

Chapter 3

Education and Politics in Malaysia

Ong Kian Ming, Saifuddin Abdullah, Meng Yew Tee, and Moses Samuel

Abstract In a heterogeneous country like Malaysia, it is not surprising that education policy has often interacted with the politics of race, religion and language. The nature of these interactions, however, has evolved over time as policymakers, politicians and citizens dealt with the challenges of globalization, a growing economy and shifting demands of an increasingly complex employment market. This chapter distils the views of two politicians, one formerly from the ruling Barisan Nasional (BN) Coalition and the other from the opposition, in order to highlight the continued influence of race and religion in the politics of education but also the emergence of other contending forces of influence, including market-based pressures, especially at the higher education level. Through the various narratives and questions posed, a dynamic and evolving education policy landscape is revealed. The views of both politicians show the tensions and contestations between moving away from a race-based lens of education policy and maintaining a tight control of education policy that serves the larger political interests in the country.

3.1 Preface

This chapter analyses the politics of education in Malaysia from the perspective of two politicians from both sides of Malaysia's political divide. Ong Kian Ming writes as a member of the primary opposition coalition known as *Pakatan Harapan*

Two of the editors of this book—Tee and Samuel—aided in the process of writing this chapter. The content here was originally narrated and/or written by Kian Ming and Saifuddin. This is their perspective.

O.K. Ming (✉)

Penang Institute, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
e-mail: im.ok.man@gmail.com

S. Abdullah

Pakatan Harapan, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
e-mail: saifuddin61@yahoo.com

M.Y. Tee • M. Samuel

Faculty of Education, University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
e-mail: mytee22@yahoo.com; mosess@um.edu.my

(PH, or Alliance of Hope; its predecessor was known as *Pakatan Rakyat*, or People's Alliance) and Saifuddin Abdullah as a member of the dominant ruling coalition known as *Barisan Nasional* (BN, or National Front). It is important to note that BN—and its predecessor known as *Perikatan*, or Alliance—has governed Malaysia since its independence from the British in 1957. While in the last phase of the writing of this chapter, Saifuddin left UMNO (United Malays National Organisation, the dominant party in BN) to become the chief secretary of *Pakatan Harapan*.

Kian Ming was elected as a member of the Malaysian Federal Parliament in the 2013 general election. He ran as a member of Democratic Action Party (DAP), one of the three key parties that make up PH. His public engagement with educational issues began in 2005 through the 'Education in Malaysia' blog he co-wrote with another opposition leader. His early formal education took place in Malaysia's public school system. His upper secondary and pre-university schooling was completed in Singapore through the ASEAN Scholarship. On his way to a PhD in political science from Duke University, he also obtained undergraduate and postgraduate degrees in Economics from Cambridge and the London School of Economics.

Saifuddin was elected as Member of Parliament in the 2008 general election, and soon after was appointed as the deputy minister of higher education. He ran as a member of UMNO, the dominant party in BN and Malaysia's political landscape. His early education took place in the public school system, where his parents also served as Islamic religious teachers. He then went on to Malay College Kuala Kangsar, an elite boarding school reserved for the best performing Malay boys in the country. Upon completion, he went on to obtain a degree from the University of Malaya (UM).

Both Kian Ming and Saifuddin are deeply interested in educational issues. Through their lenses, this chapter examines the convergences and contestations in constructing the nexus between politics and education in Malaysia.

3.2 Introduction

In Malaysia, there is an inextricable link between politics and education. This link has taken different forms in relation to the larger political milieu. In the decade after independence in 1957, the milieu was very much focussed on nation building (Chai 1977). In the two decades following the late 1960s, the dominant milieu revolved around meeting the needs of specific ethnic communities in an attempt to redress ethnically based economic imbalances (Brown 2007; Haque 2003; Thomas 1983). From the 1980s onwards, the milieu was driven by the goal of industrialization as the nation attempted to diversify its large agricultural economic-base (Bajunid 2008), although ethnically based discourse often played a significant role (Samuel and Tee 2013; Brown 2007). During this 50-year period after independence, these milieus were largely driven by a political structure in which education in the various states was driven by a federal government through the Ministry of Education.

It was during these formative years that Malaysian politics and education became inextricably linked. In the last decade, the relationship between politics and education has become considerably more complex and multifaceted. We will attempt to unlock some of these complexities in this chapter through the lens described by Thomas (1983). He envisaged the effects of politics on education in terms of:

- (i) *Influence over the support of, and access to, education.* This dimension concerns the question: ‘Who receives how much schooling of what type and of what quality?’ (Thomas 1983, p.8).
- (ii) *Influence over the content and practice of education.* This dimension concerns the question: ‘What is taught, by what methods is it taught, and how is it assessed?’
- (iii) *Influence over the latitude of social and political actions of various actors within the education system.* The driving question is: ‘To what extent should the school’s professional staff members and students be allowed to engage in whatever social and political behaviour they choose?’

