

ADVANCING THE 2030 AGENDA AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS (SDGs) THROUGH PARLIAMENTARY REFORMS IN MALAYSIA

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ABSTRACT

The 14th General Election (GE14) in Malaysia was a pivotal turning point that witnessed a progressive parliamentary reform in the country. The parliamentary reform agenda is timely in building an inclusive parliament as a primary legislative institution of the country. Nevertheless, this reform agenda should take into account the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which was adopted by the United Nations in September 2015, whereby three key areas were emphasized; economic, social and environment. Therefore, parliament plays an important role in advancing and implementing the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs within the reform agenda framework. The main objective of this paper is to analyse the roles of parliament in advancing the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs besides putting forth suitable recommendations for parliamentary reform agenda. Using a qualitative approach, the discussion in this paper shall be divided into three parts. The first part explains the background of the Parliament of Malaysia and its reform agenda. The second part analyses the roles of parliament and how parliament can and should become involved in addressing the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs. Finally, the paper lays down five recommendations regarding parliamentary reform agenda, which conforms to the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs. This is vital to support parliamentarians in carrying out their duties effectively, which in turn assists the Parliament of Malaysia as an institution to represent the voices of the people.

Keywords: Agenda 2030, parliament, parliamentary reform, SDGs.

Introduction

The 14th General Election (GE14) was a pivotal turning point in Malaysia, since it witnessed a progressive parliamentary reform in the country. The parliamentary reform agenda was timely in its effort to build an inclusive and sustainable Parliament which is Malaysia's primary legislative institution. Nevertheless, the reform agenda should consider the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which was adopted by the United Nations in September 2015. Therefore, Parliament plays an important role in advancing and implementing the 2030 Agenda and SDGs within the reform agenda framework.

The main objective of this paper is to analyse the roles of parliament in advancing the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs. In addition to that, this paper aimed at proposing suitable recommendations for the parliamentary reform agenda. Using a qualitative approach, the discussion in this paper will be divided into three parts. Firstly, the paper explains the background of the Parliament of Malaysia and its reform agenda. Secondly, current study clarifies the roles of parliament and how parliament can and should become involved in addressing the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs. Finally, the paper offers several recommendations regarding parliamentary reform agenda that complies with the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs framework.

Background of the Parliament of Malaysia

Malaysia adopts a bicameral parliamentary democracy system (two chambers) comprising of the House of Senate and the House of Representatives. It is clearly reported in the Reid Commission Report 1956 that “*made recommendations for a federal form of constitution for*

*the country as a single, independent, self-governing unit within the Commonwealth based on parliamentary democracy with a bicameral legislature”.*¹

The Federal Constitution in Article 44 reads, "The federal legislative power shall vest in the Parliament, which shall consist of the Yang di-Pertuan Agong and two Houses of Parliament known as the Senate (Dewan Negara) and the House of Representatives (Dewan Rakyat)". The composition of the Senate is governed by Articles 45² of the Federal Constitution, whereas Article 46 provides that the House of Representatives shall consist of two hundred and twenty-two (222) elected members. In addition, the Federal Constitution listed several criteria for the Members of Senate as follows:

- i. have rendered distinguished public service or have achieved distinction in the professions, commerce, industry, agriculture, cultural activities or social service; or
- ii. representative of racial minorities; or
- iii. Capable of representing the interests of aborigines.

To ensure the legislative processes run smoothly in the Senate and the House of Representatives, both Houses are chaired by the Speaker and Deputy Speaker in the Senate³ and in the House of Representatives.⁴ Additionally, the Federal Constitution guarantees the special position and privileges of the parliamentary institution, as enshrined under Article 62 and Article 63 of the Constitution. The provisions allow a parliamentary institution to

¹ Chapter 1, Report of the Federation of Malaya Constitutional Commission 1957, p 5.

² The Senate shall consist of elected and appointed members as follows:

(a) two members for each State shall be elected in accordance with the Seventh Schedule; and

(aa) two members for the Federal Territory of Kuala Lumpur, one member for the Federal Territory of Labuan

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(a) two members for each State shall be elected in accordance with the Seventh Schedule; and

(aa) two members for the Federal Territory of Kuala Lumpur, one member for the Federal Territory of Labuan and one member for the Federal Territory of Putrajaya shall be appointed by the Yang di-Pertuan Agong; and

(b) forty members shall be appointed by the Yang di-Pertuan Agong.

