



ARTICLES

Safeguarding Democratic Discourse in Malaysia

July 10, 2026

Introduction: Distinguishing Criticism from Subversion



reflection: what does it actually mean to undermine democracy? Is the articulation of inconvenient facts or uncomfortable analysis a threat to democratic institutions, or is it part of democracy itself?

Democracy depends not only on elections and institutions but also on the ability of citizens, scholars, and commentators to speak openly about political realities. In any functioning democracy, the discussion of policy failures or political tensions is not subversion, but it is accountability. Democratic systems are strengthened when uncomfortable truths are acknowledged and debated. Suppressing or discouraging such discussions risks confusing criticism with disloyalty. Democracies do not collapse because people disagree with the government of the day; they collapse when public trust erodes to the point where institutions lose legitimacy. If critique is mischaracterised as destabilisation, the space for democratic discourse narrows. But if we take a step back, it becomes clear that the more serious threats to democracy lie elsewhere and are often far less visible than public disagreement. Ensuring that criticism is not mistaken for subversion is central to DASAR 3.0's commitment to inclusive governance and democratic resilience.

Structural Risks to Democratic Trust

If we are serious about identifying what undermines democracy, we should look at factors that corrode trust in institutions rather than those that merely generate political discomfort. Persistent corruption, inefficient governance, and the failure to deliver public goods weaken citizens' confidence in the political system.

Corruption can significantly influence public perceptions of governance and accountability. When governance is perceived as transactional, rules appear negotiable and accountability becomes selective. Over time, this creates a form of democratic fatigue whereby citizens may continue to participate formally in elections, but with diminishing confidence in eventual meaningful change. Malaysia's own experience illustrates this clearly. The 1MDB scandal, and the subsequent conviction of former Prime Minister Najib Razak, played a significant role in eroding public trust and contributed to the electoral defeat of Barisan Nasional in the 2018 general election (Lemiere, 2018). The historic change in government demonstrated how large-scale corruption, when perceived as systemic rather than incidental, can reshape electoral behaviour and fundamentally alter political outcomes.

Inefficiency compounds this problem. Democracies are not judged solely by their procedural correctness but by their ability to govern. When governments struggle to



management contributed to declining political support for the administration of Muhyiddin Yassin (Panneerselvam & Tayeb, 2023). Currently we are witnessing a global energy crisis. The success of the Madani government to steer the country through stormy seas can directly shape political legitimacy independent of electoral procedures.

Concerns have arisen regarding perceptions of selective enforcement. Democracy depends not only on laws, but on the belief that those laws are applied consistently. When legal instruments are seen as unevenly deployed, especially in anti-corruption efforts, the issue is no longer individual cases but systemic credibility. The danger lies in the suspicion that the rules themselves are contingent. Malaysia is, arguably, facing this dilemma. The unity government led by Anwar Ibrahim, which includes long-time rivals from Barisan Nasional, has had to navigate tensions between reform commitments and coalition realities. Controversies involving figures linked to coalition partners, and even those within and adjacent to Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR) itself, have generated public debate over whether enforcement is even-handed (Arshali & Wan Ahmad Zakry, 2026). When enforcement appears constrained by political considerations, it risks reinforcing the perception that accountability is selective.

Societal fragmentation adds another layer. Democracy requires competition, but it also requires a baseline agreement that competition occurs within shared rules. While differences of opinion are natural and essential to democratic life, they are distinct from the deliberate cultivation of division. Historically, divide-and-rule strategies have been used to pit communities against one another, entrenching political dominance and prolonging certain views and tendencies. When political contestation becomes framed as existential, where losing power is equated with losing protection or identity, democratic institutions are placed under strain.

Malaysia has periodically seen this dynamic in the use of identity-based narratives, particularly around the protection of Malay and Bumiputera rights. While such concerns are rooted in historical and constitutional realities, their framing as urgent or under threat heighten perceptions that political change carries existential risks. When voters are encouraged to see elections not as routine democratic contests but as moments of civilisational defence, political compromise becomes more difficult, and this fragility is fertile ground for the rise of populist leaders and movements.



and political continuity appeared closely linked. Stability, in this context, was associated with upward mobility and national progress. As a result, disruptions to political order may be viewed with greater caution.

Millennials, however, were shaped by rupture. The *Reformasi* movement, the rise of civil society, and the expansion of alternative media introduced a different political vocabulary that centred on accountability and transparency. Democracy, for this cohort, is not only about stability but about whether institutions function fairly and responsively.

Generation Z occupies an even more complex position. Their political consciousness developed during a period marked by both democratic breakthrough and instability: the 2018 electoral transition, subsequent government collapses, and the COVID-19 crisis. Unlike their elders, this cohort has seen, in a matter of a few years, democratic change and its fragility. The result is not a linear progression toward liberal democratic ideals as some would have hoped, but a layered set of expectations. Younger Malaysians may value accountability, but they also demand competence. They have witnessed both reformist rhetoric and governance inconsistency, and this produces a more cautious form of democratic engagement.

These differences do not signal democratic decline nor a challenge to our institutions. They reflect the normal evolution of political expectations in a society undergoing rapid change. Democracy does not require agreements; it only requires that these differing expectations coexist within a shared institutional framework. It is within this context that concerns about political fragmentation and differences of opinion in Malaysia must be understood.

