

Conceptualising the People's Parliament Approach in the Parliament of Malaysia

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Abstract

This study explores the Parliament of Malaysia's transition towards a more public-friendly institution, part of a global trend towards transparent and people-centric parliamentary processes. Utilising 16 articles from the Inter-parliamentary Union's Public Engagement Hub and additional literature, the research compares Malaysia's initiatives with those of the U.K., Australia, and New Zealand. The analysis focuses on public engagement strategies such as public broadcasting of sessions, committee hearings, public visits, research services, and the potential for a parliamentary budget office and petition systems. Findings indicate Malaysia's progress in some areas, like public broadcasting and committee hearings, while identifying gaps in others, like interactive visitor experiences and comprehensive digital engagement. The study highlights the challenge of balancing security with accessibility, especially under legal frameworks like the Protected Areas and Protected Places Act 1959 (Act 298). Recommendations include enhancing the Parliament's virtual tour and establishing a more engaging visitor centre. The study concludes that while Malaysia has made commendable strides in public engagement, there are opportunities for improvement, particularly in areas requiring substantial legal and structural changes. This study contributes to understanding the dynamics of public engagement in parliamentary processes, underscoring the significance of a People's Parliament spirit in democratic governance.

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Introduction

The Parliament of Malaysia is the nation’s highest legislative body in a constitutional monarch democratic system, where it enacts, amends, and approves federal laws, examines government policies and approves government spending. However, this institution was frequently perceived as ‘exclusive’ in Malaysia due to its closed-door approach during the past government era.¹ Starting from the 15th Parliament,² the Parliament of Malaysia has embarked on a commendable mission to foster a stronger bond between the institution and the citizens it represents. This endeavour resonates well with the mantra ‘*Merakyatkan Parlimen*’ or, in English, ‘People’s Parliament’, a sentiment passionately echoed by the management of the Parliament of Malaysia, aimed at making the Parliament more people-centric. Traditionally, governmental institutions, including the Parliament, have been bound by stringent regulatory frameworks such as the Protected Areas and Protected Places Act 1959 (Act 298), which tended to create a veil of exclusivity around these vital institutions. While crucial for maintaining security and order, this legal framework often contributed to a perceived distance between the Parliament and the people it serves.

The concept of a people-centric approach in parliamentary practices has garnered significant attention in recent years, emphasising the importance of fostering a closer relationship between legislative bodies and the citizens they represent.^{3,4,5,6,7,8} As democratic institutions

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- 1 Nazaruddin, M. I., & Yusoff, M. A. (2023). ‘Parliamentary Institutional Reforms in Malaysia: The Case of the Pakatan Harapan Era, 2018-2020’, *Kajian Malaysia*, 41(2), 21-41.
 - 2 Note: The 15th Parliament sitting commenced with the *Dewan Rakyat* convening for a two-day sitting on 19 and 20, followed by *Dewan Negara* on 21 December 2023.
 - 3 Narud, H. M., & Valen, H. (2008). ‘The Norwegian Storting: “People’s Parliament” or Coop for “Political Broilers”?’’, *World Political Science*, 4(2).
 - 4 Callenbach, E., Phillips, M., & Sutherland, K. (2008). *A People’s Parliament/A Citizen Legislature*. Exeter: Imprint Academic.
 - 5 Kimari, W., & Rasmussen, J. (2010). ‘“Setting the agenda for our leaders from under a tree”: The People’s Parliament in Nairobi’, *Nokoko*, 1, 131-159.
 - 6 Mocek, O. (2012). ‘Europe’s Parliament: People, Places, Politics’, *Czech Journal of Political Science*, 4, 388-391.
 - 7 Walker, A. (2012). ‘A people’s parliament?’, *Parliamentary Affairs*, 65(1), 270-280.
 - 8 Russell, M. (2021). ‘Brexit and parliament: The anatomy of a perfect storm’, *Parliamentary Affairs*, 74(2), 443-463.

worldwide strive for greater transparency and public engagement, the Parliament of Malaysia stands as a noteworthy case for examination. The nation's unique political landscape, coupled with its rich cultural fabric of society, offers a distinct backdrop against which its parliamentary practices can be evaluated. This study explores evolution, challenges, and successes of Malaysia's people-centric parliamentary initiatives' through a comprehensive analysis of existing literature.

Purpose of the review

Understanding the dynamics between parliamentary institutions and the public is crucial in evaluating the effectiveness of a people-centric approach. This review is dedicated to:

- i. assessing the strategies and measures undertaken by the Parliament of Malaysia to transition towards becoming a more public-friendly institution;
- ii. identifying and discussing challenges encountered by the Parliament of Malaysia in the people-oriented transformation; and
- iii. evaluating the potential implications of a people-oriented parliamentary approach for the citizens of Malaysia, considering how such an approach can influence civic participation, trust in governance, and the democratic process.

This review's objective was achieved by analysing different research findings related to parliamentary public engagement. The insights from the literature were then organised based on specific themes to provide a structured analysis. Sixteen (16) articles related to the global people-centric approach of parliaments worldwide, published between 2022 and 2023 and retrieved from the Inter-parliamentary Union's Public Engagement Hub,⁹ were meticulously assessed to form the basis of this review. Additionally, literature obtained from the databases subscribed by the Parliament of Malaysia was also subjected to content analysis.

⁹ Inter-Parliamentary Union. See Inter-Parliamentary Union, 'Public Engagement Hub' <https://www.ipu.org/innovation-hub/public-engagement-hub> accessed 3 November 2023.