³ Article 56, Federal Constitution.

⁴ Article 57, Federal Constitution.

regulate their own laws and execute any action involving the procedure within Parliament without being challenged in Court.⁵

Sustainable Development Goals and the roles of Parliament

The 2030 Agenda is a comprehensive and inclusive framework, which complements both developed and developing countries, since it places people as the focus in the development process. It contains a total of 17 SDGs and 169 targets involving the economy, society and the environment (See table 1). It calls on all stakeholders, including legislative institutions, to develop and produce laws and policies that meet the needs of the people, by upholding the principles of human rights.⁶ The 2030 Agenda accedes with Article 1 of the 1986 United Nations Declaration on the Right to Development, as stated below:

“The right to development is an inalienable human right by virtue of which every human person and all people are entitled to participate in, contribute to, and enjoy economic, social, cultural and political development, in which all human rights and fundamental freedoms can be fully realized.”

⁵ Harding, A, The Constitution of Malaysia, A Contextual Analysis, Hart Publishing, 2012, p 103.

⁶ Parliaments and the Sustainable Development Goals, A self-assessment toolkit, <http://archive.ipu.org/pdf/publications/sdg-toolkit-e.pdf> (1 July 2019).

SDGs	
1	End poverty in all its forms everywhere.
2	End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture.
3	Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages.
4	Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.
5	Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls.
6	Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all.
7	Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all.
8	Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all.
9	Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialisation and foster innovation.
10	Reduce inequality within and among countries.
11	Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable.
12	Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns.
13	Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts.
14	Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development.
15	Protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss.
16	Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels.
17	Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalise the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development.

Table 1: Sustainable Development Goals⁷

To adopt and domesticate the SDGs into workable national laws and policies entails a collaborative effort from all levels of society and stakeholders. Having said that, Parliament plays a critical role in facilitating these efforts from a preliminary phase. The reason for the involvement of Parliament is to ensure that the national policies addressing the SDGs actually

⁷ Engaging parliaments on the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs: representation, accountability and implementation, A handbook for civil society, 2018, p 6.

reflect the needs of the citizens.⁸ Goal 16 of SDG states, “Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels.” Parliament is one of the institutions that falls within the ambit of Goal 16, which is to have effective, accountable and transparent institutions and ensure responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative decision-making at all levels.⁹

Roles of Parliament

This section explains the role of the parliament in implementing SDGs at a domestic level. National parliaments play an essential role through the enactment of legislation as a law-making institution, budget approvals, the adoption of budgets and its role in ensuring accountability for effective implementation as well as representation of the people.¹⁰

i. Parliament as a law-making institution

To ensure the effectiveness of the SDGs framework at a national level, parliamentarians should support bills that are environmentally friendly, reduce poverty, and promote equality. Parliamentarians should also identify and review related legislation to ensure the smooth implementation of SDGs policies. Furthermore, parliamentarians should urge the government to introduce new legislation that strengthens the practice of human rights. Moreover,

⁸ Parliaments & SDGs, United Nation Development Programme, June 2016, https://agora-parl.org/sites/default/files/june_2016_fast_facts_-_sdgs_and_parliaments.pdf, (1 July 2019).

⁹ Target 16.6 and 16.7 of SDGs 16.

¹⁰ Para 45, General Assembly Resolution (A/RES/70/1) - Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, 25 September 2015.

parliamentarians could introduce a private members bill to support the implementation of SDGs.¹¹

ii. Budget approvals

Parliament have the capacity and influence to ensure that sufficient financial resources are allocated to the achievement of the 2030 Agenda through annual parliamentary reviews of proposed government expenditures.¹² Parliament can also ensure that sustainable development priorities are reflected in national and local budgets.¹³ Having said that, parliamentary oversight of budget expenditure is equally crucial, since Parliament can analyse the effectiveness of government expenditure on achieving SDGs through various platform such as debate, question in parliament as well as through select committee.¹⁴

iii. Oversight function to check and balance on the action of government

Parliament must verify that the implementation of SDGs is on track and can be validated. Various oversight mechanisms available in Parliament to be used in identifying obstacles and assessing progress of the SDGs implementation such as Question Time, written questions to the government, as well as parliamentary committee hearings. Parliamentary committees should have the power to call on government officials to provide information on the impact of government policies and programmes. Committees should also be able to call public

¹¹ A Parliamentary Handbook, Parliament's Role In Implementing The Sustainable Development Goals, by Global Organization of Parliamentarians Against Corruption (GOPAC), United Nation Development Programme, and Islamic Development Bank (IDB), <https://www.undp.org/content/dam/undp/library/Democratic%20Governance/Parliamentary%20Development/parliaments%20role%20in%20implementing%20the%20SDGs.pdf>, (1 July 2019).

