

POVERTY ERADICATION: A VIEW FROM THE MALAYSIAN PARLIAMENT

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ABSTRACT

This article explores poverty eradication issues in the Malaysian Parliament. It attempts to re-evaluate the existing works on poverty in Malaysia by examining the debates extracted from the *Dewan Rakyat* Hansard and interviews with the Members of Parliament (MPs). This article aims at understanding *whether* and *to what extent* the poverty eradication programs have benefited citizens and spilled over throughout the constituencies in Malaysia. It focuses the untold story of the MP's views that have not been reported by the mainstream media in Malaysia. While the data and statistics provided by the state agencies and literatures help us to understand the success of the poverty eradication in Malaysia, this article highlights the MP's views that are contradicted to the existing "facts and findings."

Keywords: The Malaysian Parliament, Members of Parliament, *Dewan Rakyat*; poverty eradication.

Introduction

Using the Malaysian Parliament as a case study, author examines the debates in the *Dewan Rakyat* (House of Representatives) to understand why poverty eradication issues have always surfaced and raised in every parliament sitting to date. To understand the never-ending debates on poverty eradication, author explore this issue from the 8th parliament to the 12th parliament (1990 – 2013). Author questions *whether* and *to what extent* the data and statistics represent the 'reality' of poverty eradication in Malaysia after the New Economic Policy (NEP) ended in 1990.

Sowell's (2004) notion on poverty in Malaysia is interesting. He argues that poverty in Malaysia is more about perception rather than hunger or grinding poverty (Sowell, 2004: p. 63). Sowell suggests that perceptions about poverty matter a lot in Malaysia. If they do matter, therefore, the perceptions of MPs are analyzed in this article to understand their views on poverty eradication by utilizing the Parliament Hansard and interviewing them. Existing scholarly works (see for example Gomez & Jomo, 1999; Zainal, 2001; Rahimah, 2012) do not use the Parliament Hansard. The exclusion of Parliament Hansard has left the reality of poverty debates in parliament unnoticed. Hansard could be very useful for understanding the political context of poverty eradication in Malaysia. In this article, author emphasizes and demonstrates how Members of Parliament (MPs) as state actors, to some degree, are still able to undertake their task as citizen representatives, and are not always constrained by partisan interests when they raise poverty issues in parliament.

Methodology

This article is an exploratory examination based on a case study of the Malaysian Parliament. In a case study, the words *whether* and *to what extent* are vital to avoid the researcher's subconscious assumptions and perceptions clouding the analysis in qualitative. Author use a case study because it produces 'insights' that capture 'the complexity of social behavior' (Gerring, 2007, 4) of the MPs which I figure out through the 'unknown quality' (Gerring, 2007: p.7) of data gathered from the Hansard and interviews. A case study relies on a coherent story by integrating inferences and interpreting the puzzle of the story of the case.

Contrary to the existing works that mostly examine poverty using quantitative research technique, author attempt to revitalize and refresh the discussion by employing qualitative research technique. Author exam the parliament sittings in the *Dewan Rakyat* from the Hansard and triangulate them with 20 interviews conducted by myself in 2011 – 2012. As the only elected representatives in Malaysia, MPs are the ideal key informants who have 'situated knowledge' (Mitrom, 2003: 72) in providing unique and research-worthy insights into the parliament affairs. Through a narrative focused on the MP's views, I seek to understand the nature of politics and poverty eradication in Malaysia.

The Parliament Hansard are under-utilized in the examination of legislative policy-making in Malaysia's politics. However, Hansard provide a rich source of data that reveal the way in which MPs articulate their positions in key policy debates. Hansard offer better insights regarding whether and to what extent MPs, as legislators have the ability and capacity to articulate and advocate for citizens' interests and concerns. The contents of Hansard may enlighten studies that aim to understand a legislator's stand on public policy from *inside* parliament prior to decision-making made by the cabinet.

