

Systematic Literature Review on Civil Society and Democracy in Malaysia: The Pursuit of Patriotism

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Abstract

The discourse on civil society in Malaysia is dominated by liberal cosmopolitanism and Malay-Islamic ethnoculturalism, often overlooking nation-building and patriotism as integrative frameworks. Building on a ROSES-guided systematic literature review (SLR), we reassessed 191 records (1990–2021), screened 90, assessed 32 for eligibility, and retained 24 (high/moderate quality) after expert appraisal. We update the problem context with empirical anchors—the 2020–2022 political crisis ("Sheraton Move"), the 2022 general election (GE15) and youth trust/polarisation surveys—and situate patriotism alongside Malaysia's policy architecture (Rukun Negara; National Unity Blueprint 2021–2030). Thematically, eight clusters emerge: democracy, elections, new media, identity politics, healthcare, environment, women's rights, and welfare/education. The corpus skews toward elections/media/identity, with thinner coverage on healthcare and gender. We synthesise competing universalist claims (cosmopolitan vs. Islamic) and propose an enlightened patriotism model for cultivating constructive patriotism (logos + ethos) that avoids both ethnic exclusion and rootless universalism. We translate this into actionable recommendations for civic education, NGO practice, and government unity programming, and expand limitations with a concrete plan to incorporate Malay-language sources, Malaysian indexes, and triangulation with survey/interview data.

Keywords: Cosmopolitanism, Ethnic politics, Nationalism, ROSES review protocol, Civil society, Democracy

INTRODUCTION

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Civil society and democracy concepts contain internal paradoxes (Foley & Edwards, 1996; Mouffe, 2000; Trentmann, 2000). Current literature on these concepts is primarily influenced by liberal perspectives, highlighting paradigms rooted in individualism and universalism (Cohen & Arato, 1992; Diamond, 2015; Habermas, 1991). Despite its significance, these contributions overemphasise their intellectual relevance, potentially overshadowing other literature on democratic civic republicanisms, such as communitarianism (MacIntyre, 2013; Sandel, 2005) and Islamic perspectives (Ghannouchi, 1999; Kamali, 2001).

With a population of approximately 33.4 million in 2023 (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2023), one anticipates rapid growth of civil society organisations (CSOs) in Malaysia. According to the Registry of Societies of Malaysia, the country's total number of registered societies has surpassed 80,000 as of 2022. As highlighted by Farouk (2011), many of these organisations in Malaysia are communitarian-based. This observation suggests that, in addition to the prevalent liberal perspectives rooted in individualism, understanding civil society in Malaysia requires consideration of communitarian and civic republican approaches. Given the predominantly Malay-Muslim majority, focusing on Muslim non-governmental organisations (NGOs) or Islamic social movements becomes crucial for objectively assessing the dynamics of civil society and democracy in Malaysia.

Since the 1980s, a series of debates have emerged among activists and academicians in Malaysia regarding political identity, pitting liberalism against Islam. This dichotomy champions or, in some instances, overlooks the significance of patriotism. Many groups, spanning ethnic, ideological and class-based divisions, actively engage in public forums, advocating for their respective causes and contributing to discussions on the significance of loyalty to the nation. Research on various groups, including NGOs, social movements and grassroots organisations, has gradually increased, all falling under the umbrella of CSOs. The ethnically Malay elites persist in wielding power in representing their community, providing financial support and sponsoring many CSOs championing their causes. The contestation is fuelled by multiculturalism and ethnoculturalism, with the public sphere being the primary focus, often neglecting the crucial ethos dimension in discussions about loyalty to the country or patriotism.

While research on civil society in this country is expanding (Beh et al., 2020; Ismail, 2022; Weiss, 2023), there remains a need to evaluate the specific focus of their activities and the extent of their contestation. Understanding how the public space and knowledge of history and culture become politicised is essential, as it poses a risk to political instability and the potential for fostering genuine and constructive patriotism. Such contention has the potential to promote political divergence rather than convergence among Malaysian citizens and, worse, encourage jingoism, racism and populism. In this context, Steven B. Smith's work "Reclaiming Patriotism in an Age of Extremes" (2021) emerges to support endeavours promoting patriotism. The existing literature on patriotism presents mixed perspectives. Alasdair MacIntyre (2003), for instance, argues that

patriotism is a virtue rather than a vice, while others, such as George Kateb (2000) and Martha Nussbaum (1996), express scepticism about the concept in favour of cosmopolitanism. The influences of globalisation, liberalism and cosmopolitanism intensify the contention, highlighting the unequivocal importance of patriotism in the present discussion. Therefore, the current study addresses the following research questions:

- a) What roles do civil society and democracy play in developing countries such as Malaysia?
- b) Why do untamed contestations lead to potential political instabilities and patriotism deemed unequivocally necessary?

