

Chapter 7.5

Information and Communications Technologies and Policy Development for E-Democracy in Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

This chapter discusses the prospect of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) enhancing Malaysia's policy development processes through citizen engagement to enhance the development and implementation of electronic democracy (e-democracy). The Malaysian government promotes a diverse range of ICT initiatives which this chapter seeks to examine through a series of key questions: What are the initiatives and their objectives? How do these initiatives provide opportunities for civic education and citizen empowerment? Has the government through its public administrators actually started to engage citizens in policy development processes online? Are citizens ready to take part in

these online initiatives? What sort of contribution can citizens provide to government online? In order to answer these questions, this chapter discusses the role of ICT planning, strategies, and initiatives to improve democratic practices. The chapter discusses four factors influencing the thinking of the Malaysian public service toward local conceptualization and implementation of e-democracy for better policy development. The answers are based on publications in the public domain and preliminary interviews with a handful of key informants.

INTRODUCTION

ICTs in Malaysia are diverse in the type of initiatives and lead agencies. Citizens are often left unaware as to what and how government formulates the ini-

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tiatives. A number of significant questions arise: What are current government initiatives and their objectives? How do they provide opportunities for citizens' empowerment and civics education? What factors influence the implementation of e-democracy in Malaysia? What sort of contribution can citizens provide to government online? In order to answer these questions, this chapter will discuss the role of Malaysia's ICT planning, strategies, and initiatives as well as its contribution towards enhancing the public administrator's task of federal government policy development.

The chapter will mention online initiatives by civil organizations and communities to advocate their causes to the government, while acknowledging that access to ICTs do not equate with engagement. Evidence used in this chapter is derived from a cycle of in-depth interviews conducted among a pilot group of public administrators in the Malaysian federal government conducted in 2007.

BACKGROUND

Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) play a potentially critical role in Malaysia's vision to become a developed nation by the year 2020 (e.g., National Information Technology Council, 2000). The desire for development raises the need for efficient and effective ICT initiatives and programmes to support the national development planning of the country. Provision of ICTs could facilitate practical government-citizens engagement. Dialogue between citizens and government that enables citizens to be involved in public policies and decision-making is called 'citizen participation' (Baum, Neil, & Paul, 2001). Citizen participation with interactive ICTs and on-line applications can diminish traditional barriers of time, space and other physical restrictions on open, continuous policy development. According to the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS, 2003), ICTs can potentially enable citizens to promote sustainable development in the policy

development process. The inclusion of citizens in policy development processes is likely to better ensure a greater acceptance of policies and success of development, particularly for citizens living in a multicultural country like Malaysia.

The nature of Malaysia's population, termed a 'plural society' (e.g., Embong, 2007; Hussin, 1990), resulted from colonial British rule in Malaya (now Malaysia). The British brought in Chinese and Indians in large numbers to serve their economic interests, whereby the Chinese were employed at tin mines and the Indians at rubber estates. Before independence, the Malays, Chinese and Indians as the majority communities in the country made a bargain whereby Malay hegemony in the political arena was recognized in return for Chinese and Indian citizenship status (Singh & Narayanan, 1989). The still-extant bargain gives the Chinese and Indians a status which was equivalent to that of *Bumiputras* except in politics. *Bumiputra* is a term used to describe 'sons of the soil', or indigenous people, including ethnic Malays and various indigenous groups such as the *Orang Asli* in the Peninsula Malaysia, *Iban* in Sarawak and *Kadazan Dusun* in Sabah. The 'social contract' brought the country into independence with the "promises [that the Chinese and Indians are] to help the Malays economically and [the Malays] to accept gradual non-Malay political equality" (Horowitz, 1985, p. 585). The bargain's principles are preserved in an ongoing way with the adoption of democratic ideals in Malaysia. The nature of Malaysian plural society and its social contract are not reflected in ICT access because provisions of ICTs are guaranteed for the whole nation (Government of Malaysia, 1998a). However, the contract helps to understand the way Malaysian society reacts to and adapts interactive ICTs.

There are a series of contested concepts around online government-citizen engagement which require discussion. These are 'e-government', 'public administration', 'e-democracy', and 'civics education'. Globally, government agencies and

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