Evidence of the exclusivity of the Parliament of Malaysia

In a recent session of the House of Representatives (*Dewan Rakyat*), Honourable Sim Tze Tzin, Member of Parliament for Bayan Baru, voiced concerns over the accessibility challenges faced by government officers at the Parliament of Malaysia. He highlighted the prolonged wait times and the burdensome security checks that these officers, some holding high ranks, must endure, especially during significant events like the tabling of Budget 2023.

... We, the Members of Parliament, have a proposal brought forward by the Honourable Minister of Home Affairs to ensure a smooth passage for the members of this House. However, for the officers outside (of the Parliament of Malaysia), especially this morning, every day, including today, tomorrow, and Friday (for Budget 2023 tabling); many government officers will enter the House to assist the (respective) Ministers in answering questions. I observed a very long queue. Some officers told me they had to wait at least 40 minutes. A 30-minute wait used to be usual, but now half an hour just to reach the security post (at the Parliament of Malaysia entrance) to enter the premise is quite long. I noticed that this process, where officers have to queue for such extended periods, results in a significant loss of productive hours. Each of these officers, holding ranks such as director-general and secretary-general, however, unfortunately, waste their time in these queues. I kindly request that you (the Speaker of Dewan Rakyat) instruct the Chief Administrator (of the Parliament of Malaysia) and Chief Security Officer (of the Parliament of Malaysia) to relax the process (of entering).¹⁰

However, the Speaker of *Dewan Rakyat*, Honourable Tan Sri Dato' Johari bin Abdul, responded:

... The issue raised by the Honourable Member (Honourable Sim Tze Tzin, Member of Parliament for Bayan Baru) will be looked into. However, I advise that Standing Order 1(e)¹¹ (of the Dewan Rakyat) should only be implied to the Members of Parliament. Nevertheless, I advise government officers to come early. Arrive early. They know their duties— the Honourable Member from Bayan Baru might arrive at 9:25 in the morning; hence I suggest officers come at 8:15 in the

10 Parliament of Malaysia, *Hansard of Dewan Rakyat*, 22 February 2023, p. 24.

11 Parliament of Malaysia, *Standing Orders of Dewan Rakyat*, para. 1(e).

morning. If they come at 8:15, there will not be any congestion. So, if that can be resolved, especially for the officers, please come early.

The second problem is that sometimes a car might have four people. So, (sometimes the) security requests clearance (was only being pre-applied) for one person. Therefore, they have to check (all the people in the car) because this is also about our safety. Imagine if— God forbid, there is someone with ill intentions, and we could all be at risk in this House. I do not want to take that risk, and I will ensure that the safety of the Honourable Members is of the utmost importance and prioritised by me.¹²

This exchange in the *Dewan Rakyat* brings to the forefront the underlying issue of the Parliament's exclusivity. While it stands as a symbol of democracy, the stringent security measures and limited accessibility suggest otherwise. The fact that even government officers, fundamental to the nation's administration, face such hurdles is a testament to the restrictive nature of the institution. It beckons a reflection on the balance between security and openness, emphasising the need for democratic institutions to be both secure and welcoming.

Protected areas and Protected Places Act 1959 (Act 298)

The Protected Areas and Protected Places Act 1959 (Act 298) is a Malaysian gazetted act enacted to safeguard areas and places designated as crucial for national security. Under this Act 298, the government is authorised to declare any area or place as "protected" if it is deemed necessary for the nation's security. Such designations come with stringent restrictions on access, photography, and other activities, which can only be undertaken with proper authorisation. The enforcement of these restrictions falls to the police and military, who are tasked with preventing any security breaches within these zones. Violations of Act 298 carry serious consequences, including fines and imprisonment, emphasising the government's commitment to maintaining the integrity and security of these protected areas and places. Act 298 acts as a critical component of Malaysia's legal framework to control access to sensitive locations, including military installations and government buildings, ensuring they are shielded from actions that could compromise national security.

Unintentionally, Act 298 shapes the image of the Parliament of Malaysia's as an exclusive institution. It imposes a legal framework that

12 Parliament of Malaysia, *Hansard of Dewan Rakyat*, 22 February 2023, pp. 24-25.

necessitates stringent security protocols by designating the parliamentary complex as a protected area. While essential for safeguarding the nation's legislative core, these protocols also create an aura of inaccessibility to the general public. The Act's provisions for security checks and restricted entry have a dual effect. On the one hand, they serve the critical function of ensuring the safety of the Members of Parliament and the integrity of the parliamentary proceedings. However, on the other hand, they inadvertently contribute to a perception of the Parliament of Malaysia as a distant, fortress-like entity, separated from the day-to-day lives of the citizens it represents. The necessity of balancing security with public accessibility becomes a pressing concern in this context. While Act 298 ensures the Parliament's security, it also raises questions about the extent to which such measures should impede the public's right to engage with their democratic institution. The challenge lies in finding a middle ground where security measures do not overly encroach upon the principles of openness and transparency that are fundamental to a democracy.