Within an empirical context and motivation, this article is influenced as well on Malaysia's political volatility since 2020 (the "Sheraton Move" and subsequent coalition changes), followed by GE15 (2022) with expanded youth suffrage (Undi18/automatic registration) and high, though not record, turnout, sharpened contestations over national identity and the public good. Parallely, youth-focused surveys indicate ambivalent trust in government and heightened polarisation, even as civic engagement remains significant. During COVID-19, civil society self-help networks (#KitaJagaKita, #BenderaPutih) demonstrated solidaristic capacities beyond formal politics. These shifts strengthen the case for re-centring patriotism—anchored in Malaysia's constitutional monarchy and Rukun Negara—as a unifying, democratic ethos rather than a vehicle for ethnocultural exclusion.

Thus, this contributes to the conceptual gap, in which an existing Malaysian scholarship tends to bifurcate into: (a) cosmopolitan-liberal accounts that prioritise rights/individual autonomy and (b) Malay-Islamic ethnocultural accounts that foreground communitarian ethos and religious authority. Both, in different ways, have sidelined a shared, programmatic conception of patriotism that integrates logos (the letter; logical aspects of the constitution, manifested in clauses) and ethos (the spirit; historical memory, loyalty to the country rather than lineage). We argue for a constructive, plural patriotism compatible with democratic contestation.

METHODOLOGY

A Systematic Literature Review (SLR) was conducted to synthesise empirical evidence and provide an overview of the current civil society and democracy roles in Malaysia. The focus was on the contentious nature of these dynamics and the importance of patriotism in the country. Additionally, this SLR discusses potential avenues for future research. The Reporting Standards for Systematic Evidence Syntheses (ROSES) (Haddaway et al., 2018) were applied in conducting and reporting the findings of this SLR.

The Review Protocol – ROSES

ROSES has gained widespread adoption across various disciplines, including pure sciences and social sciences. ROSES aims to assist researchers in providing accurate information with enhanced precision. The authors developed the relevant research questions and search strategies using the review protocol as a guide.

Formulation of Research Questions

The PICO framework Lockwood proposed is valuable for formulating relevant research questions for review papers. Based on three essential components, namely, Population or Problem, Interest and Context, the authors incorporated these components into the review. In particular, the authors focused on civil society, organisation (Population), roles in democracy (Interest) and Malaysia (Context). This categorisation guided the authors in formulating the primary research question as follows:

What roles have civil society organisations played in Malaysian democracy over the past 30 years?

Identification

Identification involves the exploration of synonyms, related terms and variations associated with the study's principal search keywords. These keywords include non-governmental organisations, civil society organisations, grassroots communities, the third sector, NGOs, social movements and voluntary organisations and Malaysia. The objective is to offer broader options for selected databases to retrieve more relevant

articles for this review. The identification process relies on an online thesaurus to verify synonyms, keywords from earlier studies, those recommended by Scopus, and those suggested by specialists.

The authors extended the existing keywords and devised a comprehensive search string on two well-known databases, Scopus and Web of Science. This process involved utilising Boolean operators, phrase searching, truncation, wildcards, and field code functions) (see Table 1). These two databases provide the best coverage for social sciences research (Norris & Oppenheim, 2007). The Google Scholar search engine was used in the search process. The selection of Google Scholar as an additional database aligns with the recommendation by Haddaway et al. (2015), who highlighted its potential role as a supporting database in systematic review processes. However, no articles from the Google Scholar search were included, as they did not meet the inclusion criteria for this SLR. Only articles obtained from the Web of Science and Scopus databases were utilised. The identification process resulted in 191 articles from the search queries.