¹² Parliaments & SDGs, United Nation Development Programme, June 2016, https://agora-parl.org/sites/default/files/june_2016._fast_facts_-_sdgs_and_parliaments.pdf, (1 July 2019).

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Parliaments and the Sustainable Development Goals, A self-assessment toolkit, <http://archive.ipu.org/pdf/publications/sdg-toolkit-e.pdf> (1 July 2019).

hearings to acquire the opinion of its peoples on the implementation of SDGs. The information gathered can then be fed back into government planning and delivery mechanisms through a national SDG working group or secretariat in which parliamentarians can participate in.¹⁵

iv. Representation

Both citizens and stakeholders should be involved in setting policies and priorities in order to establish a meaningful national ownership of SDGs. As representatives of the people, parliamentarians shoulder the responsibility of reaching out to their constituents throughout their term of office. Through consultation with the people, parliamentarians are able to identify gaps and shortcomings in the implementation of SDGs that may not have transpired in government reports or statistics.¹⁶ Furthermore, Parliamentarians need to be aware of their constituents' bigger concerns by consulting with civil society organizations, academic institutions, private sectors and other bodies to help them identify those concerns.¹⁷

Moreover, parliamentarians should also hold hearings regularly and request plenary reports. By doing so, parliamentarians can bring the SDGs to the attention of the public and media, therefore encouraging accountability at all levels. Due to their accessibility to the people, parliamentarians can serve as advocates and front liner for the SDGs. Parliament can also ensure that the process of developing a national development plan is developed by an inclusive and effective participation by the peoples.¹⁸

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Parliaments and the Sustainable Development Goals, A self-assessment toolkit, <http://archive.ipu.org/pdf/publications/sdg-toolkit-e.pdf> (1 July 2019).

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Parliaments & SDGs, United Nation Development Programme, June 2016, https://agora-parl.org/sites/default/files/june_2016._fast_facts_-_sdgs_and_parliaments.pdf, (1 July 2019).

The Malaysia Parliamentary Reform

A Parliament is a "living" institution that needs improvement over time. Hence, the effort to strengthen the Malaysian Parliament to become an effective and sustainable legislative institution through reformation has long been proposed from the government, the opposition or non-governmental organizations. Historically, the Honourable Lim Kit Siang has proposed for a Parliamentary Reform Conference to be held by the House of Representatives, which aimed to improve the practices of Parliament and for it to be independent from the control of the Executive. This proposal was debated but unfortunately, was not accepted by the members.¹⁹

On the 19th of May 2015, a Parliamentary Transformation Plan was announced by the Speaker of the House of Representatives. The idea of transforming the Parliament was carried out in two phases which covered four key areas, which are as follows:

- 1) To introduce Ministers' Question Time (MQT),

The Minister's Question Time was scheduled for 30 minutes (10.00am to 10.30pm) on Tuesdays and Thursdays to provide a medium for MPs to ask questions on the latest issues. It was officially launched on the 18th of October 2016. The main purpose of the MQT was to provide space for MPs to raise questions concerning current, public interest and relevant issues during a Parliament sitting under the jurisdiction of the Minister.

¹⁹ Penyata Rasmi Parlimen Dewan Rakyat, Parlimen ke-5, Penggal Kedua dated on 17 June 1980.

- 2) To introduce a Special Chamber,

The second proposal was the creation of a Special Chamber for matters under Standing Order 17 (postponement speech) and Standing Order 18 (certain matters concerning public interest in the urgency of being expedited). The Special Chambers operated officially on the 16th of May 2016. There were nine proposed amendments to the rules of the meeting, namely Standing Orders 13, 14, 16, 17, 18, 22, 24, new Standing Orders 14A and new Standing Orders 24A. The amendment on the Standing Orders of the House of Representatives are required to allow the Special Chamber and Ministerial Question Time to work legally under the provisions of the law.

