PAROCHIALISM AND ITS IMPACT ON MALAYSIAN PUBLIC SERVICE

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ABSTRACT Parochialism is an important mechanism that determines the measure of loyalty and obedience of a civil servant to the government organization. Thus, the ability of the head of an organization in the public sector to instil parochial characteristics in a civil servant is the most important value in forming a certain set of thoughts in a civil servant. Basic courses in public sector services and staffing are among examples of useful tools for forming a parochial mind set. Apart from that, the emphasis on commitment and loyalty to the head of government and state is a form of aspiration that is useful in determining how a civil servant carries out his functions and at the same time obeys the head of government and the head of state. Public policies and regulations related to the way a civil servant carries out his duties are the most important channels that can be used by the head of a government agency to instil parochial values and norms in a civil servant. This will allow the head of the organization to form a big picture of the duties and responsibilities of a civil servant in the workplace environment and in making the process of service delivery to the public a success. Thus, parochial as a characteristic in a person can be identified through the way of working, the approach chosen to lead the group in the organization, the thinking and decision-making and subsequent influence in creating a work culture guided by the individual leader concerned.

Keywords: Parochial, government, public service, civil servant, public policy.

INTRODUCTION

Parochialism describes a predetermined mode of thinking and acting within organizations, shaped by authority and characterized by loyalty to leaders and strict adherence to norms (Collins, 2022). While some argue this rigidity provides stability and a strong organizational image, others contend it hinders innovation and adaptability in a dynamic environment (Grillo & Landabaso, 2021). Historically, Malaysian public sector reforms from the 1960s to the 1980s formalized this structured management, laying the groundwork for a bureaucratic culture that emphasizes compliance and uses rewards and punishments to shape employee behaviour (Bani & Mohd Hassan, 2023; Taib & Mat, 2021).

This entrenched parochial culture has led to significant integrity challenges, evidenced by a high number of corruption arrests and low transparency scores, which are directly linked to the culture's emphasis on group loyalty over public accountability (Roslan et al., 2023; Zainal, Som & Mohamed, 2021). While agencies like MAMPU (the Malaysian Administrative Modernisation and Management Planning Unit) and initiatives like the National Anti-Corruption Plan have been established to facilitate reform, their effectiveness is often limited

by the very parochial culture they seek to change. These efforts risk being treated as mere procedural artifacts rather than fundamental shifts in behaviour. For these initiatives to be truly effective, a deeper understanding of parochialism is necessary to transform the organizational culture from an authoritarian instrument of control into a genuine tool for effective and accountable governance (Chin & Ramasamy, 2022; Tan & Kumar, 2024).

Building upon these historical and contemporary challenges, a path forward requires a fundamental re-evaluation of the core tenets of Malaysian public sector management. The current top-down reform efforts, while well-intentioned, often fail to address the root cause of the problem: a deeply ingrained culture that prioritizes hierarchical authority and group loyalty over individual accountability and ethical conduct. To achieve lasting change, it is crucial to move beyond superficial fixes and implement a more holistic, bottom-up approach. This involves empowering frontline employees, fostering a culture of psychological safety where dissent and new ideas are encouraged, and redesigning reward systems to recognize not just compliance, but also integrity, transparency, and innovation. By transforming the organizational climate from one of fear and control to one of trust and shared purpose, the public sector can evolve from a rigid, bureaucratic machine into a dynamic, ethical, and truly effective engine of public service, ultimately restoring public trust and fostering sustainable national development.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Historical and Structural Roots of Parochialism

The public sector's culture of parochialism in Malaysia is deeply rooted in both its colonial past and subsequent nation-building policies. The British-influenced bureaucratic structure established a precedent for a system where conformity to national agendas is highly valued (Abd Manaf, 2023). This foundation, characterized by a top-down, command-and-control approach, set the stage for a culture where obedience takes precedence over independent thought. According to Schein's model, this can be seen as a deep-seated political basic assumption that has long shaped the entire organizational culture (Zabidi et al., 2024; Bani & Mohd Hassan, 2023). The fragmentation between local and national governments further reinforces this, as localized interests can overshadow broader national unity goals, hindering effective policy implementation (Lee et al., 2024).