Parliament of Malaysia Open Day 2023

A significant manifestation of bridging this gap was vividly displayed during the grandiose event, Parliament of Malaysia Open Day, held from 6 to 7 May 2023, at the Parliament's building in Kuala Lumpur. Themed "*Merakyatkan Parlimen, Warisan Negara,*" which translates to "Bringing Parliament to the People, a National Heritage," the event served as a robust medium to foster closer relations between parliamentary proceedings and the public. The opening ceremony was graced by the Honourable Senator Tan Sri Dato' Seri Utama Dr. Rais Yatim, former President of the Senate, alongside the Honourable Tan Sri Dato' Johari Abdul, Speaker of the House of Representatives. The event featured enlightening speeches, a special video presentation, and a book launching titled "*Parliament of Malaysia: Pillar of the Nation's Democracy.*" During the officiating speech,¹³ the Honourable Senator Tan Sri Dato' Seri Utama Dr Rais Yatim emphasised:

... this building (the Parliament of Malaysia), which is protected under the National Heritage Act 2005, represents the pinnacle of legislative

13 "*Merakyatkan Parlimen, Warisan Negara*" (Parliament Open Day Ceremony), 6 May 2023, Official YouTube Channel Parliament of Malaysia, available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BQOBcCBpAHY&t=2744s> (accessed 7 October 2023), at 40:33 – 41:52.

structures as well as embodies the hopes and aspirations of the people for the future.

Meanwhile, in his social media posting,¹⁴ the Honourable Tan Sri Dato' Johari Abdul shared:

... I am here with visitors who came on the occasion of the Parliament of Malaysia Open Day. Most of the first-time visitors have given me positive feedback about this program, which is filled with valuable information. I hope that our citizens will get to know and appreciate the legislative institution that is the heartbeat of our country's democracy. Thank you for attending. Let us come in large numbers and get to know our Parliament.

The ceremony witnessed a diverse turnout, including foreign dignitaries, senior government officials, students, NGO representatives, and the general public, apart from Members of Parliament and officers from the Parliament of Malaysia, reflecting a broad spectrum of societal engagement. Notably, the event was live-streamed across the Parliament of Malaysia's social media channels, extending its reach beyond physical attendees. The two-day open day showcased 48 exhibitors from various ministries, government departments and agencies, NGOs, foreign embassies, and internal parliamentary exhibitors. This remarkable event marked a significant stride in breaking down the walls of exclusivity associated with the Parliament, transforming it into an institution that is both accessible and welcoming to the public, rendering it more transparent and engaging in parliamentary proceedings.¹⁵ Despite the open access to

14 S Johari Abdul (@JohariAbdul_MY), Twitter post, accessed 7 October 2023, https://twitter.com/JohariAbdul_MY/status/1654988794263916544.

15 Parliamentary proceedings refer to the formal actions and processes conducted within a parliament or a legislative body. These proceedings are guided by established rules and protocols, and encompass a variety of activities including, but not limited to:

- *Debates*: Discussions where members of the parliament express their opinions on proposed laws (bills) or issues of national importance.
- *Voting*: The process by which members of parliament cast their votes to pass or reject proposed laws or motions.
- *Question Times*: Sessions where members can question Cabinet Members about their work or current issues.
- *Committee Meetings*: Meetings of smaller groups of members to examine issues in more detail, often with input from experts and the public such as Public Accounts Committee or Special Select Committees.

the public during these days and the visitor count recorded at 10,000, the security and safety of the parliamentary compound were still meticulously maintained. The event was conducted without any security breaches or untoward incidents, demonstrating that public accessibility can be successfully balanced with the priority of maintaining the sanctity and security of such a critical legislative institution. This successful execution stands as a testament to the Parliament of Malaysia's commitment to fostering a secure yet inclusive environment for democratic participation. Notably, prior to the Parliament of Malaysia Open Day in 2023, the only occasion when the Parliament freely welcomed the general public¹⁶ was during the final tribute ceremony for the late second Prime Minister, Tun Abdul Razak, in 1976.¹⁷

Defining the concept of People's Parliament in the Parliament of Malaysia's

Suppose the essence of hosting Parliament of Malaysia Open Day 2023 is intrinsically linked to the People's Parliament concept; in that case,

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- *Legislation Process*: The stages a bill goes through to become law, including introduction, consideration in committees, debate, and voting.
 - *Presentations*: Presentation of reports, budgets, or other important documents to the parliament for examination and approval.
 - *Adjournment Debates*: Debates on various topics that occur at the end of a parliamentary sitting day.
 - *Special Chamber*: Special Chamber has been set up to allow matters of national importance or urgency to be discussed without interrupting the normal proceedings of the House of Representatives. It convenes for the first time on 16 May 2016.

Official Portal of Parliament of Malaysia, 'Glossary search', available at: <https://www.parlimen.gov.my/index.php?modload=glosari&action=10000> (accessed 4 October 2023)..

- 16 While an open day was also being organised in 2022, it differed significantly from the 2023 event. In 2022, visitors were not granted spontaneous access; instead, they were pre-invited and required to adhere to a standard operating procedure. This procedure mandated that interested visitors register their names in advance through the Parliament of Malaysia's e-Visitor Management System before being permitted entry.
- 17 The late Tun Abdul Razak, Malaysia's second Prime Minister, was accorded a State Funeral in 1976. His body was laid in state at the Banquet Hall of the Parliament of Malaysia, providing an opportunity for the public to pay their final respects and bid him farewell. Subsequently, Tun Abdul Razak was laid to rest at the National Hero Mausoleum (*Makam Pahlawan*), located within the grounds of the National Mosque (*Masjid Negara*). Available at: <https://www.parlimen.gov.my/bangunan-parlimen-malaysia.html?&uweb=web&view=238&lang=en> (accessed 10 October 2023).

it suggests that the Parliament of Malaysia is a space that is not only secure but also welcoming, where citizens can observe and participate in the legislative process without feeling alienated by excessive security protocols. The event's people-centric approach not only reflects the democratic ethos of the Parliament of Malaysia as a legislative pillar of the nation, but also strengthens the bond between the Parliament and the people it is meant to serve.