As author mentioned earlier, he also interviewed a few MPs. As a case study does not required a large sample, I only interviewed 20 MPs using unstructured interviews. The MPs were divided into two categories, based on the political allegiances of the key informants – Barisan Nasional (BN), and Pakatan Rakyat (PR). The key informants who were speakers and deputy speakers, cabinet members, senators, *Menteri Besar* and parliament secretaries have been excluded from participation. This is for three reasons: first, it is assumed that such informants are likely spend less time in their constituency; secondly, their duties at constituency level are assisted by civil servants; and thirdly their portfolio responsibilities would skew the results. Some informants decided to keep their identity anonymous. For the purpose of protecting the identity of the informants who had asked to remain anonymous, and to reduce confusion, when presenting the data, author only quoted in this article those MPs who agreed to reveal their identities. The MP constituencies and their positions are accurate as of the time the data were gathered.

Poverty Eradication: The Endless Debates in the *Dewan Rakyat*

Since the implementation of the New Economic Policy (NEP), according to official government statistics, the poverty rate in Malaysia has significantly fallen from 49.3% (1970) to 29.2% (1980) to 16.5% (1990), and to 5.7% (2004) (Rahimah, 2012: 38). In the parliament sitting on 14 May 2008, the *Dewan Rakyat* was informed that there were 54,977 hard core poor families in Malaysia (Najib Razak, DR.14.05.2008). Based on *e-Kasih* records, the number was decreased to 44,463 families registered by the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development in August 2010. Interestingly, the validity of data related to the hardcore poverty provided by the state agencies had been challenged by a few MPs. For example, Mohamad Shahrudin Osman, the Kuala Lipis MP questioned the validity of the hardcore poverty statistics that were provided by the government. He claimed that there were two different statistics provided by the EPU and MoRRD (Mohamad Shahrudin Osman, DR.18.02.2009). Up to 2013, most of the recipients of *e-*

Kasih were from the poor states such as Sabah, Sarawak, Kelantan, Kedah and Terengganu. Sabah and Sarawak remained as the two poorest states within the federal to date.

Despite of a few affirmative actions that have been introduced by the federal government after 1990, the NEP remained as the focal point of debates in the *Dewan Rakyat*. The NEP outcomes and their consequences were still being debated in parliament, two decades after the policy officially ended in 1990. For example, Khalid Abdul Samad, the Shah Alam MP, asked the government in 2010 to explain the reasons why the NEP failed to meet its objectives (Khalid Abdul Samad, DR.14.12.2010). The polemics have centered on a new need for a policy approach that is inclusive due to many of the perceived consequences and flaws that have arisen from the implementation of the NEP. The NEP has been debated because of the government's failure to reach targets to eradicate poverty and increase Bumiputera equity. The interviews and Hansard data establish the notion that the NEP has contributed to what MPs perceived as new problems in Malaysia, such as the increasing gap between the poor and rich amongst the citizens, and the growing and increasing relative poverty amongst citizens in the first decade of the 21st century.

Furthermore, some MPs perceived that affirmative action also contributed to the Bumiputera being unproductive and lacking competitiveness, as well as the abuse of public procurements, projects and loans. MPs believed that these problems occurred because the government allowed cronyism and nepotism during the implementation of the NEP and this has continued as a culture amongst the elite up until the present time. What MPs perceived is also supported by existing scholarly literatures on this subject. Scholars have argued that the implementation of the NEP has been abused by the politicians and has indeed fostered cronyism and nepotism in Malaysia (Gomez, 1990, 1991, 1996; Gomez & Jomo, 1999). The gap between the rich and the poor Malays has also certainly been widened and contributed to greater economic inequality amongst the ethnic groups (Ho, 2003; Jomo, 1994), and nourished a complacent attitude amongst some Malays and thus made them less competitive in developing survival skills (Gomez & Jomo, 1999; Mahathir, 2011; Plate, 2011).

