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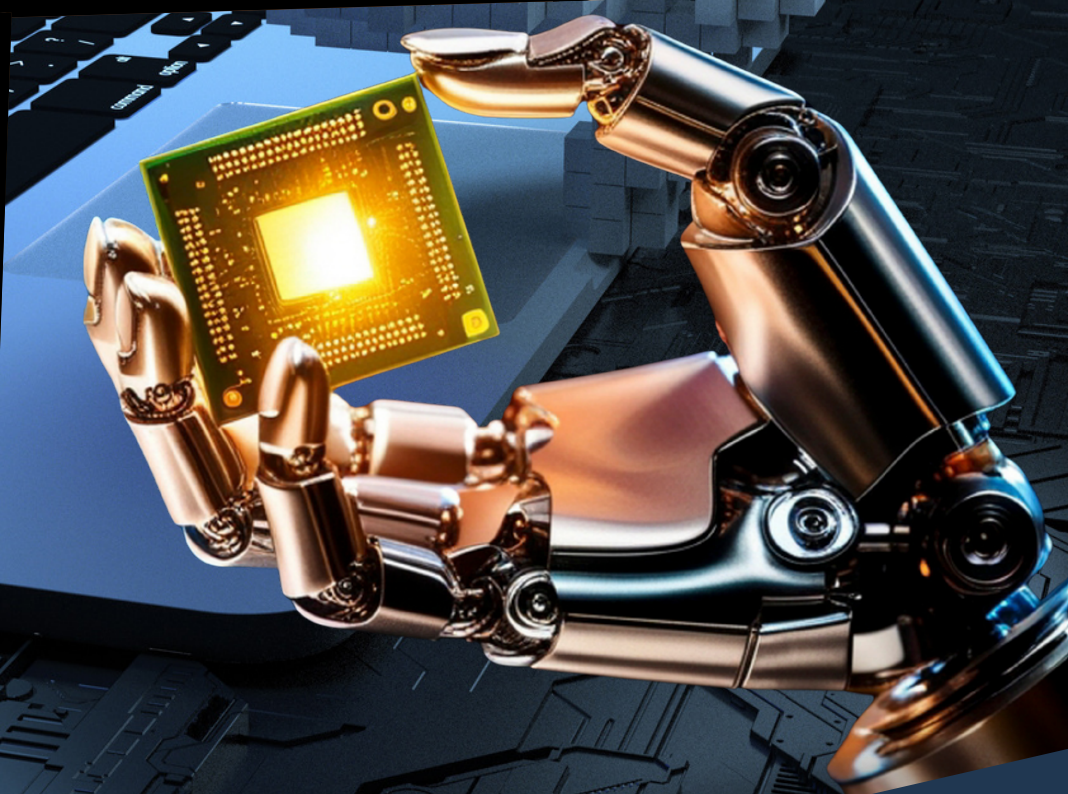


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TIME FOR CHANGE: REPLACING OUTDATED VIP SPEECHES WITH MEANINGFUL ENGAGEMENT IN MALAYSIAN CEREMONIAL PROTOCOLS

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INTRODUCTION

Ceremonial protocols in Malaysia have a long-standing tradition in official events, symbolising respect, heritage, and nationhood. However, with changing times, these extensive, and sometimes rigid guidelines, have come under criticism, particularly regarding speeches by Very Important Persons (VIPs). While ceremonial traditions remain culturally valuable, there is a growing call for modernisation to create practices that are more inclusive, participatory, and efficient, especially among younger generations. This article reviews the current state of ceremonial protocols in Malaysia, highlights the gaps they create between authorities and the public, and proposes a balanced approach that integrates traditional practices with contemporary communication methods.

THE ROLE AND LIMITATIONS OF TRADITIONAL CEREMONIAL PROTOCOLS IN MALAYSIA

The structure of ceremonial protocols in Malaysia, including formal greetings, honourifics, and lengthy speeches by VIPs, is designed to convey respect and solemnity during official functions. These practices are deeply rooted in culture and reflect Malaysia's efforts to preserve its diverse heritage. However, their effectiveness in the contemporary context is increasingly questioned. Younger audiences may find overly long and formal speeches outdated and unengaging.

Research has indicated that young people today are more interested in platforms that actively engage them rather than in being passive spectators (Faiesall et al., 2023; Nouri et al., 2022). In this context, the convention of treating long and solemn speeches as the primary method of communication may hinder efforts to attract younger generations to public discourse and civil society. Rather than facilitating meaningful communication, these protocols risk entrenching hierarchical systems that marginalise the voices of youth and other community members.

