



Waiting for Bernie Sanders: Igniting a political and social revolution in Malaysia

Let's face it. There is not going to be political or social revolution in Malaysia anytime soon—not for at least one generation. Here are the facts. Nearly 60% of Malaysians are apathetic to politics, with more than 70% of Malaysian youth aged between 19 to 24 years declared themselves as simply 'not interested in politics'. Moreover, two-thirds of Malaysians feel they are individually powerless to exert any meaningful changes to the country.

Oddly, though, only one-third of Malaysians feel that the country is moving the wrong direction. Malaysians are strongly segregated along racial and religion lines, where 64% Malays identified with religion first, compared to 11% Indians and 6% Chinese. On the other hand, 71% Indians identified as Malaysians first, followed by 55% Chinese and 26% Malays. No surprise then that different races in Malaysia have a different perspective of this country. The most discontent race is the Chinese, where less than one-fifth of Chinese agree that the country is moving in the right direction. In sharp contrast, however, a whopping 70% of Malays see the country as moving in the right direction.



Despite appalling human rights and deteriorating social unity in Malaysia, oddly more than half of Malaysians still see the country as moving in the right direction. (c) dizain @ fotolia.com

While about half of Malaysians agree that corruption is a major concern in the country, only less than 10% see racial issues as a serious problem. The latter is surprising considering that nearly half of Malaysians agree that national unity has declined over the years. While many other countries are concerned about their racial inequalities and have attempted to mitigate such problems, Malaysia is rather unique because there is a large disparity in agreement between races on whether all people in Malaysia should be treated and accorded to the same rights regardless of race or religion. You would think having such a fundamental and important human right is a no-brainer, that there would be a clear consensus in agreement by all Malaysians. Not true. Only 39% Malaysians agree that all Malaysians should be treated equally, compared to 64% Chinese.

While the government is guilty of playing the race and religion cards to divide and subdue the people, the opposition parties stand just as guilty as the government and are as crazy as for power as the government is in staying in power.

Malaysia's future is bleak. Not only are many Malaysians uninterested in political issues, many are unaware that Malaysia is regressing politically and socially into an oppressive, divisive, ignorant, and unenlightened country. Instead, more than half of Malaysians think the country is actually progressing in the right direction, and this trend has been increasing steadily over the years since 2008.

There is no one party or one person in this country who truly represents all

Malaysians, regardless of race, culture, or religion and whom is accepted by every Malaysian to champion for their respective rights.



No leader, no political party truly represents all Malaysians regardless of race, religion, or even sexual orientation. Malaysians have also allowed themselves to be strongly divided along racial and religious lines, so distrust between groups of people and racism are sky high. (c) alphaspirt @ fotolia.com

No surprise then that I gradually find myself particularly captivated by the ongoing [US Presidential elections](#). I am captivated by the elections there because they express my desires for Malaysian politics. How I yearn that our country's politics move closer to that in the US than the quagmire it is now.

I am of course not naïve. US politics, though touted to be the most democratic in the world, is hardly perfect or even free and fair.

In the current (and past) US elections, there have been accusations of election fraud (or at least, election mismanagement), voter suppression, and media blackout of certain President candidates. US politics are also unfortunately heavily influenced by interest groups, lobbyists, and a select powerful few (oligarchy), taking away the power and voice from ordinary US citizens.

Consequently, voter turnout in US elections is among the lowest in the world, as many Americans do not see their government as serving their interest. Like Malaysian youth, the American youth too have little to no interest in politics.

But something interesting and profound is happening in the current US Presidential elections that have relevance to us Malaysians. The US is of course the sole superpower country in the world, so whoever is elected to hold the most powerful job position of a US president is of great interest to many countries. Whatever the US does (or does not do), unwittingly or not, will directly or indirectly affect us all, the rest of the world.

Sure, the US Presidential nominations may have started off in the usual, expected way, but over a span of one year, we have seen the current US elections evolving to one essentially about electing a candidate who is either willing to break or keep establishment politics, whether a given candidate wants to break or keep the *status quo* of a political system heavily influenced by interest groups and oligarchy.