To these three dimensions, we added a fourth:

- (iv) *Influence of the political economy on education.* This is to underscore the strong role of another key nexus—Malaysia’s political economy (Gomez and Jomo 1999), where political patronage can have a major influence on economic activities including the education sector.

It is through these lenses that we will discuss the situation in Malaysia.

Thomas (1983, p.283) also argued that his Malaysian case study illustrates ‘how a dominant political cleavage tends to absorb, suppress, subsume, and make irrelevant other potentially political cleavages’. According to Thomas, the cleavage created by the ethnicized politics of education has subordinated the other substantial cleavages such as socio-economic and geographical (e.g. urban and rural) differences.

Kian Ming argues that Thomas’s characterization may have had currency in the 1970s, but contemporary Malaysia has been moving towards a post-racial era where other significant forces, and not just racial issues, come into play. The inter-linkages between politics and education policy have become more complex in conjunction with the increasing diversity in education demands on the part of the parents, the increasing number of education providers especially in the private sector and greater competition in the political landscape. Saifuddin, on the other hand, argues that Thomas’s conclusion of racial Malaysia is still accurate to a large extent, although there is a need for a more significant move towards a more post-racial narrative.

Through this backdrop, we discuss these four dimensions in light of the following vignettes that capture the nexus between politics and education in contemporary Malaysia.

3.3 Vignette 1: The Evolving Politics of Language and Race in Education

Saifuddin argues that education policies are affected too much by race-based political currents. To elaborate on this further, some background must be given: There are many languages used in Malaysia, and this multilingual landscape is due in large part to the country's ethnic diversity. The Malaysian population of 28 million consists of 67 per cent *Bumiputera* (literally 'princes of the soil'), 25 per cent Chinese and 7 per cent Indians (Department of Statistics, Malaysia 2011). Malays make up an overwhelming majority of *Bumiputeras*, followed by other indigenous groups such as the Ibans and Bidayus in Sarawak and the Kadazans, Dusuns and Muruts in Sabah. The linguistic diversity in the country is such that even within these ethnic groups, different vernacular tongues are used. The many dialect groups among the Chinese community such as the Hokkiens, the Hakkas, the Teochews, the Hainanese and the Foochows, just to name a few, would speak their own dialects. The Indian community comprises mostly of Tamil speakers but also has a minority of Telugu, Gujarati, Malayalam and Punjabi speakers. Among the Dayak people in Sarawak, several dialects are spoken by different subgroups (refer to Chap. 8 for a more detailed perspective). Even among the Malay community, regional dialects such as Kelantanese may not be understood by the wider Malay-speaking population. While there are no restrictions on the speaking of these various languages, the dominant language of instruction in publicly funded educational institution, post-independence, has been the national language, which is Bahasa Malaysia or the Malay language.

In the 1970s, the shift to replace English with Malay as the medium of instruction in schools and universities began. By 1983, virtually every public education entity, with the exception of Chinese and Tamil vernacular primary schools (which will be further discussed below), used Malay as the medium of instruction. The missionary schools which had used English as the medium of instruction were converted into national schools, which used Malay as the medium of instruction. Most secondary schools which used Chinese as the medium of instruction were converted into national or national-type schools with Malay as the medium of instruction. The impetus to create a post-colonial identity through education policy was seen as an attempt to create a largely Malay or Malay-speaking identity. At the same time, the education structure under the British was replaced by the highly centralized education system which we continue to see today. In this federal system, the state governments and local councils have almost no power over education policies.

In 2003, Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad pushed for a major shift back to English as the medium instruction for Science and Mathematics subjects. This policy shift is known by its Malay acronym PPSMI (*Pengajaran dan Pembelajaran Sains dan Matematik Dalam Bahasa Inggeris*, translated as Teaching of Science and Mathematics in English). However, this was reversed some six years after it was implemented by the next deputy prime minister cum education minister, Muhyiddin Yassin. As a follow-up, in 2013, Muhyiddin directed that a pass in English be made compulsory for school leavers by 2016. However, this ruling was deferred by

Muhyiddin's successor in 2015. The proposal to teach Science and Mathematics in English in 2003, by the then prime minister Mahathir Mohamad, illustrates the longevity and relevance of identity politics in language, but at the same time also illustrates some of the new realities and complexities of the relationship between education policy and politics.

Saifuddin argues that many of these policy decisions were made on ethnopolitical grounds. For instance, Mahathir justified PPSMI as being beneficial for the Malays. Likewise when the policy was reversed, members of the powerful UMNO Supreme Council, who were briefed by the director-general of education (the top officer in the education ministry), were most concerned about the impact of the shift away from PPSMI on the Malay community. Saifuddin clearly recalls that the discussions about the educational implications of this policy shift were minimal. In essence, it was seen as an ethnopolitical and not an educational decision.

Saifuddin believes that the main decision drivers for the policy reversal focussed on the impact on the Malay and UMNO agenda. There was a strong belief that PPSMI undermined the position of the Malay language. It was also argued that rural students, especially Malays, would suffer from the policy. More importantly, the continuance of PPSMI may translate into loss of critical votes in the Malay heartland. The Malay heartland parliamentary constituencies are generally seen as safe seats for UMNO, and whose insecurities are often subjected to manipulation and racialized rhetoric for political gains.

