Policy & Profit

AMIR ISYAM ABDUL RAHIM
IM Possible Solutions
Sdn Bhd managing director
and Tunku scholar

Future-proofing democracy beyond Undi18

THE recent long celebration of Merdeka and Hari Malaysia inspired an epiphany for me to cast a keener eye on the vulnerabilities that lie ahead for our nation.

The fresh protests in Nepal, Indonesia, and Bangladesh serve as stark reminders of what happens when a democracy fails to balance the needs and aspirations of its different generations.

We are not immune. The forces driving those unrests are at play here too – and we must act with foresight to future-proof our own democratic system.

Intergenerational divide in politics

Our beloved Malaysia, like many nations globally, is ageing.

Increased life expectancy is a triumph of public health and economic progress, but it brings with it a shifting political landscape.

We are seeing the emergence of what some call a "gerontocracy", where an increasing proportion of power resides with older generations, often those with higher voter turnout.

This isn't about favouring any single generation but recognising demographic reality.

When much of the electorate comprises older citizens, policies tend to reflect their immediate priorities: pensions, healthcare, and social welfare.

While crucial, this risk sidelining issues vital to younger Malaysians like climate action, quality education, digital economy opportunities, and affordable housing, fuelling disenfranchisement and apathy.

Intergenerational equity isn't merely a philosophical discussion – it's a pragmatic necessity for national stability.

Our youth, who will inherit the consequences of today's decisions, must not just be heard but also be actively involved in policy.

Ignoring this widens the gap between the governed and the governing, breeding unrest and stunting our long-term potential.

Digital flood: AI, deepfakes, and the erosion of trust

Just as our population is changing, so is our information ecosystem.

The rapid advancement of artificial intelligence (AI), particularly in generative capabilities and deepfakes, presents an unprecedented challenge to election integrity and public trust. We've already seen glimpses of this.

From AI-generated voice clones used in robocalls abroad, the resurrection of the dead to campaign, to fabricated images and videos designed to smear reputations, the tools for creating convincing but false political content are becoming more accessible.

In Malaysia, we are already seeing deepfake extortion targeting politicians and the use of AI to promote fraudulent investment schemes using the likeness of our prime minister.

These aren't just minor annoyances but direct attacks on the fabric of truth and trust essential for a functioning democracy.

The danger extends beyond fakery.

AI-powered microtargeting can mine personal data to deliver hyper-personalised and emotionally manipulative messages, designed to influence voter behaviour rather than inform it.

This creates echo chambers, deepens polarisation, and erodes rational discourse.

Our citizens, civil servants, and leaders must learn to navigate this "digital flood", where fact and fiction blurs.

Unfinished agenda: Beyond today's reforms

To be fair, Malaysia is not standing still.

The Undi18 constitutional amendment has already empowered youth to vote from the age of 18.

The Madani government has proposed separating the roles of the attorney-general and public prosecutor, strengthening Parliament with the Parliamentary Services Act 2025, and considering a 10-year limit on the prime minister's term.

These are only the beginning – more is needed.

As we prepare for the next cycle of general elections, starting with the Sabah state elections, a more comprehensive and forward-looking approach is needed.

Roadmap for a resilient democracy

We must take decisive action to address these dual challenges head-on.

To address intergenerational equity:

> Candidate diversity: Set age and gender quotas for candidate nominations to ensure parties field younger individuals and women with fresh perspectives.

> Leadership renewal: Impose two-term limits for Members of Parliament (MPs) in a single seat and four-term limits for ministers/deputies, alongside prime ministerial limits, to encourage new leadership.

> Fitness for office: Require mandatory health screenings for all candidates to assure the public of their capacity to serve.

> Performance accountability: Tie MPs' attendance, debate quality, and contributions to transparent performance metrics.

This can, in turn, be tied to their pensions and benefits, for example, no salary and pension if you fail to attend Parliament.

> Party best practices: The Registrar of Societies and the Election Commission should set guidelines for political parties.

This can include the creation of elder/veteran wings to give senior leaders a respected advisory and mentoring role, proposals for movement of senior leaders to contest in tougher seats, etc.

To address the rise of AI in elections:

> AI literacy: Launch nationwide campaigns and embed AI awareness in the education system to help citizens recognise deepfakes and manipulated content.

> Content transparency: Enforce laws requiring all AI-generated or altered political content to be clearly labelled.

Voters have a right to know if what they are seeing or hearing is authentic.

> Legal safeguards: Establish targeted prohibitions – modelled on Singapore's Elections (Integrity of Online Advertising) Act – for example, banning malicious deepfakes and deceptive content during election periods.

> Big Tech accountability: Collaborate internationally to pressure tech giants to regulate platforms and curb manipulation, recognising that risks can also stem from the platforms themselves.

Future-proofing Malaysia's democracy is not a partisan issue, but a national imperative.

An ageing electorate and a flood of digital disinformation won't wait for politics to catch up.

We need a system that is resilient, inclusive, and adaptable – one where the voices of all generations are heard, free of manipulation.

Only then can Malaysia stay a beacon of stability and progress in an uncertain future.

■ Malaysia faces a growing electoral divide between older and younger generations

■ AI and deepfakes threaten election integrity and public trust

■ Safeguarding democracy means tackling both generational imbalance and digital manipulation