This study conducted a comprehensive search using phrase search, keyword search, and Boolean operators across Google Scholar and Scopus, as well as within two databases subscribed by the Parliament of Malaysia: the Journal of Legislative Studies and the Journal of Parliamentary Affairs. The search yielded a few direct results on the term "People's Parliament". Nonetheless, there was a significant number of literature on parliamentary public engagement, which aligns closely with the principles of the People's Parliament as envisioned by the Parliament of Malaysia.

In practice, the concepts of a People's Parliament and parliamentary public engagement revolve around the principle that the parliament should actively involve the public. This involves organising forums where citizens can voice their opinions, seeking public input on proposed legislation, and utilising online platforms to gather and consider public feedback. Both terms underscore the importance of maintaining a two-way communication channel between the parliament and its constituents. This approach sets straight the workings of the parliament, making it more approachable and transparent, and reinforces the notion that the parliament is a true reflection of the people's will.

Discussions

The criticality of augmenting public engagement stands prominently in the public sphere of parliamentary processes. Reflecting this, an analysis of the 16 articles previously mentioned¹⁸ revealed six key findings. These findings span a diverse range of thematic areas, underlining the vast nature of public involvement in parliamentary functions as follows:

- i. Public broadcasting of parliamentary sessions achieves transparency and accessibility in the legislative process, allowing citizens to observe and understand parliamentary operations directly;

18 Inter-Parliamentary Union (n 1).

- ii. Public hearings through a committee system mark a significant stride towards encouraging public participation. This platform enables citizens to contribute their opinions and expertise to the legislative process;
- iii. Petition system empowers the public to influence the parliamentary agenda directly, establishing a clear communication channel between citizens and their representatives;
- iv. Public visits to parliament serve a dual purpose; they are not only educational but also instrumental in raising awareness about the parliament's role and functions;
- v. Parliamentary Research Service, which gathers and provides unbiased information based on public feedback. This service ensures that Members of Parliament make informed decisions that resonate with public sentiment and needs; and
- vi. Parliamentary Budget Office plays a key role in enhancing fiscal transparency and accountability. This office underscores the importance of fiscal responsibility and public involvement in governmental financial decisions by providing non-partisan budgetary analysis and facilitating public engagement in budget planning.

Together, these initiatives highlight the significance of public engagement in parliamentary processes and form the central focus of this study's discussion. Each aspect will be examined to understand its contribution to the people-oriented approach within parliaments.

Benchmarking Parliament of Malaysia's public engagement with the other Parliaments

The public's engagement in parliamentary processes stands as a crucial barometer of a parliament's commitment to a democratic people-oriented approach. This benchmarking analysis compares the public engagement strategies of the Parliament of Malaysia with those of its counterparts in the United Kingdom (U.K.), Australia, and New Zealand. By examining various facets of public interaction and participation in parliamentary processes, the analysis seeks to highlight the strengths and potential areas for improvement in Malaysia's approach to fostering a people-oriented legislative environment.

Table 1: Benchmarking Parliament of Malaysia's Public Engagement Initiatives with the Parliament of the U.K., Parliament of Australia and Parliament of New Zealand

Public engagements or people-oriented approach	Parliaments			
	Mas	UK	Aus	NZ
1. Public broadcasting of Parliamentary Sessions and Proceedings	/	/	/	/
2. Public hearing through a committee system	/	/	/	/
3. Petition system to allow the public to influence the parliamentary agenda directly		/	/	/
4. Public visit to the Parliament	/	/	/	/
5. Parliamentary Research Service, which provides unbiased information to Members of Parliament from the public's feedback	/	/	/	/
6. Parliamentary Budget Office, which provides non-partisan budgetary analysis and participatory budget planning through public engagement		¹⁹	/	

Legend: Mas = Malaysia, UK = United Kingdom, Aus = Australia, NZ = New Zealand

By benchmarking Malaysia's parliamentary engagement against counterparts in the United Kingdom, Australia, and New Zealand, a comprehensive view emerges of the commitment to democratic engagement and transparency. All four countries, including Malaysia, publicly broadcast parliamentary sessions, a practice essential for maintaining transparency and keeping citizens informed and involved in the democratic process.

Furthermore, public hearings through committees in these nations allow significant public input into the legislative process, ensuring that diverse perspectives and expert testimonies shape laws and policies.

The ability for the public to visit the Parliament, as seen in all four countries, serves as an important educational tool, increasing awareness of the legislature's workings. Another notable similarity is the existence

¹⁹ Note: The Parliament of the UK has the Office for Budget Responsibility established in 2010. It is an independent body that provides comprehensive analysis and forecasts regarding the UK's public finances. Even though not labeled as a "Parliamentary Budget Office", but it serves a similar role in terms of providing non-partisan budgetary analysis.

of a Parliamentary Research Service in each country, which provides unbiased and comprehensive information to Members of Parliament based on public feedback. This service ensures that legislative decisions are based on balanced and thorough information.