Data from Hansard indicate that debates about affirmative action are concentrated on the privileges given to the Bumiputera under Article 153. This article has been used to justify the strategy to increase Bumiputera equity. Ibrahim Ali, the Pasir Mas MP, questioned the rationales of the New Economic Model (NEM) as he believed that they were not sufficient to protect Malay privileges as stated in Article 153 of the Constitution (Ibrahim Ali, DR.14.12.2010). Ibrahim Ali, an independent MP and the President of Perkasa (an ethnic Malay NGO), was against the idea of dropping 30 per cent Bumiputera equity ownership as proposed in the NEM. He was one of the MPs that have advocated for quota allocations for Bumiputera remaining in the NEM. Strong opposition from UMNO and Perkasa has made the National Economic Advisory Council (NEAC) to amend the original version of the NEM to protect the Malays' interests. However, opposition MPs argued that it was about time that Article 153 was re-examined. For example,

One of the pillars in the Constitution is the privileges of the Malays and Bumiputera. [But I'm questioning] the method used here. We use the Malay and Bumiputera privileges only to enrich a few leaders and give a very small portion to the ordinary citizens. Therefore, it is acceptable for us to study article 153 again (Anwar Ibrahim, DR.19.2.2009).

Another problem is the competing and overlapping tasks between different ministries.¹ This has contributed to a situation where responsibilities and policies often overlapped. These ministries are

¹ An example involving bureaucracy and red-tape is the IAZAM programme of *e-Kasih* to eradicate hardcore poverty by 2010. *e-Kasih* is a government programme to register poor households nationwide. *e-Kasih*'s target is the poor family, single or sick elderly person, ill family members that need treatment, disabled persons, and so forth.

responsible to inform the parliament about the programs that they oversee. This has also caused confusion especially on data validity and the actual state agency that is responsible and accountable for decision-making, tasks and resources. The multiple state agencies that are involved in a given government program also, to some extent, has created difficulties to MPs in the execution of their tasks. Nancy Shukri, the Batang Sadong MP, raised the issue related to the effectiveness of the 1AZAM program since it involved different ministries and multiple state agencies at federal and state levels (Nancy Shukri, DR.09.12.2010). For example the ministries and government agencies involved in poverty eradication are the Prime Minister's Office, the Economic Planning Unit (EPU), the Ministry of Finance (MoF), the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development (MoWFCDD), the Ministry of Rural and Regional Development (MoRRD), the Ministry of Housing and Local Government (MoHLG), Majlis Perundangan Ekonomi Melayu (MAPEM), Majlis Perundangan Ekonomi Negara (MAPEN), YBK, Amanah Ikhtiar and so forth.

Hansard data indicate that often the one-off administrative service expenses are bigger than the total amount of aids channeled to citizens. For example, Zuraida Kamaruddin, the Ampang MP, asked the government to explain the reasons why the one-off administrative service expenses of the welfare department was bigger than the assistance provided. She argued that the government should reduce the red-tape, and overlapping and unnecessary bureaucracy, to improve the delivery system and the resources available to providing welfare to citizens. In the Auditor General's Report 2009, low income individuals in Tawau, Sabah, had to wait for two to eight months to get the assistance from government agencies. Zuraida claimed that the government took from 17 to 500 days to channel the allocation of RM2.4 million to the deserving recipients (Zuraida Kamaruddin, DR.8.12.2010).

Questions also raised by MPs regarding the methods employed by Putrajaya to empower the poor groups. Abdul Hadi Awang, the Marang MP, questioned the methods used by the government in implementing some policies to enhance the socio-economic status of poor citizens. He argued that budget allocation was not good enough if the body that managed a particular program failed to deliver it. He claimed that MAPEN had not carried out their duties effectively and the *modus operandi* of MAPEN was different from what had been agreed upon during the policy-making process. Hadi claimed that the initial *modus operandi* involved and engaged different stakeholders such as state agencies, opposition parties, academicians and NGOs (Abdul Hadi Awang, DR.30.04.2008).