Such political expediency, Saifuddin argues, will in the long run be detrimental to the Malays who have to learn to compete in the global economy. But the momentum of racialized rhetoric continues to be present in education-related decisions. In the case of PPSMI, the momentum came from many sources, including seasoned politicians, senior civil servants, academics and literary figures. Even as the deputy minister of higher education and member of the UMNO supreme council then, Saifuddin could offer little resistance despite requests for a more evidence-based approach. Such political expediency is not atypical, according to Saifuddin. It played major roles in many of the policy shifts discussed earlier in this vignette.

The debate on PPSMI also illustrated some of the complexities in the link between education policy and politics. The movement to abolish PPSMI as a policy brought together groups that normally would not see eye to eye. Malay NGOs such as the National Writer's Association (*Gabungan Persatuan Penulis Nasional*, better known as GAPENA) formed a movement to abolish PPSMI (*Gerakan Mansuhkan PPSMI*) together with Chinese educationist group, *Dong Jiao Zong*, in order to champion mother tongue education and to oppose the PPSMI policy. Two opposition parties—*Parti Keadilan Rakyat* (PKR) and *Parti Islam Se-Malaysia* (PAS)—also supported this position in part because of pressure from many of the Malay NGOs. On the other hand, PPSMI was strongly supported by the multiracial Parents Action Group for Education in Malaysia (PAGE), which was supported by many prominent Malay individuals, including a prince from the state of Negeri Sembilan (Malaysian Insider 2011a). The DAP took the position that schools and parents should be allowed to choose whether or not to continue the teaching of Science and Mathematics in English.

Another long-standing language-related issue in the nexus between education policy and politics concerns vernacular schools. More than 90 per cent of the 5.2 million school-going children in Malaysia are enrolled in public schools (Ministry of Education Malaysia 2013). Of the 2.9 million children that go to public primary schools, close to 700,000 go to partially government-funded vernacular schools, i.e., Chinese-medium and Tamil-medium schools, while the large majority go to what is generally referred to as fully government-funded, Malay-medium national schools (Centre for Public Policy Studies 2012). Historically, the vernacular schools are generally quite homogeneous—Malaysians of Chinese descent make up a large majority of the Chinese-medium schools, and Malaysians of Indian or Sri Lankan descent make up a large majority of the Tamil-medium schools. Increasingly, an overwhelming majority of Chinese parents are sending their children to study in Chinese-medium primary schools. What this means is that schools at the primary level are becoming increasingly homogeneous, with the national primary schools predominantly Malay while the Chinese and Tamil schools predominantly Chinese and Indian respectively.

In terms of government funding, national schools are entirely government owned and operated, while most vernacular schools receive government funding for general operations and teachers' training and salaries, while the school buildings and other assets are derived from private contributions.

The vernacular school system has been a major flashpoint for political rhetoric. On one hand, the supporters of vernacular schools cry foul over the imbalance of the funding structure, as well as constant administrative and curricular encroachments into the vernacular system. On the other hand, Malay ultranationalists will argue that there should not be funding at all as there is no room in the country for public funding of non-Malay-medium schools. Worse, the frequently used race-based rhetoric on vernacular schools is often used to gain political mileage by the various race-based parties.

One of the key reasons for the increasing demand for vernacular schools has been linked to their perceived higher quality when compared to national schools. Has politics (including but not exclusively race politics) had a hand in the poor quality of the national schools? Saifuddin argues that it has in very significant ways. The clearest sign of this is the racially driven hirings, promotions and appointments of principals, teachers and staff in the public education system. For example, Saifuddin points out, most public school principals are Malays. Vernacular Chinese-medium schools must have a Chinese principal. Many a controversy have arisen when these conditions are not met. There are disproportionately small numbers of non-Malays in the entire administration of the Malaysian public education system, from the federal ministries down to the schools. If the focus is on quality, Saifuddin argues, should not the main criteria for employment or appointment be based on merit rather than ethnicity or religion?

In contrast to Saifuddin, Kian Ming argues that the trajectory of the political debate on vernacular education has shifted, especially since the economic liberalization of the 1990s. While politicians—especially from UMNO and the occasional representative of a Malay nationalist NGO—would periodically call for the

abolishment of vernacular education, there is no real danger to the continued existence of Chinese and Tamil primary schools on socio-political and constitutional grounds. The contestation, according to Kian Ming, has instead shifted to the local level where residents and local political leaders lobby for more Chinese (and less often, Tamil) primary schools to be built in new high-demand residential areas. Politicians and law-makers often have to manage the tensions between maintaining the number of Chinese and Tamil schools versus the pressures or demands for more Chinese and Tamil schools by the respective communities.