Although ceremonial speech is often framed as a symbol of respect and prestige, it can also become overly performative and disconnected from the practical concerns and interests of the public. As Briutli et al. (2023) explained, when uncoordinated, ceremonial protocols may hinder effective governance, introducing inefficiencies and diverting attention from the issues that require attention.

SYMBOLISM AND SUBSTANCE IN CEREMONIAL EVENTS

The tension between tradition and modern participation reflects a broader conflict between form and content. Ceremonial events, particularly those featuring formal speeches, are highly symbolic. They evoke national pride, reinforce cultural identity, and affirm the authority of those in power. However, symbolic gestures that lack substantive dialogue may fail to resonate with the audience. According to Tajuddin and Zulkepli (2019), cultural symbols can foster a sense of togetherness and belonging, but excessive reliance on them may undermine the importance of inclusive and action-oriented interactions that address contemporary issues.

This reliance on symbolic practices may have emotional and psychological effects. Young people, particularly in events that prioritise formality over content, can feel alienated. Zeldin et al. (2015) observed that in youth engagement, the critical factor is enabling participants to engage in a meaningful way that empowers them and fosters investment in the issues they address. In the context of the study, the challenge for ceremonial protocols in Malaysia is to transform these rituals of speech and action into meaningful engagements that allow for genuine dialogue.

MODERNISING CEREMONIAL PROTOCOLS: A PATH FORWARD

The necessity of changes in ceremonial procedures is not a matter of disregarding tradition, but of adapting it to the needs of modern society. The aim is to strike a balance between respecting traditions and engaging citizens meaningfully. This can be achieved by revising the overall structure of official events, as well as the content and delivery of VIP speeches.

One possible approach is to make VIP speeches shorter, focusing on key points that resonate with the audience. This would allow VIPs to deliver concise and impactful presentations, as well as create opportunities for discussion and interaction instead of lengthy monologues. As asserted by Amant (2023), communication strategies should be shaped according to audience expectations, ensuring that messages are both relevant and engaging.

It is highly recommended to incorporate more interactive elements into such formal events, such as Q&A sessions with VIPs, panel discussions, and other relevant activities, to increase public engagement. These strategies provide attendees with opportunities to express their views, seek clarifications, and engage directly with key decision-makers. Studies indicate that participatory event designs, including town halls, youth forums, interactive panels, and other methods may lead to greater citizen participation, particularly among younger generations who prioritise collaborative engagement and direct contact with decision-makers (Faiesall et al., 2023; Nouri et al., 2022; Zeldin et al., 2015).

Technology can also be used to enhance interaction by providing real-time feedback and facilitating more dynamic exchanges between VIPs and the audience. For instance, digital

platforms or mobile applications could be employed to collect questions or comments from attendees during events, enabling speakers to address them immediately. This approach not only promotes greater participation but also ensures that discussions remain closely aligned with the interests and concerns of participants.

THE IMPORTANCE OF CULTURAL RESPECT IN MODERN PROTOCOLS

Although there is a clear need to modernise ceremonial protocols, it is equally imperative to ensure that cultural respect remains central to any reforms. Malaysia is a multicultural society, and ceremonial practices must reflect respect for the diverse cultural orientations of its people. Liu et al. (2023) emphasized that respecting culture during official functions is a crucial step towards enhancing national cohesion and fostering social unity.

However, respect for cultural traditions should not be confused with institutional inertia. A policy of rigidly adhering to outdated practices, without regard for contemporary needs, may hinder development and marginalise certain segments of society. Bakar and Mustaffa (2013) noted that institution-based communication must evolve to take local circumstances into account and to address the needs of as many citizens as possible. This is particularly important for engaging younger generations, who are often more responsive to digital communication and participatory governance.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it is time for Malaysia to reconsider its ceremonial guidelines and shift towards a more balanced system that respects tradition while incorporating modern engagement methods. By reducing the reliance on lengthy official speeches and embracing more interactive and inclusive formats, Malaysia can foster stronger relationships between leaders and the public. A more dynamic and participatory civic culture can be achieved by prioritising substance over symbolism, utilising technology for real-time feedback, and recognising cultural diversity. As Malaysia navigates the challenges of modernisation, this balance will be essential to ensure that ceremonial events remain relevant and engaging for all citizens, particularly the youth, who hold the key to the nation's future.

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