- 3) To establish a Parliamentary Select Committee; and

The transformation agenda proposed to be set up are nine (9) New Select Committees as follows: 1) The Committee of Transportation And Cities; 2) The Committee of Foreign Affairs; 3) The Committee of Education; 4) The Committee of Food And Health; 5) The Committee of Energy, Environment And Water; 6) The Committee of Rural Wellbeing; 7) The Committee of Economics; 8) The Committee of Women Affairs; and 9) The Committee of Integrity. However, the proposals to set up Select Committees were temporarily suspended to allow detailed studies and appropriate systems to be adopted in Malaysia.²⁰

²⁰ Penyata Jawatankuasa Peraturan-Peraturan Mesyuarat Majlis Mesyuarat Dewan Rakyat, DR.2, 2016, p 3-4.

- 4) To reinstate the Parliamentary Service Act (PSA).²¹

The second phase, on the other hand, involved the reinstatement of the new PSA.²² The Act was established by virtue of the Federal Constitution. It is an Act that provides for the Parliament of Malaysia to conduct its own administration which includes staffing and financing. However, the PSA had been repealed on the 21st of October 1992.

Therefore, the new PSA will separate Malaysian Parliamentary staff from the Public Service Commission. The Malaysian Parliament will be autonomous and independent from the Executive, as practiced in other Commonwealth countries. This is in line with the doctrine of the separation of powers and parliament sovereignty. However, the reinstatement of the Parliamentary Service Act was postponed until the 14th General Election, which was held in May 2018.

Post 14th General Election

In 2018, for the first time in history, the Pakatan Harapan (PH) coalition crossed the minimum threshold of 112 seats in Parliament and formed Malaysia's new government after the 14th General Election (GE14). It was a pivotal turning point that witnessed a progressive parliamentary reform in the country. The parliamentary reform agenda is timely in building a sustainable institution as a primary legislative body of the country. In line with the Pakatan Harapan manifesto, which was to restore the dignity of the Parliament (Promise 16), initiatives and mechanisms need to be established to ensure that the reform agenda can be

²¹ Penyata Jawatankuasa Peraturan-Peraturan Mesyuarat Majlis Mesyuarat Dewan Rakyat, DR.2, 2016.

²² Penyata Jawatankuasa Dewan, Majlis Mesyuarat Dewan Rakyat, DR.14, 2016.

implemented comprehensively and effectively.²³ Several improvement took place in parliamentary reform among others are establishment of Special Select Committees, Appointment of Opposition MP as Chairman for Public Account Committee (PAC) and towards establishment of All Party Parliamentary Groups (APPG).

a) Special Select Committees

In August 2018, the House Committee approved six (6) Special Select Committees as a starting point towards a better function of Parliament.²⁴ The select committees play an important role in monitoring and scrutinizing the government. The new special select committees are:

- i. Special Select Committee for Consideration of Bills;
- ii. Special Select Committee on Budget;
- iii. Special Select Committee on Rights and Gender Equality;
- iv. Special Select Committee on Major Public Appointments Committee;
- v. Special Select Committee on Defence and Home Affairs Committee; and
- vi. Special Select Committee on Federal State Relations Committee.

b) Appointment of Opposition MP as Chairman for Public Account Committee (PAC).

Appointment of Opposition MPs as Chairman of PAC is an important move to ensure transparency and in line with the doctrine of parliamentary sovereignty. However, such recognition must be made through the amendment in the Standing Order.

²³ Buku Harapan, Rebuild The Nation Fulfil The Hope, http://kempen.s3.amazonaws.com/manifesto/Manifesto_text/Manifesto_PH_EN.pdf, p 44.

²⁴ Penyata Jawatankuasa Dewan, Majlis Mesyuarat Dewan Rakyat, DR. 6, 2018.

c) All Party Parliamentary Groups

MPs elected every five years represent the interests of the people in their constituencies. In line with the spirit of SDGs, non-governmental organizations and civil society also have roles and responsibilities to assist parliamentarians. Hence, the establishment of an All Political Parties Parliamentary Group (APPG) is important to encourage interaction between members of Parliament with individuals and non-governmental organizations for brainstorming sessions and to assist parliamentarians carrying out their duties as elected representatives and execute their functions effectively through law-making, budgeting, and oversight functions.