Contrary to the U.K., Australia, and New Zealand, Malaysia lacks a public petition system that might directly influence the parliamentary agenda, fostering a communication channel between the electorate and their representatives. However, a distinct difference is observed in the aspect of Parliamentary Budget Offices. While the U.K. and Australia have established such offices for non-partisan budgetary analysis and participatory budget planning, Malaysia and New Zealand have not, indicating an area for potential development. Establishing a Parliamentary Budget Office in Malaysia could enhance fiscal transparency and public participation in budgetary matters, aligning it further with practices observed in the U.K. and Australia. Overall, Malaysia's approach to public engagement in its parliamentary processes mirrors that of its counterparts to a significant extent, demonstrating a strong commitment to democratic values. Continually enhancing these mechanisms, such as the potential addition of a Parliamentary Budget Office, remains crucial for deepening democratic practices and ensuring that the parliament remains responsive and accountable to its citizens.

The importance of institutionalising parliamentary public engagement

The perception of parliaments as entities that actively listen to and engage with the public is fundamental for the peaceful resolution of social and political conflicts. By providing a platform where diverse groups can share their perspectives, parliaments facilitate the discovery of common ground, fostering social cohesion and ensuring that every segment of society feels heard and represented. Such inclusivity bolsters public trust in the legislative process, ensuring adherence to laws and encouraging active democratic participation. Conversely, when parliaments appear indifferent to public sentiment, it can lead to national unrest, with strikes and protests emerging as a last resort for citizens to express dissent when their voices are ignored. For instance, the French people frequently engage in their routine nationwide strikes and protests, sparked by their legislative body acting contrary to and despite the popular will, reflecting public frustration.²⁰ In October 2014, the Hansard

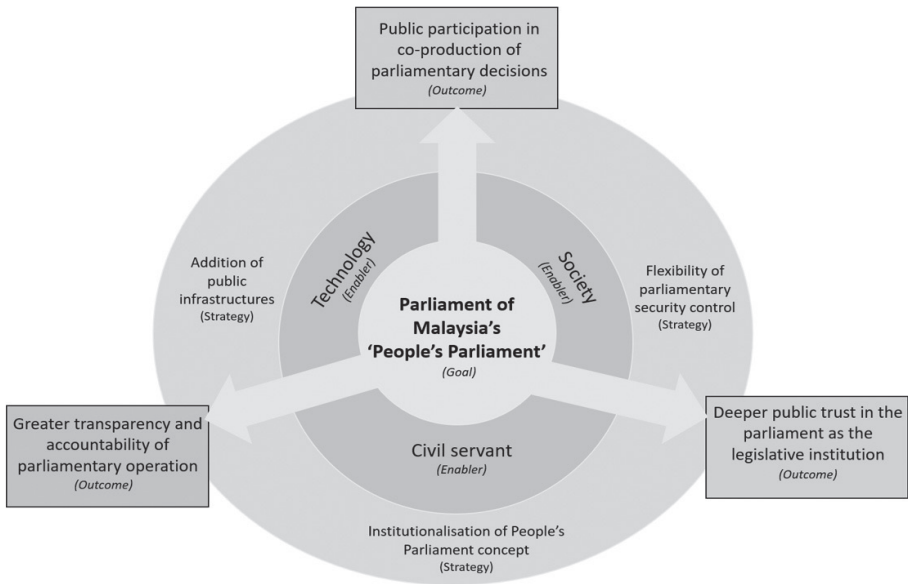
20 Burney, Nathaniel. "James Wilson." Biography Research Paper. Submitted April 30, 2023. Available at: <https://lawcomic.net/guide/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/James-Wilson-Part-One-Foundations.pdf> (accessed 22 October 2023).

Society,²¹ in collaboration with BritainThinks²² published a report titled “Listening Parliament”²³ which concluded that Parliament needs to show people that they are listening; otherwise, people will feel like they have no voice. This scenario underscores the vital role of parliamentary openness in maintaining a harmonious and functioning democracy.

The conceptual framework of the People’s Parliament of the Parliament of Malaysia

In an ambitious endeavour to transform the Parliament of Malaysia into a ‘People’s Parliament’, a comprehensive framework has been conceptualised, focusing on inclusivity, transparency, and public participation. This initiative aims to reshape the parliament into an institution that truly represents and actively engages with the Malaysian populace.

Figure 1: Proposed conceptual framework of Parliament of Malaysia’s People’s Parliament



21 Founded in 1944, the Hansard Society is the UK’s leading source of independent research and advice on Parliament and parliamentary affairs.
 22 BritainThinks. BritainThinks is a business consulting service that conducts market research and offers advice for growth and development in business. London, England, United Kingdom. Available at: <www.britainthinks.com> (accessed 11 November 2023).
 23 See Hansard Society & BritainThinks, available at: <<https://www.parliament.uk/globalassets/documents/speaker/digital-democracy/Digi89HansardSociety...BritianThinks.pdf>> (accessed 11 November 2023).

This transformation is underpinned by three key enablers: the dedication and expertise of civil servants, the strategic use of technology to bridge the gap between the parliament and the public, and the active involvement of society, including citizens, NGOs, academia, and the media. The strategy involves adding public infrastructures, essential for facilitating easy and meaningful public access to parliamentary processes. This includes both physical amenities and digital platforms, enabling both on-site and remote engagement.

Another critical aspect is the flexibility of parliamentary security control, ensuring that necessary security does not become a barrier to public access. Moreover, institutionalising the ‘People’s Parliament’ concept is vital, embedding it into the ethos and operations of the parliament through policy changes, capacity building, and legislative amendments.

