

POVERTY DEBATES IN THE DEWAN RAKYAT OF THE MALAYSIAN PARLIAMENT

PERDEBATAN KEMISKINAN DI DEWAN PERWAKILAN RAKYAT PARLEMEN MALAYSIA

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ABSTRAK

Artikel ini menyajikan prediksi perdebatan tentang isu kemiskinan di Malaysia yang diungkapkan di Dewan Perwakilan Rakyat, Parlemen Malaysia. Dengan menggunakan teknik penelitian kualitatif, fokus utamanya adalah masih adanya isu kemiskinan di Malaysia yang disematkan dalam Pernyataan Resmi (Hansard) Dewan Perwakilan Rakyat. Namun demikian, menganalisis isu kemiskinan secara kualitatif akan mengundang keabsahan, dan bersifat ambigu serta terbuka terhadap tantangan. Terlepas dari keberhasilan pemberantasan kemiskinan di Malaysia, masalah kemiskinan selalu diperdebatkan hampir di setiap sidang parlemen di Dewan Rakyat. Jika Malaysia berhasil memberantas kemiskinan, mengapa anggota parlemen masih memperdebatkan isu kemiskinan di Dewan Rakyat sampai sekarang? Untuk memahami masalah ini, catatan Pernyataan Resmi, Hansard, Dewan Rakyat (1990-2012) digunakan untuk menggambarkan komposisi isu kemiskinan di daerah perkotaan dan pedesaan di Malaysia secara kualitatif. Kajian-kajian sebelumnya mengenai kemiskinan di Malaysia dievaluasi kembali dengan meninjau kembali perdebatan yang dikutip dari Pernyataan Resmi, Hansard, Dewan Perwakilan Rakyat. Tujuan utamanya adalah untuk memahami apakah ada dan sejauh mana pengentasan kemiskinan menguntungkan masyarakat dan menyebar ke seluruh wilayah di Malaysia.

Kata kunci: Parlemen Malaysia, Hansard (Pernyataan Resmi), Anggota Parlemen, Dewan Perwakilan Rakyat, pengentasan kemiskinan.

ABSTRACT

This article highlights the nature of parliamentary debates in the Dewan Rakyat (House of Representatives) of the Malaysian Parliament related to the poverty issues in Malaysia. Using qualitative research technique, it focuses on the untold story of poverty in Malaysia that buried in the Dewan Rakyat Hansard. Analysing poverty issues qualitatively, however, can be ambiguous and open to challenge. Despite the success story of poverty eradication in Malaysia, poverty issues have always been debated in almost every parliament proceeding in the Dewan Rakyat. If Malaysia is so successful in eradicating poverty, why the Members of Parliament (MPs) are still debating the issue in the Dewan Rakyat to date? To understand this issue, it uses Hansard records of the Dewan Rakyat (1990-2012) to narrate the multifaceted of poverty issues in both rural and urban consistencies in Malaysia, qualitatively. It re-evaluates the previous works on poverty in Malaysia by examining the debates extracted from the Dewan Rakyat Hansard. The aim is to understand whether and to what extent the poverty eradication agendas have benefited communities and spilled over throughout the constituencies in Malaysia.

Key words: The Malaysian Parliament, Hansard, Members of Parliament, Dewan Rakyat; poverty eradication.

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INTRODUCTION

There are many scholarly works have been published on poverty in Malaysia to date. Malaysia is considered as one of the most successful stories of poverty eradication in the world after the affirmative action of the New Economic Policy (NEP) (1970-1990) was introduced by the second Prime Minister, Abdul Razak. Using quantitative methods, scholars show the reduction of poverty in Malaysia statistically. While data and statistics provided by the state agencies help us to understand the success of the poverty eradication, I highlight the untold story of poverty that has been raised in the Malaysia Parliament in this article qualitatively.

Scholarly literatures and data by the various state agencies in Malaysia inform us little about the poverty debates in the Malaysian Parliament. By analysing the *Dewan Rakyat* (House of Representatives) Hansard² to understand poverty issues, I explore the extent to which the Members of Parliament (MPs) use the Malaysian Parliament to express their concerns to government. My focus is the narrative debates on poverty issues and politics in the *Dewan Rakyat*. I analyse the *Dewan Rakyat* Hansard within the time framework of the 8th parliament to the 12th parliament (1990-2012). Since the 1990s, Malaysia has experienced a rapid economic growth and urbanisation which contributed to reduce of the poverty level. I question *whether* and *to what extent* the data and statistics represent the “reality” of poverty in Malaysia after the New Economic Policy (NEP) ended in 1990.