Independent voters, so called for their disenfranchisement and disillusionment of US politics, have suddenly become interested in the current US elections. For many, this is the first time—and for the older folks, the first time in several decades—that they suddenly feel empowered that they have a say to shape the government of their future. The election of [Barrack Obama](#) as the US President in 2008 was hailed as a very significant and progressive point in US history, but many Americans have since become disillusioned by President Obama. Some see him as not being liberal enough, still held back by establishment politics. Without doubt, the US have improved under President Obama's leadership - but the changes or improvements under him, despite over eight years, have not been enough.

In the current US elections, many Americans find themselves being offered three contrasting pathways to their future: to keep or break establishment politics, and if the latter, through divisiveness by [Donald Trump](#) or inclusiveness by [Bernie Sanders](#)?

I first heard of Bernie Sanders when he participated in one of the [early Democratic debate](#). He, along with the other Presidential candidates, were asked what was the biggest security threat to the US at the moment. While the other

candidates gave the expected answers of China, Iran, ISIS, or the instability in the Middle East, Bernie answered climate change. His answer was radical, totally unexpected, and different from others.



Some have called Bernie Sanders as a once-in-a-lifetime politician. Integrity, consistency, honesty, and authenticity are rare attributes for any politician today, but yet they accurately describe Bernie.

It was clear to me then that Bernie has a different mindset from the rest. A simple search on the web would reveal that Bernie has been astonishingly saying and fighting over the same issues for the past four decades. Bernie wants to break big banks, tax the rich, expand Social Security, and improve medical care and education by offering free health care to education to all. Like him or hate him, even Bernie critics cannot accuse him of flip flopping over issues and stance. Honesty, integrity, and consistency are characteristics not normally attributed to politicians. But such attributes do apply to Bernie.

Even when certain issues were unpopular, Bernie stood by his principles. He fought for [gay rights](#) in the 1990s when it was very unpopular and potentially a political suicide to do so then.

Bernie was against the Gulf War and Iraq war even before they happened. He was against free trade agreements when they were first proposed. Such free trade agreements have been disastrous to the US because they have cause millions of job losses in the country. Even the so-called [Panama Papers](#) controversy have shown Bernie was right when he first opposed to the Panama free trade agreement. He argued that such a trade would encourage money laundering and

tax evasions in Panama. At hindsight, Bernie, the prophet, was exactly right.

Everyone can claim to be a genius after all answers have been revealed. It's easy to say, "I told you so" after the event. For Bernie, however, his genius is his foresight. Bernie has a remarkable clear and steadfast idea of what exactly constitutes social righteousness.

Bernie is now 74 years old, old enough to be the grandfather of many - hardly a model of charisma, youth, and eloquence that would draw people to him, but yet an overwhelming majority of US millennials (ages between 18 and 34 years) have adhered strongly to Bernie. Why? As [Cenk Uygur](#), the host of "[Young Turks](#)", said, "It's the authenticity, stupid. You can't fake a 40-year record."

US millennials are a very progressive lot—and Bernie is as progressive as they are, but not because Bernie has cleverly fashioned his stance and message to appeal to the millennials for winning the US elections. No, Bernie is authentic, fighting for the same values cherished by millennials of today even since the 1960s. Bernie himself have said that his message and views are not radical. He is merely echoing what the 99% of the country are wishing for.



Bernie was active in civil rights even in the 1960s. Here, Bernie was arrested in 1962 for his protest against racial segregation against blacks at his university.

Like Donald Trump, Bernie is a representation of anti-establishment politics, but in sharp contrast to Trump, Bernie fights for a society that runs on cooperation and inclusiveness and for a government that, for once, represents the common people, not just the few. Bernie rouses and challenges people's desire for unity

and for change towards common good and greater social justice.

Bernie is a Jew, but you wouldn't know it because he doesn't make a meal of it. He never pushes for any "Jewish agenda" but instead he supports immigration reform and respect for Islam—even Palestinian rights, something no US politician has ever openly defended—and these are further reflections of his inclusive universalism. No wonder then even the US Muslims have come out to support Bernie the Jew. Championing for only one race, one religion, or one group of people would strongly violate everything Bernie stands for.

As it currently stands, Bernie is trailing his Democrat opponent, [Hillary Clinton](#), and it is very unlikely he would win the party nomination for US Presidency. But Bernie has surpassed all expectations. From initially being just an interesting footnote in the news media, Bernie has mounted a very strong challenge that no one had anticipated. He has strongly fought Hillary for the nomination, winning 18 primaries, and with overwhelming support by the millennials, far more than even Obama had when he ran for the nomination in 2008. In open primaries which allow for independents (not just registered Democrat members) to vote, Bernie has won by large margins.