To add to this complexity, a more recent trend had led to more non-Chinese parents wanting to send their children to Chinese primary schools. In 2014, about 15 per cent of the students at Chinese vernacular schools were non-Chinese (Teh 2015). This growing trend has led to some interesting and quite unexpected scenarios from just a decade ago—some Chinese vernacular schools have become more ethnically heterogeneous compared to national schools, and in some vernacular schools, the student population are all Malays (Hoo 2016; Lee 2015; The Star Online 2014).

Embedded within these dynamics, there are also pressures to expand Islamic schools via the federal as well as the state authorities to cater to the Malay Muslim population.

The opposition coalition, according to Kian Ming, has managed to broaden their position to not just advocate for more resources to be given to vernacular education but also to religious education. In this area, there was broad consensus among the parties in the then *Pakatan Rakyat* since DAP could be seen as championing vernacular education, PAS could be seen as championing religious education and PKR could be seen to be championing both.

Another major force, according to Kian Ming, is the east–west divide. The east Malaysian states of Sabah and Sarawak have called for a greater autonomy in the highly centralized Malaysian education system. They have been unhappy with the encroachment of teachers from west Malaysia into Sabah and Sarawak. They have also been unhappy with the lower teacher salaries in their states as a result of lower allowances compared to west Malaysia. East Malaysians have been unhappy with the fewer education options especially at the primary and secondary levels in east Malaysia. There have also been calls to reintroduce English-medium schools, despite the risk of touching politically sensitive nerves linked to the special position of the Malays and the Malay language. The 2015 policy decision by Chief Minister Adenan Satem to recognize the United Examinations Certificate (UEC), an upper secondary qualification from the 60 independent Chinese secondary schools which still exist in Malaysia, is in stark contrast to the position of the federal government, which still refuses to recognize the UEC as an entry qualification to public higher educational institutions. This could be in response to PR's 2013 General Election manifesto, which had pushed to recognize the UEC. This is yet another example of the growing complexity in the political landscape regarding education policy—that a chief minister of a BN-controlled state would adopt a policy that is the opposite of the position held by the BN-controlled federal government.

Kian Ming argues that these signal the beginning of a shift of the Malaysian political narrative on education towards a more post-racial narrative. The next vignette will examine more closely this possibly emerging new narrative.

3.4 Vignette 2: The Rise of Private and Parallel Education Pathways

Kian Ming argues that a major driving force in Malaysia's political–education nexus is market-oriented pressures. For instance, due to economic development objectives as well as major regional financial crises in 1985 and 1997, public policy has faced enormous pressures to increase higher education enrolment in the country. This has led to an expansion of the private education sector as a 'release valve' for those who cannot or do not want to access the public university system. Today, hundreds of private higher educational institutions (PHEIs) in Malaysia are home to about half a million students.

The key forces, Kian Ming argues, were not ethnic politics but market forces. The primary and secondary school system has also seen a similar trajectory. Malaysia's virtually free public education has helped its citizens achieve near-universal basic literacy and numeracy skills. However, the Malaysian education system has not been able to keep up with the demands of the increasingly knowledge-driven world economy. The quality of its education has come under heavy fire in recent years. One gross indicator of the deteriorating quality is reflected by Malaysia's performance in international assessments such as the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) and the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS). In the 2012 PISA, for example, Malaysia ranked 39 out of 44 countries in the problem-solving test for 15-year-olds. Malaysia also ranked in the bottom 25 per cent in the Mathematics and Science tests. Between 1999 and 2012, both the Malaysia's TIMMS and PISA scores have seen a consistent downward trend. This is despite the fact that Malaysia's per student spending on education ranked in the world's top 10 per cent. In response to this situation, more private primary and secondary schools have opened in the last decade. This has allowed more Malaysians to enrol in what were previously international schools that were only open to non-Malaysians. This is another instance of a 'release valve' for parents seeking other options besides national or even vernacular education. In this case, it was market dynamics that played a greater role than racial issues.

In other words, a side effect of Malaysia's struggling education system has been the rise of private education. According to the World Bank (2015), the percentage enrolment in private schools as a percentage of total enrolment (public and private) doubled in Malaysia between 2002 and 2012. The enrolment in private primary schools went from 0.9 per cent to 1.8 per cent, and private secondary schools from 3.5 per cent to 7.7 per cent in that time period. Similar trends can be seen in the higher education sector. In 2013, for example, the enrolment in private higher

educational institutions was already in the mid-40 per cent range as a percentage of total national enrolment (public and private).

Kian Ming maintains that this rise in private education is an example of other more significant forces—in this case, market forces—overshadowing racial politics. The growth of Malaysia's middle class led to a growing demand for better education at all levels. Saifuddin also sees similar trends with Islamic schools. He explains that religious schools in Malaysia, especially the private ones, came about in Malaysia because Islamic education in Malaysian public schools was seen as inadequate by Muslim parents. The influential ABIM (*Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia*, or Muslim Youth Movement of Malaysia) championed for the revival of a more rigorous Islamic education in the 1970s. They used private and charitable channels to start kindergartens and schools that focussed on Islamization of knowledge. Later on, other private enterprises such as Al Mumin and Al Hidayah added to the momentum. In this regard, Saifuddin and Kian Ming are in agreement, arguing that fulfilling an unmet need led to market-demand solutions and the formation of multiple parallel school systems in Malaysia. This created numerous choices for parents and children.