The competing and overlapping tasks by various state agencies of the different ministries were perceived by MPs as a mechanism for the politicians to get more government projects through the government programs. Wan Azizah Wan Ismail, the Permatang Pauh MP, agreed that the NEP had contributed to the development and reduction of poverty in Malaysia. However, she urged the government to re-examine any policy resemblance to the NEP as they had become a factor that had nourished

Under *e-Kasih*, the government has created a few platforms to facilitate or/and create jobs for citizens through the 1AZAM programme. The 1AZAM programme can be divided into four sub-programmes which are the AZAM Kerja (labour sector), the AZAM Tani (agriculture sector), the AZAM Niaga (business sector), and the AZAM Khidmat (services sector). The Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development is responsible for co-ordinating the 1AZAM programmes of *e-Kasih* that are conducted by the different ministries and government agencies such as the Ministry of Human Resources for AZAM Kerja, the Ministry of Agriculture and Agro-Based Industry for AZAM Tani, the Amanah Ikhtiar Malaysia for AZAM Niaga and AZAM Khidmat. Meanwhile, in East Malaysia, the state governments appointed their own agencies. In Sarawak the agencies responsible for the 1AZAM programme are the Department of Agriculture, the Bintulu Development Authority, the Sarawak Bumiputera Development Unit, the Sarawak Timber Industry Development, FAMA, LKIM, GIAT MARA and the Sarawak Labour Department. In Sabah, the agencies involved are Sabah Usaha Maju Foundation, the Department of Agriculture Sabah, the Sabah Fishermen Cooperation, the Sabah Rural Development Cooperation, the Department of Fisheries Sabah, and the Department of Women Affairs Sabah (Hen Seai Kie, DR.09.12.2010).

cronyism, manipulation and the self-serving abuse of power amongst the elite politicians. She argued that it was about time that the affirmative action policies included all marginalised citizens in Malaysia.

[This] is very unfortunate for Bumiputera when only a minority of the rich [Bumiputera] urge [the NEP] to continue. What we must care about is the future of the majority of Bumiputera – Malays in villages, Kadazan, Murut, Iban, Bidayuh and others in remote rural areas and along the coast. Any new approach to tackle poverty has to take into account the poor and marginalised Chinese and Indians as well (Wan Azizah Wan Ismail, DR.05.05.2008).

Under the NEP, the government focus for poverty eradication was mainly in the rural constituencies, especially from the 1970s through the 1980s. Since the 1990s, the focus has shifted to include the urban constituencies as well because of the rapid industrialisation and urbanisation that was highly concentrated in the major urban areas such as Klang Valley, Penang and Johor. The rapid industrialisation and urbanisation has driven the steady internal migration of the rural citizens to urban constituencies. The population concentration and the high cost of living in the major urban areas like Kuala Lumpur/Klang Valley, Johor Bahru and Georgetown has created housing problems which has contributed to the emergence of relative poverty in today's Malaysia, even if absolute poverty has been dramatically reduced.

Tug-of-War between the Government and Opposition

There were two programs that had been established by the federal government to eradicate poverty that have directly impacted upon poor citizens, namely the Development Program for the Hard core Poor or Program Pembangunan Rakyat Termiskin (PPRT) and *e-Kasih*. Prior to the 21st century, generally the aid given under this program was in the form of one-off-aid, and did not contribute to value-added activities or proper vocational training. However, the strategy has been since changed through the provision of better technical skills and vocational training support, in order to ensure the sustainability of recipients' abilities to cope and adopt with the changes in life-style and surroundings as Malaysia continues to develop.

In April 2008, Muhammed Muhamad Taib, the Minister of the MoRRD, informed *Dewan Rakyat* that Putrajaya was focused on six core strategies to tackle poverty eradication in rural constituencies. The first strategy focused on upgrading the quality of basic infrastructure, and social utilities and amenities such as the road system, alternative roads for villages, water and electrical supplies. The second focused on eradicating hard core poverty via development schemes for people and mega agricultural projects of the agropolitan. Third, intensifying the human capital development for rural citizens through vocational training and along with the fourth, integration of development programmes for isolated and underdeveloped villages were both key strategies for increasing value-added activities within the program. The fifth strategy was to narrow the digital gap between the rural and urban areas by providing infrastructure and info-structure such as information technology (IT) centres in villages and rural districts, while the sixth and final strategies were to develop industry based on the agropolitan project (Mohammed Muhamad Taib, DR.30.04.2008).