The anticipated outcomes of this transformation are multifaceted. Firstly, it aims to foster public participation in the co-production of the Parliament of Malaysia’s decisions, ensuring that the legislative process reflects a wide array of public opinions and insights. This participatory approach is expected to lead to greater transparency and accountability in Parliament of Malaysia operations, thereby building public confidence in the institution. Ultimately, the most significant outcome would be the establishment of deeper public trust in the Parliament of Malaysia as a legislative body that truly represents and serves the interests of the people. This trust is the cornerstone of a robust, functioning democracy, and the transformation into a ‘People’s Parliament’ is a step towards strengthening this democratic foundation in Malaysia.

People-oriented parliamentary approach and trust deficit

The lack of confidence between citizens and parliamentary democracy has been a major issue in recent years, highlighting a widening gap between democratic institutions and the people they are supposed to serve. This trust deficit comprises several factors: diminished voter engagement and participation, unequal involvement in political procedures, lack of transparency and responsibility in governance, perceived ineffectiveness in meeting public demands, and a widespread perception of democratic systems’ inadequate performance. These circumstances contribute to what is commonly called an “imperfect democracy” or a “democratic deficit,” resulting in what can be defined as a crisis in citizenship.

Notable findings derived from the research encompass the notion of a ‘democratic deficit’, which denotes an absence of democracy and

detachment from the general populace and has emerged as a significant subject of controversy. The deficit can arise from various factors, including diminished voter engagement, limited citizen participation in decision-making processes, insufficient oversight of executive entities, intricate political mechanisms, and a perception of inadequate system performance. These factors contribute to a decline in trust regarding the provision and management of services.²⁴

Trust and cooperation are closely linked within the democratic public sphere, where the ideal democratic system is based on trust-based relationships. This link is predicated on the premise that either civil society or institutional frameworks are indispensable for a robust and enduring democracy.²⁵

Post-communist regimes have exhibited a notable lack of confidence in fundamental political institutions. To further progress towards civil society and democracy, it is crucial to focus on enhancing trust. This can be achieved by understanding politics and civil society as domains characterised by continuous diversity, rivalry, and conflict.²⁶

Trust in Parliament is essential for properly functioning of a democracy, as parliaments are the primary institutions responsible for creating laws. Distrust in Parliament poses a significant threat to democracy and can be particularly troublesome for emerging democracies when dominant parties maintain control over multiple election cycles, potentially deepening the divide between victors and losers.²⁷

When compared to established modern industrial democracies, the European Union (EU), which is sometimes criticised for lacking democratic representation, is deemed to be legitimate. The EU's institutions are subject to strict constitutional checks and balances. Overall, the EU corrects existing political representation, discussion, and output biases rather than creating them.²⁸

The lack of faith in parliamentary democracy is complex, encompassing concerns related to citizen involvement, openness, and the efficiency

24 Hill, Lisa. "Democratic deficit in the ACT: Is the citizen initiated referendum a solution?" *Australian Journal of Social Issues* 38, no. 4 (2003): 495-512.

25 Misztal, Barbara A. "Trust and cooperation: the democratic public sphere." *Journal of Sociology* 37, no. 4 (2001): 371-386.

26 Lovell, David W. "Trust and the politics of postcommunism." *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 34, no. 1 (2001): 27-38.

27 Holmberg, Soren, Staffan Lindberg, and Richard Svensson. "Trust in parliament." *Journal of Public Affairs* 17, no. 1-2 (2017): e1647.

28 Moravcsik, Andrew. "Reassessing legitimacy in the European Union." *JCMS: journal of common market studies* 40, no. 4 (2002): 603-624.

of governing. To tackle this deficiency, it is necessary to adopt a comprehensive strategy that promotes public engagement, ensures accountability, and cultivates a perception of efficiency and significance in democratic institutions.

Enhancing the accessibility of Parliament to the general public can help mitigate the lack of trust. Studies have demonstrated that more transparency and openness in legislative proceedings might yield certain favourable outcomes, although they are not consistently direct or assured.

An assessment of the influence of Freedom of Information (FOI) on the UK Parliament revealed that FOI resulted in a modest increase in transparency and responsibility at Westminster. Nevertheless, it substantially failed to enhance public comprehension, engagement, or confidence. This implies that while initiatives such as FOI can increase the transparency of legislative operations, they may not be enough to restore or improve public trust.²⁹

It is important to further evaluate the interconnection between trust in legislators and compliance with public policies. An analysis of public health policies used during the COVID-19 pandemic revealed that individuals with greater confidence in officials were more likely to adhere to containment measures. Consequently, improving confidence in parliamentary institutions could increase public adherence and involvement in legislative decisions.³⁰

The recognition of 'trust' as a fundamental element of contemporary democracy in Parliament has been largely accepted. The variations or fluctuations in trust levels across different countries can be ascribed to state attributes, such as accountability and dependability. According to Meer,³¹ increasing transparency could enhance these traits and promote trust in parliamentary systems.

In the case of Malaysia, trust in government and its determinants have been a subject of study, particularly in the context of public policy acceptability. A study specifically examined the level of public acceptance towards environmental taxes in Malaysia, emphasising the importance of trust in the government for the effective execution of new policies. The

29 Hazell, Robert, Gabrielle Bourke, and Benjamin Worthy. "Open house? Freedom of information and its impact on the UK parliament." *Public Administration* 90, no. 4 (2012): 901-921.