Table 1:
Search String

<i>Database</i>	<i>Search string</i>
<i>Scopus</i>	<i>TITLE-ABS-KEY (("non*governmental organi*ation*" OR "civil society organi*ation*" OR "grassroots communities" OR "third sector" OR "NGO*" OR "social movements" OR "voluntary organi*ation*" OR "non*profit organi*ation*") AND "Malaysia")</i>
<i>Web of Science</i>	<i>TS= (("non*governmental organi*ation*" OR "civil society organi*ation*" OR "grassroots communities" OR "third sector" OR "NGO*" OR "social movements" OR "voluntary organi*ation*" OR "non*profit organi*ation*") AND "Malaysia")</i>

Screening

The 191 selected papers underwent screening for this study, utilising the databases' sorting function for the article selection criteria. The selection criteria were based on the research questions proposed by Kitchenham and Charters (2007). Okoli (2015) highlighted the importance of researchers setting a feasible time for review due to the impracticality of reviewing the current published studies. However, the restriction on timeline publication should only be considered if relevant studies were likely reported during a specific period (Higgins & Green, 2011). Based on the database search process results, it is evident that scientific studies related to civil society and democracy in Malaysia have been prominent since the early 1990s. Therefore, the timeline of 1990–2021 was selected as one of the inclusion criteria in this study.

Furthermore, to ensure the quality of the review, only English articles reporting empirical data published in an indexed journal were considered. Only articles published in Malaysia were selected in line with the study's objective (see Table 2). This process excluded 84 articles for failure to meet the inclusion criteria, and 17 duplicate articles were removed. The remaining 90 articles proceeded to the third process of eligibility.

Table 2:

The Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Criteria	Inclusion	Exclusion
Time Period	1990-2021	<1990
Type of Document	Journal articles (empirical data)	Article reviews, books, book series, book chapters, conference proceedings
Language	English	Non-English
Region	Malaysia	Non-Malaysia

Eligibility

Eligibility is the third step, involving a manual review by the authors to ensure that the remaining articles (post-screening) align with the established criteria. This process included reading the titles and abstracts of the articles. During this process, 58 articles were excluded. These exclusions comprised articles written in Malay instead of English, reviews, book chapters, book series, books and conference proceedings. Journal articles lacking empirical data relevant to Malaysia and those with vaguely defined methodology sections were also excluded. In this SLR, a final set of 32 articles qualified for inclusion.

Quality Appraisal

The remaining articles underwent a quality assessment by two experts to ensure their substantive quality. Following Petticrew and Roberts (2006), the experts assigned quality scores for the remaining articles categorised as high, moderate or low. Only papers classified as high or moderate were considered for review. The focus of the experts' attention in determining quality was the methodology utilised in the articles. Both evaluators must mutually agree that the articles' quality was at least moderate for them to be considered for review. In case of discrepancies, the evaluators engaged in discussion before deciding whether to include or exclude articles from the review. Accordingly, five

articles were rated as high, 19 as moderate and eight as low. Thus, only the 24 articles in the high and moderate categories were deemed eligible for further review.

Data Extraction and Analysis

The study adopts a qualitative approach. In particular, the researchers closely examined the “abstract” and “results and discussion” sections of the 24 articles. Data abstraction was guided by the research questions, signifying that information not directly relevant to the research questions was abstracted and documented in a table. Subsequently, the researchers followed the methodology and conducted a thematic analysis to identify themes and sub-themes based on patterns and themes, clustering, highlighting similarities and exploring relationships within the abstracted data (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Eight primary themes were derived by grouping any related or similar abstracted materials. Subsequently, the authors reviewed these eight data themes and identified 16 sub-themes. The authors then reassessed the primary themes and sub-themes created to affirm their significance and the accuracy of the data. The two experts, well-versed in qualitative techniques and knowledgeable on civil society and democracy in Malaysia, were provided with the developed themes and sub-themes. Given the qualitative nature of the articles and the limited quantity captured, the decision was made to focus solely on the themes rather than the sub-themes.

RESEARCH FINDINGS – CIVIL SOCIETY AND DEMOCRACY IN MALAYSIA

A total of 24 articles were selected and categorised into eight themes, as discussed below.