Ultimately, a more capable and skilled human resource base was needed to meet economic development imperatives. The rapid economic growth experienced by the country in the early 1990s during the period of the Asian Economic Miracle necessitated an upskilling of human capital. Tan (2002) breaks down the global pressures behind the opening up of the private higher education sector into the following components: (i) the effects of trade liberalization that led to the tightening of the labour market, (ii) the opening up of regional markets to multinational corporations which put pressure on Malaysia's own competitiveness, (iii) the establishment of the Multimedia Super Corridor and the resultant demand for skills and services for information and communication technology (ICT)-related jobs and (iv) the need to upgrade human capital in order to ensure national competitiveness in a global economy.

As soon as the necessary legislation was introduced in order to liberalize and regulate the growth of the private higher education sector, the momentum created by this industry proved hard to stop. For example, not only did the growth of this sector decrease the outflow of foreign exchange via Malaysian students going abroad to study, the government later realized that this sector could attract foreign students to study in Malaysia and, in turn, earn valuable foreign exchange.

In addition, this expansion of the private education sector also proved to be a useful 'release valve' to meet demands for education among those who cannot or do not want to access the public system. In the last 20 years, as a result of the liberalization of the private higher education sector, Malaysia has seen the emergence of hundreds of new private higher educational institutions (PHEIs). They, according to Kian Ming, have become powerful lobby groups. PHEIs, for example, have so far been able to resist any quotas for the percentage of foreign students and the percentage of Bumiputera students. Although PHEIs have given in on curriculum matters such as making Malaysian studies compulsory as well as following the requirements

of the Malaysian Quality Agency, they have remained somewhat independent on most academic matters.

This independence is, however, limited. Federal legislations passed by the BN-controlled parliament such as the Universities and University Colleges Act (UUCA) can and have limited freedom of expression. While the UUCA has been amended to allow students to join political parties and to hold positions in political parties, their political activities within the confines of individual campuses are still severely circumscribed. Another law—the Sedition Act 1948—has also been used to muzzle academics. Prominent columnist and law lecturer at University of Malaya (UM), Azmi Sharom, was charged under this law merely for commenting on matters related to a constitutional crisis in the state of Perak in 2009 arising from a change in the state government (Malay Mail Online 2014). While he was acquitted in 2016, it is important to note that other academics as well as students have also been investigated under this law.

Aside from laws limiting freedom of expression, there are other concerns that may seem less conspicuous but can also have adverse effect on education in Malaysia. Saifuddin cautions that even in situations that appear to be market driven, there is substantial politics being played out in the background. Kian Ming concurs. For example, politically connected entities such as Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman (via BN component party, Malaysian Chinese Association or MCA), LimKokWing University (via connections to a former prime minister) and Nottingham University (via politically connected Boustead Holdings and YTL Corp) serve as significant clues to the nexus of politics and education in Malaysia. More implicitly, PHEIs also recruit senior civil servants and academics from the public universities and civil service to join their ranks of leadership to facilitate relationships with influential politicians and politically connected bureaucrats. Taylor's University, for example, appointed a former director general of the Department of Higher Education as its vice chancellor and president. UCSI University appointed a former public university vice chancellor and minister of education as the chairman of its university council.

Saifuddin also expresses concern with the college loan programme known as PTPTN (the Malay acronym for *Perbadanan Tabung Pendidikan Tinggi Nasional*, translated National Higher Education Fund Corporation) as well as awards of government or government-related scholarships. Through arrangements that look like political patronage, politically connected businessmen can get a licence to operate a PHEI with a virtual guarantee that he will have a minimum of 500 students enrolling through government scholarships and PTPTN loans. Having 500 fee-paying students is often cited as the financial breakeven point for running a PHEI, thus virtually guaranteeing the financial viability of a fledgling college. Invariably, Saifuddin argues, there are still strong racial undertones to these arrangements. Beneficiaries are often Malays affiliated to UMNO or, in some cases, Chinese or Indians affiliated to the other key race-based component parties.

Saifuddin points out that parallel education pathways can and have been introduced and maintained almost entirely on a racial basis. One such example is the MARA system (*Majlis Amanah Rakyat*, or Council of Trust for the People, is a Malaysian government agency formed to aid, train and guide *Bumiputeras*). The

intersection of education and race in terms of education access appears in the policies governing awards of MARA scholarship, as well as entrance into *Maktab Rendah Sains Mara (MRSM)* schools and also MARA university (*Universiti Teknologi MARA*, or UiTM). The Mara Junior Science Colleges or MRSMs are elite government secondary schools, run by MARA, that were formerly reserved for *Bumiputeras* only. But starting in 2004, 10 per cent of spaces in MRSMs were opened up to non-*Bumiputeras* as part of the BN's 2004 general election manifesto. Finally, UiTM, with more than 150,000 students across its many campuses in Malaysia, are 100 per cent reserved for *Bumiputeras*. Calls for places in UiTM to be opened to non-*Bumiputeras* have been met with protests among students as well as university administrators.