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31 Van der Meer, Tom. "In what we trust? A multi-level study into trust in parliament as an evaluation of state characteristics." *International Review of Administrative Sciences* 76, no. 3 (2010): 517-536.

study determined that the level of trust in government is impacted by the government's accountability, integrity, and competency. Although the research focused on environmental tax, the governance concepts it examines apply to parliamentary transparency and confidence.³²

Applying these discoveries to the specific setting of the Malaysian Parliament, it can be deduced that enhancing transparency and accountability in legislative proceedings could benefit public trust. This could involve fostering greater transparency in legislative procedures, enhancing avenues for public participation, and adopting more transparent methods for decision-making.

Nevertheless, it is crucial to acknowledge that the correlation between parliamentary transparency and public confidence is intricate and shaped by other elements, such as political culture, historical circumstances, and the specific dynamics of government-citizen engagement in Malaysia. Thus, while openness can contribute to mitigating the lack of confidence, it is more likely to be a component of a comprehensive approach that includes other elements of governance and public participation.

To summarise, enhancing public access to Parliament can potentially enhance transparency and accountability within the system. However, it may not always directly or definitively address the issue of diminishing public trust. Additional factors, such as promoting public comprehension and engagement and tackling wider concerns with political confidence, can have significant impacts.

Recommendations

Navigating the progressing landscape of public engagement in Parliament of Malaysia's parliamentary processes, the significance of broadening and deepening citizen involvement is always justified. In light of this, the following recommendations are proposed to enhance the accessibility and effectiveness of the Parliament of Malaysia's engagement with the public. These recommendations emerge to address key areas with the intent of bridging geographical and logistical gaps, enabling wider and more diverse participation, and ensuring that the voices of all citizens

32 Muhammad, Izlawanie, Norfakhirah Nazihah Mohd Hasnu, Mohd Adha Ibrahim, Suhaila Abdul Hamid, and Mustafa Mohd Hanefah. "Trust in government and its determinants: An empirical study of public acceptability for carbon tax in Malaysia." *Sustainability* 14, no. 23 (2022): 15684.

are heard and considered in the parliamentary discourse. These are low-hanging fruits that can be implemented immediately by the Parliament of Malaysia.

Virtual Visit to the Parliament of Malaysia

In an era where digital accessibility has become increasingly paramount, the proposal to the concept of a virtual visit to the Parliament of Malaysia represents a significant stride towards inclusive public engagement. Notably, while other parliaments around the world have already embraced virtual tours as a means to facilitate broader public access, the Parliament of Malaysia has yet to implement this innovative approach fully. The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the adoption of virtual experiences globally, underscoring their importance as both a convenience and a necessity. In the parliaments in countries like the United Kingdom,³³ Australia³⁴, and Singapore³⁵, 360° virtual tours have been effectively utilised to keep the parliamentary compound ‘accessible’ even during periods of restricted physical access.

These virtual experiences allow citizens, irrespective of their geographical location, to explore the intricacies of their parliament buildings and engage with parliamentary history and activities, all from the comfort of their homes. This digital approach is particularly vital for those outside major urban areas, such as Kuala Lumpur and Klang Valley in the Malaysian context, who may find it challenging to visit the parliament in person. This concurs with the Honourable Senator Datuk Seri Mohamad Ali bin Mohamad, former Deputy President of the Senate wish, during the closing ceremony of Parliament of Malaysia Open Day 2023 on 7 May 2023,³⁶ where he stated:

33 Parliament of the United Kingdom, ‘360° virtual tour to explore the Commons Chamber, Lords Chamber and many other parts of the building’, available at: <https://www.parliament.uk/visiting/virtualtour/> (accessed 20 November 2023).

34 Australian Parliament, ‘360° virtual tour to explore the Senate Chamber, House of Representatives Chamber and exterior of the building’, available at: <https://virtualtour.aph.gov.au/#?> (accessed 20 November 2023).

35 Parliament of Singapore, ‘Virtual tour’, available at: <https://www.parliament.gov.sg/visit-learn/ph-virtual-tour.html> (accessed 20 November 2023).

36 Parliament of Malaysia, ‘Majlis Penutup Hari Terbuka Parlimen “Merakyatkan Parlimen, Warisan Negara”’, minute 40:07 to 48:00, 7 May 2023, Official YouTube Channel Parliament of Malaysia, available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iQXk2UfhgBM&t=2852s> (accessed 18 October 2023).

... we wish to see more people and institutions outside of the Kuala Lumpur and Klang Valley to be able to come and participate in the next Parliament of Malaysia Open Day round.

While the Parliament of Malaysia has initiated its journey towards digital engagement with a virtual visit system, there is a significant scope for enhancement, especially when benchmarked against national and international standards. Though a step in the right direction, the current virtual tour falls short in delivering an immersive and engaging experience, particularly when compared to the more sophisticated and interactive platforms of the Department of Museums Malaysia³⁷ and the National Archive of Malaysia.³⁸ This gap in quality and engagement becomes even more pronounced when the virtual tour is likened to those of the U.K., Australian, and Singaporean parliaments, where virtual tours have set a high benchmark in terms of interactivity and user experience.

Honourable Senator Datuk Seri Mohamad Ali bin Mohamad's call for greater regional participation can be effectively addressed by elevating the existing virtual visit system. Revamping the virtual tour of the Parliament of Malaysia to align with global best practices would not only enhance its reach and impact but also democratise access to parliamentary proceedings. Such an enhancement should aim to provide rich, educational content in an interactive and user-friendly format, ensuring that all citizens, regardless of their location or physical ability, have the opportunity for meaningful engagement with their nation's legislative body.

