pakatan Harapan (PH) leadership; 3) the PH's internal conflicts amongst component parties; 4) the prospect of Mahathir's unity government; 5) the proposal for parliament dissolution and re-election; 6) the effectiveness of the role of the Majesty King or Yang di-Pertuan Agong; 7) the lessons behind the "Sheraton Move" crisis and; 8) the Malaysian youths' hopes for the new PN leadership.

It is clear that a significant number of Malaysia's political science graduates rejected the change in the ruling government from PH to PN as occurred during the political crisis in February-March 2020. Many respondents expressed their disapproval towards the formation of the Muhyiddin-PN government as not respecting the mandate of the people and opposing the spirit of electoral democratic practice in Malaysia. Nevertheless, most respondents agreed that the YDP Agong had played an essential and professional role in line with his Majesty's jurisdiction as the Head of the country during the "Sheraton Move" saga. Respondents also suggested that the dissolution of parliament and implementation of a re-election process should be considered to give justice to all the disputing parties and to ensure the legitimacy of the ruling government in the long run. The "Sheraton Move" crisis has taught lessons to the respondents including that real politics, based on "the aim justifies the means" approach, are irrelevant in the context of modern democracy and Malaysia's plural society, as well as the need to sustain the political integrity and the politics of accommodation amongst political parties in Malaysia. The significance of voter education and the fundamental aspects of democracy should also be widely promoted to the youth in Malaysia, especially to future new voters in preparation for the next general election.

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