The six core strategies were the continuation of previous government strategies in responding to citizens' demands by intensifying the development of basic infrastructure, utilities, rural information and communications technology (ICT) programmes, and so forth (Muhammed Mohammad Taib, DR.20.05.2008). The MoRRD claimed that providing basic infrastructure and amenities to rural areas was on track as the supply coverage for treated water in the rural areas in the Peninsular was 97 per cent,

while it was 63 per cent in Sabah and 62 per cent in Sarawak. The supply of electricity to rural areas in the Peninsular was 99 per cent, in Sabah it was 76.26 per cent and in Sarawak 84.08 per cent. Finally, the coverage of roads that were sealed roads (excluding highways) in rural areas in the Peninsular was 95 per cent, in Sabah 40 per cent, and in Sarawak this figure was 34 per cent in 2007 (Muhammed Mohammad Taib, DR.20.05.2008).

It has become the duty for MPs to disseminate information about state programs on combating poverty in Malaysia to citizens and providing the lists of poor citizens to the government agencies. MPs have been one of the backbones to trace and give feedback to the government agencies. MPs helped their constituents by providing lists of the needy to the federal government. MPs' offices have been responsible for combating poverty with programs such as the PPRT, *e-Kasih* and the *Projek Cari* (the Search Project) that target a wide range of welfare dependents, including poor families, single or sick elderly persons, stateless children, ill family members who need treatment, disabled persons who have not registered with the Department of Welfare, depleted households, and households without basic necessities. Zuraida Kamaruddin, the Ampang MP, provided a good example of the above. For example, through *Projek Cari*, Zuraida claimed that she cooperated with the state agencies at federal level to search out and notify the marginalized individuals or detect isolated cases [which have been overlooked under *e-kasih*] that need assistance. All MPs that I interviewed, regardless of whether they were BN or PR or in the urban or rural constituencies, have worked with the Welfare Department to focus on poverty eradication in Malaysia within the PPRT and *e-Kasih* programs.

In principle, MPs agreed that the battle to eradicate poverty should not be politicized. They agreed that those who qualified must be helped, regardless of their ethnic background and political affiliations. There should not be special preferences for one particular ethnic group and political allegiance. MPs provided the list of the needy families/individuals to the state agencies. However, they did not have the power to make the final decision or to ensure that the target groups actually receive the help from the agencies as claimed by key informants, Zuraida Kamaruddin, the Ampang MP; Fong Po Kuan, the Batu Gajah MP; and Siti Zailah Mohd Yusoff, the Rantau Panjang MP.

In the early 1990's, the Bukit Mertajam MP, Chian Hen Kai, claimed that the government practiced favouritism based on party alliances in selecting the recipients of poverty programme aids. He claimed that Bumiputera who earned RM5000 had received assistance while some who had earned only RM300 were denied. He, therefore, urged the government to reconsider and change the policy to ensure that only the deserving individuals received help, to ensure political allegiance was not a factor (Chian Hen Kai, DR.02.01.1991).

Although the government denied any political influence in the process of providing assistance to the poor, findings from interviews, on the contrary, reveal that most MPs perceived that poverty assistance delivery and coverage, to some extent, was actually influenced by political allegiance. Interview data indicate that there is a strong consensus amongst opposition MPs that the government gives priority to the BN constituencies. MPs from the opposition felt that it was always about the government constituencies and the opposition constituencies. Potential recipients are often scrutinised first before receiving assistance. The opposition MPs also claimed that opposition party members often did not get help from the government agencies even though they are supposed to be non-partisan.

The poverty eradication programme is a government agenda, I mean the federal government. The agendas, the existing policies are good but implementation.....But we don't have the control to make the final decision or to ensure the target groups get the help from the agencies. It's always about government constituencies and opposition constituencies; government or opposition voters. Most of the time, the opposition voters won't get the help from the agencies. Like *e-Kasih* we have provided the list of poor people but we don't have

access to monitor or to double-check the final list, which has been listed and is eligible for help (Teo Nie Ching, Serdang).

Furthermore, all opposition MPs suggested that the poverty eradication policy had been abused by UMNO elite for its own vested interests.