Parliament of Malaysia's Visitor Centre

Be that as it may, traditional walk-in visits remain the best approach to experience the full Parliament of Malaysia. As such, it is necessary for the Parliament of Malaysia to establish a visitor centre to cater to these traditional visitors. At present, the only semblance of a visitor centre is

37 Currently 20 museums under Department of Museums Malaysia have 360° virtual gallery. See Department of Museums Malaysia, '360° virtual gallery', available at: <http://www.jmm.gov.my/ms/taxonomy/term/386> (accessed 22 July 2023).

38 eNegarawan, a virtual gallery, aptly tagged as #klikdijari, aligning seamlessly with the 'Ini Warisan Kita' or 'This is Our Heritage' initiative led by the Ministry of National Unity, launched on 6 July 2023, available at: <http://enegarawan.arkib.gov.my/> (accessed 22 July 2023).

a gallery³⁹ displaying basic information on the Parliament of Malaysia. Compared to the visitor centre in the Parliament of Singapore⁴⁰, Parliament of Austria⁴¹, European Parliament⁴², and Parliament of the U.K.⁴³, which offer comprehensive and interactive experiences, the existing gallery at the Parliament of Malaysia appears limited in scope and engagement. These international counterparts have set a high standard by providing extensive educational content, interactive exhibits, and multimedia presentations that offer deep insights into their parliamentary history and functioning. In contrast, the current facility in Malaysia primarily offers a basic historical overview, lacking the interactive and immersive elements that characterise modern visitor centres. Establishing a fully-fledged visitor centre in the Parliament of Malaysia would greatly enhance the visitor experience.

Additionally, during the Parliament of Malaysia Open Day 2023, exhibitions were held in the foyer area between the *Dewan Rakyat* and *Dewan Negara*, as well as in the Banquet Hall area. This exposes the Parliament building, which has been gazetted as a heritage building, to the risk of damage. In this regard, the proposal for the construction of a visitor centre for the Parliament of Malaysia might consider the approach of the U.S. Capitol Visitor Centre⁴⁴, which provides dedicated spaces for temporary exhibitions and events.

39 The gallery currently is closed for renovation until early of 2025.

40 Parliament of Singapore, 'Parliament Visitor Centre - ParlConnect', available at: <https://www.parliament.gov.sg/visit-learn/parlconnect> (accessed 11 October 2023).

41 Visitor Center "Demokratikum – Experience Parliament", located directly under the Colonnaded Hall on an area of 1,500 m², welcomes visitors to learn about parliamentarism and explore the rich history of the Austrian Parliament. Available at: <https://www.parlament.gv.at/en/experience/visitor-center/index.html> (accessed 9 November 2023).

42 Discover the world of the European Parliament at the Parlamentarium, Europe's largest parliamentary visitors centre. More than 2 million people have already visited. See <https://visiting.europarl.europa.eu/en/visitor-offer/brussels/parlamentarium> (accessed 3 November 2023).

43 Offers first-hand experience with a tour of the Houses of Parliament along the interactive sessions which are directly integrated with the UK's four curriculums, tailored to the age and attainment of the group. See <https://learning.parliament.uk/en/uk-parliament-education-centre/> (accessed 28 November 2023).

44 The United States Capitol Visitor Center is a large underground addition to the United States Capitol complex which serves as a gathering point for up to 4,000 tourists and an expansion space for the U.S. Congress. Available at: <https://www.visitthecapitol.gov/> (accessed on 2 November 2023).

the parliamentary process, making it more approachable and relatable to the Malaysian citizenry.

However, it is important to note that some potential recommendations were not included due to their complexity and the need for significant legal and structural reforms, like introducing the Parliament of Malaysia Petition System and developing a Parliamentary Budget Office. The ongoing struggle to re-implement the Parliamentary Services Act 1963^{45,46} exemplifies these challenges.

Future efforts should prioritise feasible improvements for immediate impact while acknowledging longer-term goals that necessitate more extensive changes. Continued research and observation are essential to gauge the impact of these initiatives on democratic participation and the effectiveness of various public engagement strategies over time. This balanced approach will ensure that the Parliament of Malaysia adapts to meet current needs and evolves to address future challenges in fostering a robust, participatory democracy.

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Hansard of Dewan Rakyat, Parliament of Malaysia dated 22 February 2023, p. 24.

Hansard of Dewan Rakyat, Parliament of Malaysia dated 22 February 2023, pp. 24-25.

45 Note: Parliamentary Services Act 1963 in Malaysia was repealed in 1992. The repeal has been a subject of discussion in Malaysian political and legal circles, particularly regarding the implications for the independence and effective functioning of the Parliament of Malaysia. In the context of this 15th Parliament, the potential re-introduction of the Parliamentary Services Act has been the focus of the President of Dewan Negara and the Speaker of Dewan Rakyat to pave the way for a more autonomous functioning Parliament of Malaysia.

46 Tah, I. H. M., Saari, M., Jalil, F., Kamilan, I. H., & Abd Rahim, A. H. (2022). Keperluan Mewujudkan Semula Akta Perkhidmatan Parlimen di Malaysia: The Need to Re-enact the Parliamentary Service Act in Malaysia. *Journal of the Malaysian Parliament*, 2.

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