While some room has been opened up in terms of access, it is likely that these institutions will continue to be almost exclusively reserved for the *Bumiputera* population. Not only will proposals to open up (more) spaces to non-*Bumiputeras* be met with political pressure and internal resistance, the reality is, Kian Ming notes, that with the availability of so many other secondary and post-secondary education options, most non-*Bumiputeras* are not strongly advocating for entrance into these institutions.

The interface between education, politics, business and race has also taken on more complex arrangements in recent times. For instance, a number of private institutions are owned or controlled by government-linked companies (GLCs). To ensure *Bumiputera* participation in this sector, state-based private equity firm Ekuiti Nasional Bhd (Ekuinas) has taken up stakes in selected private educational institutions under their ILMU group of companies, including Unitar International University, Asia Pacific University (APU), Cosmopoint College, Asia Pacific Institute of Information Technology (APIIT) in Sri Lanka, the Kuala Lumpur Metropolitan University College, Tenby Educare Sdn Bhd and Asia Pacific Schools (Ekuinas n.d.).

3.5 Discussion

The education system in Malaysia has been used as a tool for nation building as well as for partisan political gains. These objectives are often interwoven into each other. At different points in time, partisan politics may take precedence over nation building objectives. The two vignettes above provide a glimpse into this interweaving between education and politics. In Vignette 1, the education-political contestations are presented in relation to the dominance of racial politics and other emerging competing forces. In Vignette 2, the contestations extend into a more multifarious mix between education and politics, economics as well as business. In presenting these vignettes, we have drawn from our experiences and observations as politicians to provide insights into the contestations, tensions and constructions of the nexus between politics and education in Malaysia.

The vignettes will be discussed through Thomas's lens. Thomas (1983) envisaged the effects of politics on education in terms of (i) influence over the support of, and access to, education; (ii) influence over the content and practice of education and (iii) influence over the latitude of social and political actions of various actors within the education system. To these three dimensions, we added a fourth: (iv) influence of the political economy (Gomez and Jomo 1999) on education.

3.5.1 Politics Related to the Support of and Access to Education

From a macro standpoint, access to universal primary education, one of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), has already been achieved by Malaysia. Access to secondary and tertiary education has also increased dramatically in the last two decades. However, on a closer examination, issues of access to education are underscored by two powerful political forces: (i) economic as well as geographical inequalities and (ii) race.

The politics of race has long dominated Malaysia's political landscape. From the beginning of its independence, race-based political parties have dominated the government and the overall political scene. These race-based parties have rallied support through education policies that cater to specific race-based constituencies. For example, Chinese vernacular schools, as discussed in Vignette 1, have been used as a convenient flashpoint by Chinese-based parties as well as Malay-based parties. This often happens when the political parties want to make their presence felt. Malay-based parties and NGOs, for instance, would call for the closure of Chinese vernacular schools in the name of forging greater national unity. The Chinese-based MCA and Malay-based UMNO—both key members of the *Barisan Nasional* alliance, which has essentially ruled the country since independence—will then use the situation to project themselves as protectors of their respective communities.

Repeated rhetoric and political actions such as this over the last several decades have created multiple school subsystems delineated by race and religion. The *Bumiputeras*, for example, have a special secondary and tertiary education system sponsored by MARA. The Chinese have created their own subsystems such as private independent secondary schools and private higher educational institutions. The other ethnic groups such as Indians and the native groups in Sarawak have also called for yet other subsystems. Religious communities have also created other subsystems. One of many consequences of the multiple school systems—a direct outcome of politics of race—is that the Malay child exiting secondary education would have access to very different pathways than the non-Malay child. As discussed in the vignettes, this situation has also affected other structural dimensions such as hiring practices, budget allocations, awards of loans and scholarships, as well as ownership of educational institutions.

While these patterns reflect the historical development of Malaysia's education system, Kian Ming diverges from Saifuddin's views in arguing that economic and geographical forces, rather than merely race politics, will affect the direction of education development. He argues that the rural–urban as well as the east–west Malaysia divide will continue to see increasing demands on policymakers. The Sarawak state chief minister, for example, has recently asked for the re-establishment of English-medium public schools in the midst of important state-level elections—a clear departure from the national narrative and policy. This will significantly affect the majority of the population in the east Malaysian state of Sarawak, which is largely rural and relatively poor and continues to struggle to gain access to high-quality basic education. Failure to address issues of access may have severe political consequences for advancing the integration between east and west Malaysia.

