

Building Governance Capacity Through Institutional Reforms: The Malaysian Experience

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Abstract

The concept of ‘New Malaysia’ was envisioned by Pakatan Harapan (PH) as part of their political pledges to build better governance capacity through institutional reforms. This was seen as a decisive move in view of a widening trust deficit between the government and society. Driven by this interest, this study aims to gauge the significant impact of institutional reforms in its professed ability to support the good governance agenda and to elevate public trust towards the government. Primary data was collected from 203 respondents via a survey questionnaire. The findings show that efforts to improve governance capacity via institutional reforms were commendable with more than 45 per cent respondents rating reforms as above par. Attempts to elevate a sense of trust in government is evident with 32.5 per cent of the total variability in public trust being accounted for by institutional reforms. This research adds to the body of knowledge relating to important corollary of institutional reforms towards better political governance in Malaysia.

Keywords: New Malaysia; Institutional reforms; Competency; Accountability; Transparency; Public trust

INTRODUCTION

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The manifesto of a Party represents the repertoire of party strategies. It provides a summary of valid party positions to gain democratic representation through election (Anja, 2011). According to Nikolous and Wolfgang (2017), the importance of an electoral manifesto can be summarized threefold; provide compendium of valid party positions, streamline the campaign and to be used as campaign materials for political support. The manifesto depicts the political pledges of a Party in envisioning their long-term policy strategies. These promises are to be honored and translated into policy outcomes once a political party has won power (David and Richard, 2020; Brouard, *et.al.*, 2018).

The Party manifesto is simply one among many factors that determine the likelihood of political success and voter behavior (Pablo, 2009 & Joseph, 2011). The significant influence that an electoral manifesto has on electoral outcomes forces the political party to prioritize issues based on matters that most concern voters (Markus

and Thomas, 2014; Spoon, 2014). Elected political parties are responsible for legislating on the issues highlighted in the manifesto (Brouard, *et al.*, 2018) and immediate action is demanded. Hence failure to deliver on the promises made in the manifesto means the Party would most likely be punished in the next election (Mansbridge, 2003). This was the strategy employed by *Pakatan Harapan* (PH) in the last General Election in Malaysia. Voters' interests were attended and salient issues were addressed in the manifesto released by PH. The political pledging made by PH represented 'symbolic agendas' and was perceived as the backbone in policy decisions.

Within 22 months in power, *Pakatan Harapan* strived to deliver a range of promises made in the 14th General Election. Sixty written promises in the 'Book of Hope' had been expected to be delivered within five years. The major reforms focused on rebranding political institutions by improving competency, accountability, transparency (C.A.T) and regaining political trust via institutional reforms. Previous issues such as mismanagement and corruption had taken a toll on the government's reputation; and with the presence of corruption in government, people tend to trust public institutions less (Mahyudin and Stephen, 2017). The damage caused by the previous government was too great, and there had been a trust deficit for many years (Tarrence Tan, 2019). As such, intervention through policy actions is indispensable to restore public trust (McLeary and Cruise, 2015, & Ari and Rina, 2010) since trust is considered an important determinant for good governance (Sulemana and Issifu, 2015). In addition, rigorous corrective measures are pivotal to improve the government's credibility, and thus institutional reforms are required to rebuild Malaysia, to reinvigorate transparency and accountability in government and to repair the trust deficit among the public.

Against this backdrop, this study aims to examine institutional reforms carried out by the *Pakatan Harapan* government. The objective of this paper is to assess public perceptions on reform initiatives carried out by PH and the impact of reforms on C.A.T and public trust. This article begins with an introduction to public sector reforms and highlighting the range of reforms introduced by the *Pakatan Harapan* government. The following section analyses challenges encountered throughout the reforms and explores its relationship in building governance capacity in the context of good governance. The key findings on public perception, correlation and regression analyses are presented in the final section. The relationship between variables is assessed to see the overall impact of institutional reforms as an antecedent factor on public trust.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Public Sector Reform

Public sector reform is perceived as largely instrumental since demand for good governance is on the rise. Driven by political will, reform is expected to strengthen the future capacity of government and to accentuate transformational change in the conduct of government business. Many have seen this as a dynamic way to overcome traditional bureaucratic barriers that hampered government performance and most of the development agenda. This could potentially bring greater effectiveness, transparency and accountability in government (Pablo, 2016).