Tools for Enforcing a Single Ideology

Following independence, the government employed specific policies and leadership styles to promote a single national identity, inadvertently becoming tools for enforcing parochialism. The May 13 riots served as a critical turning point, deeply influencing the government's push for national unity and a single identity. In the wake of this event, the New Economic Policy (NEP) was implemented, aiming to restructure society and eliminate poverty, particularly by uplifting the Bumiputera (Malays and other indigenous groups) community.

This focus had a significant impact on the ethnic composition of the civil service. According to a 2023 estimate, Bumiputera citizens constitute approximately 69.9% of the total population, while Chinese and Indian citizens comprise 22.8% and 6.6% respectively. The resulting cultural identity prioritized uniformity over diverse perspectives, which can be understood as a problematic simplification that stifles critical feedback (Visser, 2022). This

focus on a single identity, born out of the post-May 13 political climate, inadvertently fostered a parochial culture that struggles with genuine inclusivity.

In this environment, leaders often leverage their vision to meld employee personalities and suppress dissent, which in turn stifles the creativity required for effective administration (Liu, 2021; Ong & Tan, 2023). A narrow, parochial interpretation of moral values, as a cultural artifact of this basic assumption, can turn values like transparency and accountability into mere superficial formalities that protect the interests of a select few (Ramli et al., 2024; Ridzuan & Ismail, 2022).

Consequences and Critiques

The enduring focus on a single ideology has led to several negative consequences. The government's post-May 13 push for a singular national identity, while intended to foster unity, has contributed to a culture that struggles with genuine inclusivity (Abdul Hamid & Yusof, 2023). This can manifest as a leadership style that ignores the diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds of employees, hindering empathy and the ability to effectively serve a multi-ethnic nation (Chin & Ramasamy, 2022). Policies that prioritize a unified vision over diverse perspectives may become tools for reinforcing existing inequalities, undermining public trust (Wan Ibrahim & Harun, 2023). The most significant consequence, however, is a leadership model that consistently prioritizes loyalty and conformity over merit and expertise. This approach, a clear manifestation of a parochial basic assumption, fosters a rigid environment where innovation is stifled and can lead to a talent drain (Tan & Kumar, 2024; Ahmad & Omar, 2024). A truly excellent administrative system for a multi-ethnic society requires a diverse and open-minded leadership that is grounded in a broader range of basic assumptions (Grillo & Landabaso, 2021; Siti Nor Yaacob & Rosy, 2013).

Application of Schein's Model to Malaysia's Public Sector

Edgar Schein's three-level model of organizational culture artifacts, espoused values, and basic assumptions provides a robust framework for understanding the systemic parochialism within Malaysia's public sector. This model helps to move beyond surface-level observations to diagnose the deeper, often unconscious, forces at play.

Artifacts as the visible manifestations

The most visible level of culture consists of artifacts the observable structures, processes, and behaviours of the organization. Within Malaysia's public sector, a key artifact is the ethnic disproportionality in the civil service. While ethnic Malays constitute approximately 57% of the total population, they hold a significant majority of positions, comprising 78% of the federal civil service and 80% of top management roles (Zabidi et al., 2024). This visible imbalance perpetuates a monocultural work environment that can stifle innovation and exclude diverse perspectives from Chinese, Indian, and East Malaysian indigenous communities. Another artifact is the highly structured, hierarchical bureaucracy inherited from British colonial rule. This rigid system, characterized by strict adherence to rules and a clear chain of command, serves as a tangible expression of the underlying culture (Idris et al., 2021).

Espoused values

Espoused values are the organization's stated goals, philosophies, and mission statements. In the Malaysian public sector, these values often emphasize national unity, efficiency, and public service. However, a problematic overemphasis on obedience and conformity to a single ideology can be seen as an espoused value that, in practice, restricts critical thinking and dissent. Policies aimed at political integration and national unity, while presented as beneficial, can become mechanisms of control that discourage diverse viewpoints and individual initiative.

Basic assumptions

Schein's model posits that the most powerful level of culture consists of basic assumptions the unconscious, taken-for-granted beliefs that guide behaviour. The artifacts and espoused values of Malaysia's public sector can be traced to fundamental, unexamined assumptions about hierarchy, control, and the nature of national identity. One core assumption is that a strong, unified state requires a homogenous culture and a centralized, top-down power structure. This belief, born out of historical events and post-colonial nation-building efforts, underpins the observed ethnic disproportionality and rigid bureaucracy. It is this fundamental assumption that drives the prioritization of loyalty and conformity over merit and diverse representation. Ultimately, a fundamental reassessment of these basic assumptions is necessary to move beyond a restrictive, parochial culture and foster a more inclusive and effective governance system (Grillo & Landabaso, 2011).