There are many Chinese who are poor; there are many Indians who are poor. Poverty doesn't see, doesn't show in colour, ok? So actually there are many Malays who are very poor, there are many Malays who are very rich (Gwo-Burne Loh, Kelana Jaya).

You see, there are many Malays, Indians and even the Chinese who are poor in Malaysia but [they] don't get any support from the government agencies. Why? Because they are not BN voters (Liew Chin Tong, Bukit Bendera).

Raja Ahmad Zainuddin Raja Omar, the Larut MP, is an example of how an MP urged political allegiance as a must criteria to decide on the allocation of government resources to citizens. He suggested that the government should carry out studies to ensure that opposition supporters amongst the low income groups did not get assistance under the PPRT project. He expressed his frustration in the *Dewan Rakyat* because the poor families who supported the opposition were amongst the recipients of the PPRT program (Raja Ahmad Zainuddin Raja Omar, DR.23.02.2000). However, the Deputy MoRRD, G. Palanivel explained that poverty eradication did not take political allegiance into account (G. Palanivel, DR.23.02.2000).

The opposition MPs' claim that only their constituencies had been discriminated against by the government is arguably inaccurate. Hansard indicate that the government constituencies in East Malaysia were also fighting to get better treatment from the federal government. This argument is based on the consistency of pledges and statements of frustration made by the government MPs of Sabah and Sarawak in parliament. The Sabah and Sarawak MPs claimed that there was always a tendency for the federal government to be deliberately selective and biased in providing assistance to combat poverty, whether this was a regional or ethnic bias.

The Embeddedness of the Cabinet's Views towards the Members of Parliament

Hansard data indicate that in parliament, as expected, the cabinet tended to use the *Dewan Rakyat* brief and inform MPs what the federal government has done and how successful the poverty eradication programs were, rather than re-evaluate and advocate the discussed programs. Depending on the MP's political party affiliation, generally MPs had tendency to echo the cabinet's agenda if they were government MPs, and criticized it if they were opposition MPs.

Prior to the 12th general election, Hansard data suggest that often MPs echoed government explanations during parliamentary sittings. For example, Che Ibrahim Mustaffa, the Sungai Petani MP, simply praised the government by repeating what the government had delivered through the budget. Che Ibrahim Mustaffa said the government had done a great job by repeating what the minister had informed the parliament about, such as RM6 billion allocations for poverty eradication programme in rural districts: RM80 million for the subsidy scheme for paddy fertilisers, RM12 million for fishermen and farmers, RM416 million for new settlements, restructuring land use and replanting the rubber trees, RM346 million for water supply, and RM16 million for electricity supply in rural districts (Che Ibrahim Mustaffa, DR.02.01.1991).

The questions asked by MPs were rather standard during parliamentary sittings. MPs asked what the government had done to tackle poverty and to lessen citizens' burden when the oil price was

increasing globally (Razali Ibrahim, DR.30.04.2008). This type of question is often answered by cabinet ministers using a standard format, such as making reference to the government reviewing mid-term budget of the Malaysia Plan. For example, when the oil price reached US\$120 per barrel on the international market in 2008, the cabinet informed the *Dewan Rakyat* that the government would undertake a mid-term review of the 9MP. Parliament approved RM4 billion under the scope of people oriented budget to subsidize basic needs such as rice, flour, cooking oil and so forth as well as construction materials to ensure the upgrading of infrastructure projects in rural constituencies and the construction of low-cost flats for poor citizens were not affected (Abdullah Badawi, DR.30.04.2008). However, this trend has changed since the 12th Parliament. In the first sitting of the first term of the 12th Parliamentary debates, issues of poverty and upgraded quality of life dominated the concerns of opposition MPs of DAP, PAS and PKR.

Beyond Cabinet Members: The Voices from *Dewan Rakyat*

In between 1990 and 2013, poverty issues in East Malaysia, especially in Sabah, were constantly highlighted by MPs in parliament. Their concerns were focused on the problems related to the lack of infrastructure, or facilities for better living conditions and activities to boost the economy. Meanwhile, the MPs of *Semenanjung* had moved toward discussing a new type of poverty, which is relative poverty. This kind of poverty has risen because of the rapid urbanisation process and the global impacts on the Malaysian economy of certain types of increased trade opening. MPs felt that hard core poverty was not a major issue in many constituencies in the Peninsular, but it was in rural Sabah and Sarawak. However, these MPs perceived that the high level of income inequality was becoming a significant problem, especially in the urban constituencies. Issues related to relative poverty captured the attention of all informants from the urban constituencies.