Bernie Sanders has overwhelming support of US millennials (those aged between 18 and 35 years) due to his progressive and inclusive ideas. @ fuelingthebern.com



Bernie may be 74 years old, but youth support for him as the US President 2016 is very high, even higher than that for Obama in 2008. An interesting poll found that more young Americans would rather have dinner with Bernie Sanders than music megastars Kanye West and Justin Bieber combined. @
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Even many political observers have agreed that Bernie's campaign has brought important changes to not only the Democratic party but to the country as well. Bernie has forced his opponent Hillary Clinton to take up and even support his issues. Most of all, Bernie has galvanized the youth and independent and first time voters to fight for a more just society and for a government that truly represents the people and not just, as Bernie would say, the 1%. Bernie may at the end lose the nomination, but he has won. He brought change, true change, that whoever forms the new US government of tomorrow can no longer afford to ignore or underestimate the grassroots of the country.



You must be saying something right when you get such a large crowd to

hear you speak. This was the size of the crowd of 20,000 (with a further 8,000 outside the stadium) at Portland, Oregon to hear Bernie speak in Aug. 9, 2015.

The US and Malaysian politics are of course vastly different from each other. But from my observations, it is interesting to note that we Malaysians and our leaders can learn a few things from Bernie Sanders on how to start a political and social revolution here in Malaysia. The following are the principles I have gleaned from Bernie's movement:

1. Create a shared vision that everyone in the society understands — a vision that is clear and achievable and that brings together everyone, across all races, ages, culture, education, and religion. No such revolution has occurred in Malaysia because Malaysians are still religion or race first, then a Malaysian. We Malaysians are too busy looking out for our own agenda to strive for the common good.
2. There would be no compromise or settling for less in achieving our vision. So-called [Citizen Declaration](#), for instance, will fail because it lacks long term and clear vision and compromises principles to achieve “vague” goals.
3. Work for and not against any group of people. Use positivity, not negativity. Rather than reacting against injustice, create a movement that strives to achieve a better future. Movements like [Bersih](#) or those from the opposition parties have not achieved the desired social traction because these movements are always about negativity (like getting rid of current leaders, corruption, social injustice, *etc., etc.*).
4. Keep people engaged and allow them to work independently to achieve the goals. Again Bersih and other movements have failed because people are always “waiting for instructions” and cannot work independently. To keep people engaged, the use of social media and alternative news media

are absolutely imperative to keep the momentum.

5. The support and involvement of the youth are crucial. They can break or trigger the revolution. The youth are full of energy and creativity but require a vision to empower and trigger them into activity. As someone once said, “the old are full of vision but lack the energy. The youth are full of energy but lack the vision.”

At the end, Malaysia still has some hope. Not much, but a potentially nascent one. A survey carried out by [Cenbet \(Centre For A Better Tomorrow\)](#) in 2015 showed that the youth between 18 to 25 years were the most open and accommodating than the older groups. Despite a high 40% of these youth admitting that they are racists, 91% of Malaysian youth have friends from other races and 63% of them are willing to vote for a leader from a different race. Even 26% of the Malay youth surveyed would accept a notion of having a non-Malay Prime Minister. An overwhelming proportion of Malaysian youth felt merits were more important than race when it comes to awarding projects, hiring of staff, and other business-related fields. Even 62% of the youth were comfortable with having a relative bringing in a partner of a different race to the family.



Malaysian youth are the future of the country. They are the most open minded and accommodating than all other age groups. @ sdfg.com.my

Malaysia’s future lies with its youth. They may be uninterested, even disillusioned by local politics, but Malaysia needs a Bernie Sanders-like leader to break them out from their slumber and start a political and social revolution that would truly

shake the establishment to its core.

As [Abraham Lincoln](#) once famously said, “A government of the people, by the people, for the people.”

Radical idea? As Bernie would answer, “No, it isn’t.”



Where is the Bernie Sanders leader of Malaysia who is able to draw in all Malaysians to strive for a common, unifying goal of a greater well-being country? (c) wellphoto @ fotolia.com

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