Apart from that, it will improve public understanding, appreciation and participation in parliamentary-related matters. Thus, this further elevates its function as a public institution. On the 1st of July 2019, the Speaker of the House of Representatives announced that the Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (KITA-UKM) will play a supportive role in the secretariat of the All Party Parliamentary group (APPG) on SDGs, to provide monitoring and oversight of the localisation of SDGs.²⁵

The Malaysian Parliamentary Reform: The Way Forward

The Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (CPA), the World Bank Institute and the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) can be used as a benchmark to assess the effectiveness of the Malaysian Parliament (Shad Saleem Faruqi, 2015). As such, there are several recommendations that the Parliamentary reform can consider to further empower people in accordance with SDGs and its targets:

²⁵ Secretariat of the All Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on SDGs, <http://www.ukm.my/kita/news/secretariat-of-the-all-party-parliamentary-group-appg-on-sdgs-1-july-2019/> (8 July 2019).

1. An Independent Select Committee.

A Select Committee can play a check and balance role on the actions of the Executives. Faruqi proposed that all committees should be bipartisan and should allocate each MP to at least one committee.²⁶ The oversight function of Parliament can be implemented by examining and improving government policies, considering a bill before being tabled in the House and ensuring appropriate expenditure by the government.

2. Re-introduce of the Parliamentary Service Act.

The abolition of the Parliamentary Service Act 1963 in 1992 was one of the manifestations of Parliament losing its independence and autonomy. Therefore, a re-introduction of the Parliamentary Service Act allows Parliament to manage and administer its institution without interference from the Executive. It is in accordance with the recommendation of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association Recommended Benchmark and the Australian Parliamentary Service Act 1999, which specifically position parliamentary staff as separate from executive staff.

3. To Recognize and Empower the Role of the Opposition

The role of the opposition must be recognized by the government as an entity in a parliamentary democracy. The right to hear their voice and recognize their position are two key attributes of a parliamentary government (Hickling, 1997). Since the opposition plays an

²⁶ Shad Saleem Faruqi, Proposals for parliamentary reforms, <https://www.thestar.com.my/opinion/columnists/reflecting-on-the-law/2018/06/21/proposals-for-parliamentary-reforms-post-ge14-the-institutional-efficacy-of-our-elected-legislature/> (Accessed on 2 July 2019).

important oversight function and provides alternative policies to the government, the status of the Opposition Leader should be equal to the Ministers and they should also receive the same status as Members of Parliament. In addition, the Opposition Leader should be provided with equal support and facilities, such as support staff. More importantly, opposition MPs should be given access to government information and recognize their right to seek information (Deborah Loh, 2011). This practice enables them to perform their duties effectively, which in turn, assists the government to be more transparent, responsible and ultimately support the implementation of SDGs.

4. The Amendment of Standing Orders

Amendments to the Standing Orders of both houses, the House of Representatives and the House of Senate, should be made by the Standing Orders Committee, to complement parliamentary reform. The amendment of standing orders should take into account a number of items including institutionalizing a special select committee, the appointment of an opposition leader as Chairman of the Public Accounts Committee (PAC). Parliament may form a sub-committee to coordinate and conduct a comprehensive study on these amendments by involving academics and experts.

5. To Establish a Parliamentary Research Institution of Malaysia

One of the most important aspects of the Parliamentary reform is to establish a Parliamentary Research Institute of Malaysia. Their role could be to produce impartial, independent and quality parliamentary research to assist the members of Parliament to perform their duties in Parliament efficiently. Currently, the Malaysian Parliament has 15 researchers, since its

inception in 2005. With a number of modifications to suit local requirements, several models of parliamentary research institutions can be adopted, such as the Congressional Research Services (CRS) in the United States, National Assembly Research Service (NARS) in South Korea and the Parliamentary Research services in the House of Commons in the United Kingdom. These parliamentary research institutions can be a benchmark to improve research services in parliament, such as increasing the number of researchers, upgrading facilities and providing adequate funds to boost research in Parliament.

Conclusion

In conclusion, a comprehensive parliamentary reform and an inclusive parliament are vital for the successful implementation of SDGs, which also supports the realisation of the 2030 Agenda's mission to leave no one behind. It is important to ensure that Parliament plays its role of domesticating the SDGs framework into workable national policies, monitoring its implementation, as well as ensuring the government is accountable to the people for national progress on the SDGs. Therefore, both Parliament and parliamentarians should perform their duties to ensure that all SDGs and its targets can be implemented successfully at domestic level.

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