We don't have a hard core poverty group here but the relative one instead. We're seeing an increase in the urban [relative] poverty trend. Rapid urbanisation has made the issue of relative poverty quite significant and it should be taken seriously by the government ...Yes, [it is a successful story] if we're talking about hard core poverty but the nation is having a problem with the increasing urban poverty and the relative poverty. The gap between the super-rich and the middle class is so huge (Teo Nie Ching, Serdang).

I think the issues for most of Kuala Lumpur's constituencies is relative poverty - poverty is a big issue. Urban poverty is much worse than rural poverty (Chua Tian Chang, Batu).

Where are the poor? The poor are actually in urban areas. The real poor Malays are in Kerinchi, Lembah Pantai [in Kuala Lumpur] (Liew Chin Tong, Bukit Bendera).

Rather different than the BN MPs from *Semenanjung*, Hansard data reveal that the government MPs of Sabah and Sarawak have taken a different tone when questioning government programs and policies. Their behavior in questioning the government's promises to citizens is actually inclined towards and similar to that of the opposition MPs in parliament. For example, the Tanjung Manis MP, Norah Abdul Rahman, questioned the federal government's perception about the status and significance of East Malaysia. She felt the federal government had ignored East Malaysia in terms of economic development (Norah Abdul Rahman, DR.05.05.2008). She was not alone as the MPs of Kinabatangan, Kalabakan, Gaya and Batang Sadong were amongst the most active legislators who advocated citizens' concerns, demands and frustrations in the parliament. MPs from Sabah and Sarawak felt that East Malaysia had been sidelined and the East Malaysia was the *Cinderella* in the federation. Analysis based on Hansard records show that often the MPs from East Malaysia were skeptical about cabinet answers in parliament.

Abdul Ghapur Salleh of Kalabakan was one of the BN MPs that had consistently advocated and disputed the government programmes on poverty eradication in the *Dewan Rakyat*. Frustrated with the rhetoric, he suggested that the cabinet should visit the poor constituencies in Malaysia rather than rely on data provided by officials. He claimed that poverty in Sabah was at 24 per cent of its population and 800 per cent higher than poverty at the national level (Abdul Ghapur Salleh, DR.12.05.2008). The Deputy Minister at the Prime Minister's Office, S.K. Devamany informed parliament that the government only provided assistance to poor families and responded to citizens' demands based on data and statistics provided by the state agencies (S.K.Devamany, DR.12.05.2008). However, as argued by MPs of East Malaysia, statistics did not always portray the actual situation (Bung Mokhtar Radin, DR18.02.2009; Lau Ngau Siew, DR21.02.2000). The Batang Sadong MP urged Putrajaya to pay closer attention to her constituency as the reality was worse than what statistical data suggested (Nancy Shukri, DR.07.05.2008).

The common answer given by the minister in the *Dewan Rakyat* is that the government always allocates a bigger budget to Sabah and Sarawak than other states in the Peninsular. For example, the Minister of Integration, Culture, Arts and Heritage, Mohd Shafie Apdal denied that East Malaysia had been sidelined from the major development by Putrajaya. Shafie stated that both Sabah and Sarawak had been allocated a bigger budget in the 9MP compared to the 8MP. The allocation for Sabah, which was RM15.7 billion or 7.8% in the 9MP against RM13.2 billion in the previous 8MP, was the highest amongst the 13 states in Malaysia. Meanwhile, Sarawak received RM13.4 billion or 6.7% in the 9MP compared to RM12.8 billion in the 8MP. Mohd Shafie explained to the parliament that RM189 million was allocated for Sabah to tackle poverty amongst the Bumiputera with emphasis given to Orang Sungai, Rungus, Bisayah, Suluk and Sulu. Meanwhile RM139 million was allocated to Sarawak to help poor Bumiputera there, in particular amongst the Bidayuh, Kenyah, Kayan, Kadayan, Penan and Luang Bawan (Mohd Shafie Apdal, DR.05.05.2008).