3.5.2 *Politics of Content and Practice of Education*

While the vignettes do not specifically address the politics of content and practice, issues do arise regularly in this area. It should not be surprising that the syllabus of certain subjects which are taught in the national education system proves to be politically contentious especially for subjects such as history. The nation building agenda, which includes the creation of a common narrative for a national identity, plays a strong influencing role among those who are in charge of creating the national syllabus. However, Malaysia's history textbooks have been criticized for being biased and not sufficiently inclusive or even accurate. One common criticism that is often brought up is the downplaying of the role played by Chinese businessman Yap Ah Loy in the history of Kuala Lumpur (Malhi 2015). More recently, the chief minister of Sarawak, Adenan Satem, called for a review of the country's history textbooks to include the contributions of east Malaysians, specifically Sabahans and Sarawakians (Davidson 2015). At the time of writing, there was no indication that the 14-person panel that was formed in 2011 to review the history textbooks has publicly announced its recommendations (Malaysian Insider 2011b).

The choice of text for a literature syllabus can also prove to be politically controversial. In 2011, *Interlok*, a Malay novel written by national laureate Abdullah Hussein, was selected as one of the reading materials for Malay literature at Form Five level. It proved to be contentious for the usage of derogatory language to depict the Indian community. After much public pressure, the novel was withdrawn from the Malay literature syllabus (Borneo Post 2010).

The Ministry of Education's influence on education syllabi extends beyond the pre-tertiary level. It can and does exert its influence on private higher educational institutions through making subjects such as Malaysian Studies (all Malaysian students), Moral Studies (non-Muslims only) and Islamic Studies (Muslims only) compulsory. In public universities, Islamic and Asian Civilization Studies (*Tamadun Islam dan Tamadun Asia or TITAS*) is a compulsory subject for all undergraduates. Once such courses are introduced, they tend to have some staying power even

though their efficacy may be in question. After all, which politician or civil servant would want to advocate for the removal of a subject with as noble of intentions as moral studies?

These episodes—involving the role of Yap Ah Loy in Malaysian history, the contributions of east Malaysians in the national narrative, the contentious issues of racialized school literature texts and the introduction of compulsory religion-related courses—highlight the underlying currents in the politics surrounding the content of education. They also underscore the ethno-religio-political forces at work in the culture wars influencing educational decision making.

3.5.3 Social and Political Control Within the Education System

The ministry of education exercises strict control over the activities of students as well as lecturers in the public universities especially when it comes to political activism. Weiss (2011, p. 226) describes the process of ‘intellectual containment’ in public universities as ‘part of a broad program of depoliticization’ of the student body. In the Malaysian context, this is played out by attempting to silence student activism to remove a potential source of threat against the ruling regime, often by using university rules and regulations. University students have been penalized or suspended for demonstrating or supporting opposition politicians or causes.

Likewise, academics and teachers have been subject to strict social and political control. Teachers, for example, can be penalized for expressing views that are contrary to the official position. Within the last year, a teacher was initially transferred and then later removed for resisting the implementation of school-based assessment policies (Malaysian Insider 2015). As discussed in the second vignette, faculty members are subject to laws that can be used to silence dissent. Recently, a number of academics were investigated or charged under the Sedition Act for stating their expert opinions in public.

As a consequence, academic freedom is stifled. But more importantly, for every case that is filed or brought before the courts, there are many more who self-censor and thus undermine their roles as academics or educators in informing the public discourse.

At the school level, Saifuddin is also concerned about other common but tacit practices. For example, when a new school is set up, some of the teachers assigned to the school are also invariably UMNO supporters who will be instrumental in setting the area UMNO branch office. Such expediencies underscore an education system that can and has been used as a political tool.

3.5.4 *The Political Economy and Education*

The last 20 years have witnessed the rise of the private education sector, involving the establishment of private universities and private schools. On one hand, these developments appear to be market driven, but on the other hand, there is much evidence that suggests significant political forces at play.

As discussed in the second vignette, the private universities and university colleges have become an economic force to be reckoned with, especially through their collective strength in groupings such as the Malaysia Association of Private Colleges and Universities (MAPCU) and the National Association of Private Educational Institutions (NAPEI). Some of the private universities have appointed politically connected individuals to maintain good ties with the government bureaucracy.

While this is an instance of educational institutions seeking political connections to ease the running of their enterprise, there are also strong indications that the opposite is true, i.e., political parties, entities affiliated to political parties or government-linked companies have been involved in establishing or owning of private universities and schools. The government-linked private equity firm Ekuinas and MCA's University Tunku Abdul Rahman discussed in the second vignette are such examples.

Another more established model that depicts the education–politics–economics nexus is MARA. As discussed earlier, MARA is a Malaysian government agency formed in 1966 to educate and support Bumiputera in the areas of business and industry. The MARA system operates several junior colleges, *Universiti Kuala Lumpur* and the largest university in Malaysia, *Universiti Teknologi MARA*. The MARA system has close ties to UMNO and often features in UMNO political rhetoric in highlighting their role in protecting the well-being of the Malay community.

These different arrangements illustrate the variation of the political economy of Malaysia's education landscape. This intersection underscores the complex structures that characterize the education sector in Malaysia.

3.6 Conclusion: Post-racial Malaysia?

Saifuddin argues that Malaysia, in its present state, still suffers from politics of race. The politics of race is so embedded and so ingrained that some people do not see it even when it is clearly present. There have been many situations where key actors recognize its presence, but do not see any problems with it. And yet there are others who see it and find it problematic, but choose to just cope with it or tolerate it.