Democracy

The first article examined in this review, authored by Jesudason (1995), highlights the prevalence of liberalism in shaping the discourse on democracy among the middle class in Malaysia. In the context of this SLR, Jesudason’s work stands out as one of the earliest systematic investigations into civil society and democracy in Malaysia. While exploring the potential for civil society to democratise the State, Jesudason found that

obstacles outweigh opportunities for democracy. A significant overlap between the conflicting interests of the State and civil society groups complicates the achievement of consensus, and the conflicting interests among CSOs contribute to high polarization and fragmentation of public issues. On a different note, Giersdorf and Croissant (2011) highlight the potential for an oppositional dimension of civil society—one that leverages the existence of alternative media—enabling political parties and civic associations to challenge the elite.

Farouk (2011) introduces another dimension to understanding civil society and democracy in Malaysia. He observes that, unlike the middle class, Malaysian society heavily relies on the State's role, especially in low-income societies. Furthermore, the middle class is far from homogenous, implying a highly fragmented society. Miles and Croucher (2013) adopt a Gramscian approach. They argue that akin to trade unions, CSOs in Malaysia face significant issues, including their historical basis in ethnic groups and their fragile nature. The last article within the sub-theme of democracy was authored by Weiss (2005). The author concludes that oppressive measures, ethnic and religious divisions, the relative significance of universities in Malaysian society, and the availability of channels for engagement have inhibited student unity and increased transgressive activism in Malaysia.

Elections

Two works fell under this category. Electoral politics remains central to understanding Malaysia's political landscape. Rodan (2014), for instance, argues that middle-class activists seem reluctant to align their desired reforms with the substantive needs and aspirations of the masses. Moreover, they must actively seek support or engagement from representative organisations beyond the middle class. Lee et al. (2010) observed that the movement of entities such as civil society into political parties during the elections, exemplified by the Women Candidacy Initiative (WCI) and Citizen Health Initiatives (CSI) at Parliament during the 2008 elections, explains different forms of collective action of contention repertoires believed to contribute to an oppressive government.

Research on new media is increasing in Malaysia. Radue (2013) contends that the Internet is instrumental in fostering an evolving consciousness of democratic values. Similarly, Tye et al. (2018) argue that social media has played a significant role in empowering the BERSIH movement to act progressively in the interest of society.

Identity Politics

The works under this sub-theme are the most contentious in Malaysia, revolving around two rhetorics of universalism: cosmopolitan universalism and Islamic universalism. Cheng Khoo (2014) believes in cosmopolitanism, urging others to return to the Constitution's liberal democratic ideals that acknowledge religious and ethnic diversity. Muniandy (2012) observed signs of an emerging fragmentation of Islamic authority in Malaysia, particularly in their response to the public contestation over religious issues such as proselytisation, especially from Islam to non-Islam and LGBT rights, when many Malays supported the movement. Yeoh (2006) discussed the strong opposition from specific Muslim groups towards the proposal to form a national inter-faith commission. These groups believed such dialogue would usurp the functions of existing religious authorities.

The idea of Islamic Universalism influences the following works. Ahmad Fauzi (2009), for instance, observed that despite various challenges, Islamic CSOs such as ABIM and Darul Arqam resolved external pressures and internal issues to uphold their socio-political agendas and establish a more credible position, bridging the gap between the country and its people. On the other hand, Majid et al. (2011) discussed how cosmopolitanism influenced Muslim groups, including those associated with liberal Islam. This trend was perceived as a considerable threat to the direction of Muslim thought, particularly as it shaped their agenda around promoting pluralism and inclusivism. According to the author, such a direction would diminish the sanctity of Islam in this country. In a different vein, Rahmah (2017) provided a framework for understanding issues in Islam by introducing the idea of religious extremism and secular fanaticism. The author proposed using the slogan "*Wasatiyyah*" (moderation) as a solution. Beyond the religious and ethnic issues discussed above, the researchers also focused on cross-cutting cleavages in Malaysia, beginning with healthcare.

Healthcare

The first article reviewed was by Chee (2008), who strongly advocates for the crucial role of CSOs as a countervailing force in the discourse over the future of healthcare in the country. Further, Por (2011) explains how the State should satisfy its responsibility in managing essential goods, recognising challenges when the market may struggle to address the needs of people with low incomes, particularly those below the clearing price on the supply and demand curve. Rasiah et al. (2016) introduced another dimension to the discourse on healthcare in Malaysia by linking it with electoral politics. They argue that actions by healthcare CSOs have increased with the establishment of social networks and the participation of key leaders in elections and Parliament, broadening their role in contesting healthcare commercialisation to protect the interests of the disadvantaged.