Fragmentation and Democratic Contestation

Malaysia's contemporary politics is often described as fragmented with coalition tensions, internal party disputes, and shifting alliances. Some would even argue that this fragmentation erodes trust. Yet fragmentation is not necessarily a sign of democratic breakdown.

Within PKR, the 2025 internal contests have exposed deeper questions about leadership succession and reform priorities as a governing actor (Welsh, 2025). These tensions are often framed as destabilising, but they also reflect a party negotiating its role within power. The contest between competing factions is not simply personal but it reflects broader debates



internal reckoning over the balance between holding office and maintaining political credibility following the party's wipe-out in the 2025 Sabah general election (Free Malaysia Today, 2025). The question of whether party leaders should retain positions in government is, at its core, a debate about accountability and representation. Even if the outcome functions partly as a political signal rather than a substantive structural shift, the willingness to subject such decisions to internal contestation remains significant.

Political theorists have long recognised that democracy is inherently messy. James Madison, known as the Father of the American Constitution, famously observed that "if men were angels, no government would be necessary." The purpose of democratic institutions is not to eliminate conflict, but to manage it. Seen this way, factionalism is not inherently dangerous. It becomes problematic only when institutions are too weak to channel it, or when conflict spills beyond procedural boundaries. Otherwise, it serves a democratic function to prevent the concentration of power and to ensure that leadership remains contested.

To fully understand this fragmentation, it is necessary to recognise that Malaysia is undergoing a structural shift in how political power is organised. The era of a single dominant coalition, one that Gen-X is used to, entering elections with pre-determined alliances has given way to a more fluid, post-election bargaining environment. Since 2018, and particularly after the hung parliament of 2022, political actors operate under conditions of uncertainty. Parties are no longer able to rely on fixed alignments. As a result, strategic ambiguity has become widespread. Not only PKR and DAP, but also Umno, PAS, MCA, MIC, and smaller parties increasingly keep their options open. Umno's continued participation in the unity government exists alongside ongoing speculation about future alignments. PAS, while consolidating its position within Perikatan Nasional, continues to emphasise broader themes such as Malay-Muslim unity that could enable future coalition-building with Umno (Focus Malaysia, 2026). Smaller parties such as MCA and MIC have adopted cautious strategies by maintaining existing alignments while signalling flexibility.

This behaviour can appear opportunistic; but it is also structural. In a fragmented system where no coalition can guarantee victory, parties must preserve bargaining power. The logic of politics shifts from pre-election certainty to post-election negotiation. Such a system is inherently more fluid and at times more unstable. But it also diffuses power. Governance now requires negotiation, compromise, and justification, all hallmarks of a strong democratic system. The question is not whether fragmentation exists, but whether institutions are strong enough to manage it.



Policy Pathways: Strengthening Trust in a Competitive Democracy

If the real risks to Malaysia's democracy lie in declining trust, selective enforcement, and weak institutional credibility, then the policy response must focus on reinforcing the foundations of democratic confidence rather than constraining public debate. Several priorities thus emerge.

First, clarify the boundaries of laws related to democratic security. Provisions such as Section 124B should be applied and publicly understood in a way that clearly distinguishes between legitimate democratic participation and genuinely destabilising activity. This requires greater transparency in enforcement and, where necessary, clearer prosecutorial guidelines to avoid the perception that critical commentary falls within the scope of "undermining democracy." Legal ambiguity in this area risks chilling legitimate discourse and, paradoxically, weakening democratic legitimacy.

Second, accelerate institutional reforms that signal equal application of the law. Long-discussed reforms such as the separation of the Attorney-General and Public Prosecutor roles, strengthening parliamentary oversight mechanisms, and enhancing the independence of anti-corruption bodies are not merely technical adjustments. They are visible signals that institutions are designed to operate impartially. In a fragmented political environment, such signals are essential to sustaining public confidence across partisan divides.

Third, improve policy delivery and administrative responsiveness. Democratic legitimacy is closely tied to performance. Governments that can demonstrate competence in managing economic pressures, delivering public services, and responding to crises are more likely to retain citizen trust. This suggests a need to prioritise bureaucratic efficiency and communicate policy outcomes more clearly to the public.

Fourth, institutionalise coalition governance practices. As Malaysia moves into a post-election bargaining era, coalition politics requires clearer norms. Mechanisms such as formal coalition agreements, transparent decision-making processes, and structured conflict-resolution channels within governing alliances can help reduce uncertainty and prevent internal disputes from spilling into public crises. The challenges of operating without such institutionalised practices are already visible. Within Perikatan Nasional, for example, the



Fifth, invest in civic and democratic literacy across generations. Given the differing expectations among Gen-X, Millennials, and Gen-Z (and Generation Alpha who will be voting in 3-4 years), there is a need for sustained public engagement on what democracy entails. This includes fostering understanding that disagreement is a normal feature of democratic life, while reinforcing the importance of shared rules and institutional trust. Such efforts can help bridge generational perceptions and reduce the risk of polarisation.

Malaysia's democracy is still evolving. Moving forward, democracy in the country should not be defined by the absence of criticism or disagreement. It must be defined by the ability of institutions to manage contestation while maintaining legitimacy and trust. A mature democracy should be able to tolerate scrutiny, even uncomfortable ones. In fact, it depends on it. Public debate is not the enemy of democracy. It is one of its most essential safeguards.

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Author
Associate Professor Dr Syaza Shukri

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