Figure 1: Three Level of Organizational Culture
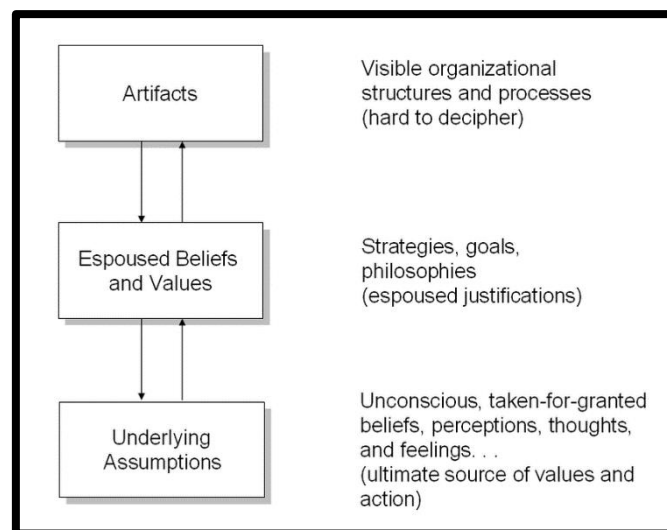
Source: Schein (1983) Organizational Culture: A Dynamic Model.

DISCUSSION

The meta-synthesis of the literature reveals a cohesive argument that the push for an "integrated" working culture in Malaysia's public service, while ostensibly promoting a unified identity, has instead fostered systemic parochialism. This analysis moves beyond superficial observations to expose the deep-seated cultural assumptions that hinder genuine reform and innovation. A fresh perspective on this problem suggests that the very stability lauded by some is a false economy. The historical influence of British colonial bureaucracy, which prioritized rules and obedience, has created an entrenched cultural artifact that, as highlighted by Grillo

and Landabaso (2021) and Ismail et al. (2023), actively prevents the system from achieving its stated goal of effective work outcomes.

This perspective reveals that the issue of parochialism is not an abstract concept but a systemic problem with tangible, negative effects. The overrepresentation of one ethnic group (Zabidi et al., 2024) and the "deep state" bureaucracy's resistance to change (Bani & Mohd Hassan, 2023) are direct consequences of a long-standing assumption that prioritizes insular group agendas over national policy goals. Consequently, the stability of the current system, while providing a degree of control, actively hinders accountability and genuine reforms needed for a truly equitable and effective public service. True progress requires a fundamental shift from an imposed, conformist culture to a genuinely shared one that values merit, diverse perspectives, and adaptability to serve the collective good of a multi-ethnic nation.

CONCLUSION

The Malaysian public service faces a persistent challenge in moving beyond its deep-seated parochial culture to achieve genuine professionalism and accountability. Critics argue that despite governmental efforts in training and education, the system remains hampered by a rigid bureaucracy, insular thinking, and a resistance to change. This is evidenced by a focus on process over results and a disconnect from the needs of the multi-ethnic populace. Consequently, the public service struggles with fragmentation, ethnic-based favouritism, and a lack of innovation, which undermines its effectiveness and public trust. To overcome these challenges, a fundamental shift in the public service's foundational culture is required. Merely focusing on superficial changes like new training programs or administrative reforms will not suffice. The core issue lies in the deep-seated cultural assumptions that prioritize conformity and loyalty over merit and adaptability. A forward-looking approach must, therefore, involve a systemic reassessment of these values to cultivate a truly inclusive, professional, and responsive administration. This will require promoting diverse leadership, encouraging critical thinking, and embracing a culture of genuine accountability to better serve the collective needs of all Malaysians and build a modern, effective public sector.

LIMITATION

A limitation of this study is the difficulty in measuring a leader's values and attitudes. This information is important for researchers to understand the specific traits and character that lead to parochial behaviour. For future studies, we suggest including psychological and self-assessment tools to better evaluate these aspects of an organization's leadership.

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