Environment

Similar to healthcare, environmental issues as an element of ethnic cross-cutting cleavage were also prioritised in this research. For instance, Singh (1993) examined vital factors contributing to environmentally sustainable development in Malaysia, including factors dealing with a more refined value system and institutional changes. Another study by Aiken (1993) explored CSOs' function as watchdogs of the environment. The author highlighted that organisations such as Friends of the Earth Malaysia and the Malayan Nature Society demonstrated vigilance in monitoring activities without the State's visibility.

Women's Rights

The issue of women's rights is regarded as a universal issue, and Lee (2011) employed the public sphere concept to light on it. The author demonstrated how the discursive logic of public spheres reinforces CSOs' political demands, ultimately gaining substantial political traction. Elias (2015) examined various cases, including those involving women. He posited that a vastly different form of "revolutionary rights" may give CSOs more mileage in challenging the ingrained classed, gendered, racialised, and nationalistic assumptions embedded in national rights regimes.

Others

This category covers articles on welfare and education issues. Shekaliu et al. (2018) highlighted the significance of Facebook in engaging Malaysians in volunteer work. The author highlighted areas of improvement in maintaining their members' activity on social media, underutilising the dialogical potential of the channel and struggling to encourage more members to take proactive action. Further, Aizat (2019) evaluated how CSOs could oversee and offer alternative education for Rohingya children. The author hoped such organisations could adapt to Penang's local culture and environment.

DISCUSSION: FROM POLARISED UNIVERSALISM TO CONSTRUCTIVE PATRIOTISM

The findings of this SLR reveal that beyond welfare and education activism, civil society and democracy in Malaysia exhibit two opposing tendencies. The first leans to the left, representing multiculturalism or cosmopolitanism. Research by Cheng Khoo (2014), Muniandy (2012) and Yeoh (2006) illustrates that the left orientation embraces a space inclined towards the non-Malay narrative, advocating for individual rights against the Malay ruling elite. Other research on civil society in Malaysia aligns with these two tendencies. For instance, research under the democracy theme is divided into two groups, communitarian liberalism versus individual liberalism, with the former leaning towards the central left and the latter towards the far left. Similar divisions are observed in the Elections, New Media, and Women's Rights sub-themes. Such trends are not necessarily unique to Malaysia (Brunei and Myanmar) (Hafizah, 2021; Htet, 2022). On the other hand, displaying a pronounced ethnoculturalistic leaning is the Malay-Islam perspective, as evident in the Identity Politics sub-theme. Research by Ahmad Fauzi Abdul Hamid (2009), Majid (2011) and Rahmah Osman (2017) represent the Islamic identity in Malaysian politics, often replaced by the Malay or Bumiputera's identity discourse.

This discussion highlights two crucial points. First, ethnic identity politics remains central to Malaysia's political landscape, ostensibly obscured by cosmopolitanism or Islam. Cosmopolitanism caters to the majority of non-Malays, while Islam addresses the Malay majority, giving rise to a new discourse on Malaysian nationalism. This new discourse introduces additional complexity to the existing political

landscape, further compounded by “constitutional patriotism” popularised by Jurgen Habermas. As theorised by Habermas, the public sphere concept as a foundation for constitutional patriotism should be open to constitutional monarchy patriotism. It is arguable that the term “constitutional monarchy patriotism” may be more fitting for Malaysia. The sensibility of Malay-Islam, which forms the backbone of the ethos of the host State, must evolve with time. The goal is to achieve the Golden Mean, balancing between the risk of losing the ethos when the gate is wide open to cosmopolitanism and losing humanity when the gate is tightly closed to protect the ethos of ethno-culturalism within the Malay-Islam history and civilisation.