METHODOLOGY

I revitalize and refresh the discussion on poverty in Malaysia by employing qualitative technique of archival research. This article is an exploratory examination of poverty using the debates in the *Dewan Rakyat* as a case study. I use the words *whether* and *to what extent* to avoid subconscious assumptions and perceptions

² Hansard is a parliament report that contains the parliament debates in verbatim during the parliament sitting. The Malaysian Parliament Hansard contains the *Yang di-Pertuan Agong's* (the monarch and head of the state of Malaysia) speech, bills and acts tabled; the attendance of MPs; questions and answers of the parliament sittings; MPs votes and so forth.

clouding the analysis. As I will highlight in details below, I use the *Dewan Rakyat* Hansard of the Malaysian Parliament (1990-2012) to capture “insights”, “complexity of social behavior” and “unknown quality” (Gerring, 2007, pp.4-7) of data gathered. Integrating inferences and interpreting the puzzle of the story is important in any case studies to produce a coherent case empirically. As the only elected representatives in Malaysia, understanding MP’s views are crucial who have “situated knowledge” (Mitrom, 2003, p.72) in providing unique and research-worthy insights into the parliament affairs. Through a narrative focused on the MP debates in the *Dewan Rakyat*, I seek to understand the nature poverty issues in the Malaysian politics. Contrary to the existing works that examine poverty and quota using quantitative data, I revitalise and refresh the discussion by triangulating verbatim data of Members of Parliaments’ debates, extracted from the Hansard.

Poverty eradication has always been on the federal government agenda in Malaysia, with programmes to eradicate poverty and rural development undertaken using a top-down approach. Often, citizen input on development is ignored by the government. Poverty eradication and the quota system for *Bumiputera* (son-of-the soil) within the scope of different affirmative action policies (in particular the NEP) have been vital in uplifting the economic status of the working class group in Malaysia. Existing works show that the different views of scholars about the Malaysian government’s top-down approach in addressing the poverty issues. Whether they agree or disagree with government mechanisms to eradicate poverty, the similarity in their arguments is that Malaysia is a success story in terms of poverty eradication and restructuring economic inequality between ethnic groups. Specifically this success has been directly associated with the quota system in education, public sector and public equity for a particular ethnic, namely the Malays, using institutionalised mechanisms.

Interestingly, Smits (2009) argues that the institutionalised mechanisms used by many governments to address poverty have become the source of controversial debates since the

1980s because it may undermine democracy. Britain, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand, have established their own welfare policies that have taken into account their own political and cultural background for the purposes of supporting low income families. To Smits, none of the programmes have met targets to eradicate poverty. Under economic rationalism based on neo-liberal perspectives, led by the American and then followed by the western European governments since the 1990s have reformed their welfare programmes to encourage the recipients to actively look for jobs and enter the labour markets, gradually implementing the bottom-up mechanisms. Their footsteps have been followed by Australia, Canada, and New Zealand in which the role of governments in providing welfare support has been reduced to promote individual responsibility.

THE *DEWAN RAKYAT HANSARD* AND POVERTY ISSUES

Poverty issues matter in Malaysia's politics. The existing scholarly work only used the official statistics of government agencies to examine the poverty eradication in Malaysia (Sloane-White, Beaulieu 2010; Van Dodge 2012; Lange 2009). The exclusion of Hansard records has left the reality of poverty debates in parliament unnoticed. Hansard records are under-utilised in the examination of poverty and decision-making in Malaysia. Interestingly, the *Dewan Rakyat* Hansard records offer a significant source of data that reveal how the Malaysian MPs articulate their thoughts in the poverty debates.

The *Dewan Rakyat* Hansard is a vital source to investigate the MPs' concerns on poverty in Malaysia. The Hansard records provide the "raw emotion and feeling" of MPs when debating poverty issues. The *Dewan Rakyat* Hansard shows whether the MPs are standing for political party or citizens when raising poverty issues in the Malaysian Parliament. The contents of the *Dewan Rakyat* Hansard enlighten us to understand MPs' stands on poverty and public policy from inside the parliament prior to decision-making in Malaysia.

The *Dewan Rakyat* Hansard, to some extent, illustrates the resistance amongst the MPs of both government and opposition to the executive agendas. In the poverty issues, MPs become the *mediators* between the constituents and government to channel the poverty issues in the parliament. The *Dewan Rakyat* Hansard shows a level of resistance amongst the MPs to be the rubber stamp for the federal government from both the government and opposition MPs because ministers and bureaucrats in Putrajaya have little contact with the community at large. This is a point of difference for this article, and contradicts the monotonous argument that MPs functions are merely as rubber stamp in the *Dewan Rakyat*. Often, to validate the argument of rubber stamp culture in the Malaysian Parliament, the sources that are referred to by the authors are based on government practices via executive power, the Malaysian Constitution, Statute Paper, Parliament Standing Orders and Parliament Order Papers. Because of the "novelty" of Constitution and other governance documents related to parliamentary affairs, often the conclusion made becomes too legalistic without "human soul" or sufficient consideration of the complex human relationships that are given voice during the process. However, the "conflicting interests" between personal views and party obligations are captured and unveiled through the analysis of Hansard.