Saifuddin further argues that when the federal constitution was written, the writers were clearly sensitive—through a process of co-conciliation and compromise—to the issue of ethnicity. It was what was needed at the time, but Malaysia's education system should have played a greater role in reducing the overemphasis on ethnicity over the last 50 years. If this had happened, Saifuddin surmises, perhaps Article 153

of the Federal Constitution would have been reviewed by now. Article 153 states that the King will ‘safeguard the special position of the Malays and natives of any of the States of Sabah and Sarawak and the legitimate interests of other communities in accordance with the provisions of this Article’. Saifuddin asserts that the original target was to remove this article after 50 years of independence, but this did not take place because Malaysia continues to be trapped in the politics of race.

As such, Saifuddin argues that ethnicity is still very much ingrained in present laws, policies and programmes that are relevant to Malaysia’s education landscape. For example, Article 152 in the Federal Constitution guarantees the status of Malay as the national and official language. And this article is often used by certain influential stakeholders in debates on medium of instruction policy in the education system. In addition, Saifuddin points out that every minister of education since independence has been a Malay. Furthermore, there are scholarships, schools and universities set up almost entirely for *Bumiputeras*. More implicitly, public school and university leaders tend to be Malay. In fact, every public university leader—the vice chancellor—is a Malay. The last public university vice chancellor who was not a Malay was a British citizen, and that was at the University of Malaya in 1968. No public universities have had a non-Malay Malaysian as the vice chancellor. Most deans and department heads are also Malay. On the other hand, a number of leaders in larger private universities are almost always non-Malays. This dichotomy underscores the nexus between race, politics and education.

The unbroken rule of UMNO-led governments since Malaysia’s independence has led to various policy and economic vehicles to legitimize race-based policies (Milner et al. 2014). To break this racial narrative, Saifuddin argues that education has a significant role to play. But this can only be done if this nexus is broken and in its place a system based on merit and socio-economic needs is installed along the lines suggested by Kamal Salih (2014). Such a system would in the long run address issues of equity (e.g. access to quality education) without compromising the needs of various ethnic communities in Malaysia.

Kian Ming argues, however, that the reality of Malaysia’s politics in relation with education is much more nuanced. These realities are not merely governed by racial and political motivations—although they do play a stronger role in some aspects of education policy than others—but also by economic and social drivers. In his view, these are more constructive lenses through which education in Malaysia may be viewed. Issues such as the urban–rural inequalities, the east–west Malaysia divide as well as socio-economic disparities are more pressing concerns that are often masked if viewed purely through the lens of racial politics. Communities in poorer rural Malaysia, including large swathes of east Malaysia, have been left behind. Income inequalities have increased drastically in the last decade. Options and access to high-quality education are limited. Opportunities for social mobility through education have been marred by the decline in the quality of the mainstream, national education system. Politicians and policymakers are under increasing pressure to address these inequalities.

However, as Saifuddin and Kian Ming have pointed out, political expediency can often get in the way of sound, long-term education policymaking as well as

operational decisions. The recent reversal of a required pass in English for school leavers is one such example. Other examples include the reversals of the PPSMI policy and the watering down of school-based assessment policy. Saifuddin's account of teachers assigned to setting up a new school in tandem with the local branch of a political party further illustrates the use of the education system for narrow political gains.

This chapter has presented an overview of the interface between politics and education in Malaysia from two vantage points. Saifuddin continues to be deeply concerned about the stranglehold of race-based politics on educational decision making. Kian Ming, on the other hand, argues that Malaysia has begun to move beyond race-based politics as economic needs take precedence. The two views taken together suggest the convergences and contestations that are being played out in Malaysian education. Kian Ming's view represents a political movement that wants to move towards a post-racial Malaysia by shifting the discourse to focus on more substantive imperatives such as economic and social well-being. While Saifuddin equally aspires to see a post-racial Malaysia, he also holds that for this to happen, the hegemonic and deeply ingrained practices of race-based politics must first be dismantled.

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Ong Kian Ming is Member of Parliament for Serdang and General Manager of Penang Institute in Kuala Lumpur. He holds a PhD in political science from Duke University. He was formerly a lecturer, a researcher and a management consultant.

Saifuddin Abdullah is Chief Secretary of Pakatan Harapan and former Deputy Minister of Higher Education. He is a progressive politician who advocates the idea of New Politics, youth empowerment and social entrepreneurship. He has published seven books and is a columnist at several local newspapers.

Meng Yew Tee is a member of the Faculty of Education and the Centre for Research in International and Comparative Education (CRICE), University of Malaya. He researches teaching and learning practices, knowledge construction, learning communities, as well as technology-supported learning.

Moses Samuel is a senior research fellow at the Faculty of Education and member of the Centre for Research in International and Comparative Education (CRICE), University of Malaya. His research and teaching interests include literacy development, discourse analysis, language planning and policy.