The review indicates that ethnicity remains central to Malaysian politics. Therefore, NGOs and social movements are not entirely free from ethnic politics. Ethnic culturalism often overshadows their activities, neglecting discussions on loyalty, national interest and patriotism. Any discussion on patriotism would be meaningless when the *logos* and *ethos* of loyalty are not at the centre. In summary, discussions on loyalty or patriotism should precede any debate on civil society and democracy. Most discussions on patriotism have been influenced by the multiculturalism or cosmopolitanism narrative (Khoo, 2014). Such contentions introduce a new dimension to the debate in Malaysian politics, underscoring the significance of *logos* and *ethos* as guiding principles of patriotism.

A theoretical literature survey on this subject indicates that Jurgen Habermas’s constitutional patriotism theory (Müller, 2007) discussed above is only relevant to the discourse on logos. It lacks the incorporation of loyalty towards the country yet provides loyalty only to the public sphere. Equally problematic is the discourse on the constitutional and ethnic culturalism concepts suggested by Carl Schmitt’s “friends and enemies” (Schmitt, 1932). The latter distorts the meaning of patriotic loyalty as loyalty towards one’s lineage rather than country. Therefore, a synthesis between Carl Schmitt’s dialectic of “friends and enemies” (Thesis) and Jurgen Habermas’s Constitutional Patriotism (Antithesis) should be specifically tailored for patriotic Malaysians. The current SLR provides some insights for such a synthesis. The authors acknowledge that there are other valuable works on this subject in Malaysia and other Southeast Asian countries not captured by ROSES, such as Fatonie, I. (2022), Selvanathan, H. P., & Lickel, B. (2019) and Vuković, D. (2018). However, such works are beyond the scope of this SLR. Nevertheless, researchers on civil society and democracy within ASEAN could benefit from works such as Case, W. (2015), Jagger, S. (2018) and Rother, S. (2018).

Second, the intensity of this new divide warrants an urgent need to initiate discussions on patriotism in Malaysia, and research in this area remains limited. When discussions on patriotism are introduced to the public, they tend to move towards ethnoculturalism or multiculturalism. Further, the rise of populism, observed in the USA, Hungary, India, and Thailand, is not unique to Malaysia, implying that patriotism in this country is not on the verge of disappearance. However, the conflict between the two extremes, the left (multiculturalism) and the right (ethnoculturalism) may be severe. When both parties push the issues, they represent two extreme ends, and the centre is eventually squeezed out once uncontrollable. The proposed model below aids in understanding enlightened patriotism logic to neutralise the extremes.

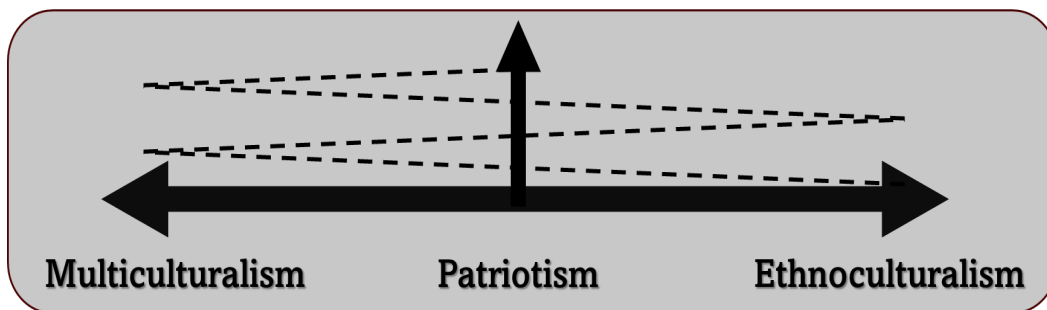


Figure 1: Model of Enlightened Patriotism Interaction

The search for patriotism in Malaysia involves multiculturalism and ethnocultural extremes. Historically, political contestation has moved horizontally to the left or right. Based on the proposed model, enlightened patriotism is crucial to draw those extremes vertically towards the centre. This approach ensures that the search for patriotism, encompassing logos and ethos, is acceptable and remains positive. More importantly, discussions on nationalism, patriotism and cosmopolitanism must be intricately linked to understanding civil society and democracy. The Democracy Index 2022 for Malaysia indicates that the country is not inherently perceived as authoritarian, unlike Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam. Among the so-called “flawed democracy” regimes, Malaysia ranked higher than the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand (Democracy Index, 2022).