Solving the problem of poverty through subsidies is also a common approach advocated by the MPs. For example, the Padas MP, Radin Malleh, argued that the 1991 Budget had further marginalised the working class and poor families in Sabah. Most of the citizens in Sabah's rural constituencies were farmers and fishermen. He argued that the government's decision to replace the subsidy scheme with a credit scheme had created difficulties for the uneducated farmers and fishermen in dealing with government agencies. Therefore, poverty remained high in Sabah after the NEP ended (Radin Malleh, DR.02.01.1991).

Addressing Poverty and the Roles of the Members of Parliament

Since the top-down approach has been practiced in Malaysia in-making and implement state programs, author argues that the roles that MPs have been playing in poverty eradication, have been changed from legislators to social workers and mediators. As social workers, MPs distribute the one-off-aid from federal government to citizens such as school uniform, book vouchers, laptops, fertilizers, groceries, and so forth through their offices, or in *kenduri* or *majlis bertemu rakyat* (face-to-face social events between MPs and their constituents) organized by the party. As mediators, the MPs educate and disseminate information about government programs and how the programs would help them. Often the distribution and collection of forms for housing, financial assistance and other applications is done by the MPs. The more state agencies that MPs have to deal with, the more they are required to camouflage their roles whether as social workers, mediators or legislators. MPs changed their roles based on political hierarchical of the state agencies that they have to deal with such as at department, agency or ministry level as well as the location such as at the constituency, local government, state government, or federal government level.

In the constituencies where poverty dominated the landscape, MPs as mediators have facilitated job creation for their constituents. Although in principle it is the government's responsibility, interview data suggest that MPs felt (for example as expressed by Nancy Shukri, the Batang Sadong MP) they had failed if they were not able to create jobs for their constituents. If the relevant state agencies were slow in carrying out their duties, MPs become the mediators for the creation of job opportunities. MPs also encouraged their constituents to upgrade their skills by providing vocational training or short courses that can be undertaken at the constituency level such as cooking, weaving, sewing and so forth.

Providing vocational training is considered a more sustainable way of combating poverty in the long-term. All of the relevant agencies have a tendency to only provide one-off aid. The Pendang MP, Fadzil Md. Noor, said that the opposition recognised government efforts to eliminate poverty through NEP. However, he urged the government to ensure the sustainability and effectiveness of programmes such as PPRT, Amanah Ikhtiar Malaysia (AIM), Yayasan Basmi Kemiskinan (YBK) or the Poverty Eradication Foundation for the recipients. He suggested that the government programmes should support recipients to be independent and achieve a sustainable lifestyle rather than providing one-off assistance, especially in supporting educational development for children of poor families (Fadzil Md. Noor, DR.16.02.2000).

Conclusion

In this article, author indicates the complexity of the poverty polemics in referring to the debates in the Malaysian Parliament and the views of MPs. The Parliament Hansard and interviews provide interesting insights into unexplored aspects crucial to understanding poverty polemics in Malaysia. Since the 12th parliament, there has been greater contestation in public forums of the wisdom of affirmative action in combating poverty in Malaysia. However, interviews and Hansard data suggest that MPs agreed in general that the federal government was able to address and reduce, over time, the hardcore poverty and restructure society in Malaysia, even if they had misgivings about the implementation of the NEP.

What we also can learn here is that any issues on poverty may create an 'equilibrium' across the divide. There are common tune and similar approaches used by government and opposition MPs who have repeatedly raised issues requesting the government to help the hardcore poor citizens in every parliament session. Contrary to the popular perception that the governments MPs merely behave as 'rubber stamp' during debates in the parliament sittings, this article shows that they have been given a 'venue' to raise the citizen's concerns within the embedded political party system. However, they still have faced some limitations as the policies that have been outlined in poverty eradication programs have been designed and decided using top-down approach.

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