The *Dewan Rakyat* Hansard, thus, does greater justice for the reluctant MPs who have been forced to accommodate, rather than voluntarily embrace legislation that may appear to be simply function of the rubber stamp culture in the Malaysian Parliament. If the study only concentrates on MP votes in the Malaysian Parliament, it does not reveal much of the process involved and thus may not necessarily reflect the outcome made by the legislative body. The *Dewan Rakyat* Hansard enlightens us as to why the MPs raised the poverty issues and the purposes for them being raised morally and politically.

DEBATES ON POVERTY

NEP has contributed significant impacts in combating poverty in Malaysia. Based on the official government statistics, Malaysia has experienced a significant poverty reduction from 49.3% (1970) to 29.2% (1980) to 16.5% (1990), and to 5.7% (2004) (Rahimah, 2012, p. 38). According to the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development, the number of hardcore families were decreased to 44,463 in August 2010. It shows a significant reduction of 10,515 families in two years. The Deputy Prime Minister had informed the *Dewan Rakyat* that there were 54,977 hard core poor families in Malaysia in the parliament sitting on 14 May 2008 (Najib Razak, DR.14.05.2008). 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 up to 2012. However, a few MPs challenged the validity of data related to the hardcore poverty provided by the state agencies. For example, the Kuala Lipis MP, Mohamad Shahrum Osman doubted the validity of the hardcore poverty statistics that were provided by the government. He claimed that there were two different statistics provided by the Economic Planning Unit (EPU) and Ministry of Rural and Regional Development (MoRRD) (Mohamad Shahrum Osman, DR.18.02.2009).

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)³ 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

³NEM (2011-2020) was introduced by Najib Razak, under the *1Malaysia* programme. Under the *1Malaysia* concept, NEM is subjected to the *Economic Transformation Programme* (ETP) and the *Government Transformation Programme* (GTP). The NEM main objective is to generate economic growth faster if Malaysia is to be a high income developed state in which Mahathir, UMNO and Perkasa (an NGO) have considered would weakening the Malay preferential treatment. The NEM was announced in parliament in 2010 during the Budget 2011 presentation.

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.⁴ This has contributed to a situation where responsibilities and policies often overlapped. These ministries are responsible to inform the parliament about the programs that they oversee. This has also caused confusion especially on

⁴ An example involving bureaucracy and red-tape is the 1AZAM 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. 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).

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. She, however, urged the government to re-examine any policy resemblance to the NEP as they had become a factor that had nourished 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 George Town 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.

ACROSS THE DIVIDE: THE VOICE OF DEWAN RAKYAT

The poverty eradication programmes have always been a top-down approach in Malaysia. Although Malaysia is a federal state, Putrajaya (previously Kuala Lumpur) has always played a vital role to govern the poverty issues. Between 1990 and 2012, there were two programmes that had been established by the federal government to eradicate poverty that directly impacted upon hardcore families in Malaysia. The two programmes were 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 Barisan Nasional (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. Furthermore, all opposition MPs suggested that the poverty eradication policy had been abused by UMNO elite for its own vested interests.

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.

POVERTY DEBATES: THE “EVOLUTION”

Prior to Malaysia's 12th General Election (2008), based on data extracted from the Hansard, the *Dewan Rakyat* was functioning more as a venue for government briefing their agenda and success rather than debating the national issues. However, the debate cultures had changed gradually since then, especially under the fifth Prime Minister, Abdullah Ahmad

Badawi (2003-2009) who allowed parliament to be more “transparent and independent”. During Mahathir tenure as the Prime Minister (1981-2003), Hansard data indicate that in parliament, as expected, the cabinet tended to use the *Dewan Rakyat* to 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 criticised it if they were opposition MPs.

Prior to 2008, 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). This trend, however, has changed since the 12th Parliament. In the first sitting of the first term of the 12th Parliamentary debates, issues of poverty and up-graded quality of life dominated the concerns of opposition MPs of DAP, PAS and PKR.

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* (Peninsular Malaysia) 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.

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).

CONCLUSION

The *Dewan Rakyat* Hansard provides new insights of the unexplored poverty polemics in Malaysia. The parliament proceedings indicate the complexity of the poverty issues and politics in Malaysia. Within the time framework of this article, the 12th parliament became the era where the MPs across the divide questioned and challenged the federal government more openly in the parliament related to the affirmative action in combating poverty in Malaysia. I employ qualitative research technique of archival research to examine how MPs, to some extent, are still impartial in undertaking their role as citizen representatives. That is to say that the Malaysian MPs are not always constrained by partisan interests when debating poverty issues in the *Dewan Rakyat*. Contrary to the popular perception that the role of the *Barisan Nasional* MPs as a “rubber stamp” to the federal government, I argue that they had been given a “venue” to question the authority related to the poverty issues in the Malaysian Parliament. However, they still faced some limitations as to in-line and coherent with the government agenda since the poverty policies in Malaysia had always using top-down approach. Based on the Hansard data, 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.

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