Following Steven B. Smith’s perspective (2021), there is a significant need for patriotism in the US and other countries, including Malaysia, grappling with the challenges of the age of extremes. Moreover, some scholars have begun to recognise the

significance of patriotism and acknowledge the limitations of cosmopolitanism. Notably, Nussbaum (2019) shifted away from her cosmopolitanism stance. Policymakers within funding agencies must realise the necessity of re-evaluating patriotism as a leading subject. This re-evaluation is essential in understanding the political landscape and shaping the discourse on civil society. Malaysian public funding agencies, like the National Unity and Higher Education ministries, may facilitate such endeavours. Patriotism is a concept that must be cultivated. Experts in civil society and democracy, including Malaysia, should focus on the increasing divide between the newly leaning left and right in civil society and democracy research.

Policy and practical recommendations

Based from this study, at least three possible policy and practical recommendations were offered, which is firstly is to introduce civil education in schools, institutions of higher learning (IHLs). It is important to embed Rukun Negara and constitutional literacy in project-based civic learning tied to local history either through museum partnerships, neighbourhood oral histories). Service-learning requirement for upper secondary and tertiary students (e.g., environmental restoration, eldercare tech support) assessed on teamwork and public impact. Furthermore, introduce critical patriotism modules that teach how dissent, watchdog journalism, and CSO advocacy can be patriotic (guardrails against jingoism/populism).

Second recommendations were involving NGO and youth programming. Effort in fund cross-cleavage consortia (faith-based + secular; urban + rural) to co-deliver welfare, education, and climate projects; require joint monitoring and shared metrics (beneficiary satisfaction, cost-per-impact, diversity of volunteers). Digital civics grants for youth creators to produce short-form content linking national principles to everyday problem-solving; pair with media-literacy mentors. Institutionalise pandemic-era solidarity: a National Mutual Aid Registry and playbooks co-authored by CSOs for rapid mobilisation during floods/health shocks.

Third recommendation relates to Government unity programmes. Among them is to align grants with the National Unity Blueprint 2021–2030 and Action Plan; score proposals on intercultural collaborations and patriotism outcomes (e.g., trust, cross-group empathy). Next, an effort to Rukun Tetangga modernisation, involving micro-grants for block-level projects; open datasets on participation to build transparency/learning.

Finally, on revising the evaluation framework: annual Unity & Patriotism Dashboard tracking: trust indices, intercultural contact frequency, youth service hours, volunteer retention, and inclusive governance indicators.

Limitations and future research

Among the limitations of this SLR is among others relate to language and database bias. This is because only an English-only WoS/Scopus thus sampling under-captures Malay-language scholarship and local journals. Future updates will search MyCite/MyJurnal and Bahasa Melayu keywords, and include policy/grey literature. The next limitation is concerning empirical consistency: We standardised “empirical” as explicit methods + data, but borderline conceptual papers persist; future work should triangulate with expert interviews, survey microdata (e.g., youth trust/patriotism), and organisational records. Lastly, another limitation is on time-boundedness, in which the cut-off at 2021 omits GE15 and post-pandemic shifts; a living SLR should add 2022–2025 materials.

CONCLUSION

While the Systematic Literature Review method is widely applied in science, engineering and clinical research, highlighting the reproducibility of research, this research raises concerns about its limited applicability in arts and humanities. The strict adherence to the SLR protocol inhibits comprehensive discussions on the conceptualisation of terms/themes/topics in different ways and how these conceptualisations interconnect or remain disconnected. A significant constraint is the oversight of research in non-English languages, particularly publications in Malay, necessitating consideration in future research. The findings on civil society and democracy exhibit variability based on approach, data type and methods. This SLR suggests that a broader understanding of politics and patriotism requires the inclusion of new variables in the civil society and democracy discourse. This ROSES-guided SLR shows a field polarised between cosmopolitan and Islamic universalism, with the shared centre—patriotism as civic loyalty to Malaysia—under-theorised and under-practised. By reframing patriotism as logos + ethos, nested in the constitutional monarchy and Rukun Negara, and by operationalising intercultural collaboration toward common goods, civil society and democracy can be mutually reinforcing. Concrete reforms in civic education,

NGO practice, and unity programming can cultivate a constructive patriotism that resists both jingoism and rootless universalism.

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Author contributions

All authors contribute as a writer in this article.

Conflict of interest

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