Public sector reform is driven by a number of concerns such as the need to overcome strains on the governing system. Some view a reform-agenda as an attempt to lift the country from economic indolence, to deal with corruption or to find solutions for administrative and political problems. Some groups are highly motivated by the need to strengthen state institutional capacity for effective policy making and implementation; to invigorate the New Public Management (NPM) market-oriented approach and to re-build and strengthen social networks, community, and civil society (Cheung and Scott, 2003). New waves of managerialism have marked significant reforms in the public sector in the United Kingdom and United States. The former witnessed a diverse form of reforms ranging from a new managerialism approach, privatization, to a complex partnership between public and private bodies. Despite positive steps taken in the United Kingdom, reforms in that country have experienced many unintended outcomes, partly due to bureaucrat confusion and a lack of understanding of the intended outcomes (Ghobadian, Viney and Redwood, 2009). Similar New Public Management range of reforms were introduced into the American public sector. Significant changes in the areas of public policy and public administration can be seen through the implementation of privatization, client-oriented approach and performance measurements. Such initiatives, however, are unlikely to improve the level of satisfaction and trust towards government agencies (Mizrahi, Vigoda-Gadot and Van Ryzin, 2010). Therefore, it is crucial for the public to witness the real impact brought about by reforms as this would bring greater support for the government's reformation agenda.

Similarly, these have been the major focus of PH's transformational agenda. Substantial interest has been devoted to improving state institutional capacity as the precondition to build capable, transparent, efficient and trust in government; these are vitally important to sustain a government's legitimacy to govern (Ali farazmand, 2015). From this perspective, reform is and always has been an eminently political motivated agenda. However, one should understand that the size, nature and scope of reforms are varied across countries. The existence of the three paradigm of reforms as depicted are not a one-size fits all model, hence reform initiatives are limited in scope and circumstances. Keeping in mind these caveats, experiences of success and failure in public sector reforms are contingent upon many factors. For instance, most of the current reforms in Singapore aim to nurture an attitude of service excellence in meeting the needs of the public and to foster an environment which induces continuous change for greater efficiency and effectiveness (Cheung, 2003). Meanwhile, in Thailand, reform is driven by political moves to enhance the institutional capacity of the state. This is part of government initiative in tackling political and administrative corruption in Thailand (Brewer, 2003).

In contrast, public sector reform in Vietnam is limited to the economic and administrative sectors rather than full-on political reform. Even so, any reform was constrained by political will and resources (Painter, 2003). Vietnam has seen a series of reforms and initiatives since 1986, however many of the initiatives were contested and thus making the pace of change slow. In the case of Indonesia, reform was driven by New Public Management (NPM) principles. However, the impact of reforms were limited and far from satisfactory and failed to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of public service. The ideal concept of NPM was unattainable in practice due to limited expertise and resources (Dasman and Hermanto, 2019).

In the case of Malaysia, the overall aspect of governance was consolidated gradually through public sector reforms, an essential part of political and administrative reform in Malaysia. As part of the governments obligation to its citizens, public demands for better service delivery was reformed by re-designing the administrative system and process, streamlining public sector through privatization, cultivating work ethics and re-aligning reforms across policy dimensions. Moving away from traditional practice, most of the reforms embarked after the 1990s were consistent and aligned to NPM-principles (Siddiquee, 2008). The Malaysian experience reveals that positive transformation was recorded throughout the reforms, but the magnitude of change was

limited and less impactful. Decades of reform in MPS revealed that although reforms are steps in the right direction, their impacts so far have been modest (Siddiquee, 2006 & Siddiquee, 2008). Despite the challenges, the consolidation of public sector management continues and PH was lauded for embarking on initiatives created to generate sustainable public sector performance in Malaysia.

Institutional and Political Reforms Under *Pakatan Harapan* (PH) Government

The aftermath of the 14th General Election has changed the Malaysian political landscape with the unexpected loss of Barisan Nasional after 60 years in power. Political parties that were once known as the opposition had formed the government. This coalition known as *Pakatan Harapan* had received a mandate to rule, thus given hope for a better Malaysia. The framework of New Malaysia was built on the five main thrusts, namely to reduce people's burdens, to reform institutional and political governance, to spur sustainable and equitable economic growth, to return Sabah and Sarawak to the status accorded in Malaysia Agreement 1963, and to create a Malaysia that is inclusive, moderate and respected globally (Tommy, 2018).

The five thrusts are encapsulated in 60 promises with ten promises expected to be delivered within the first 100 days of the new administration. The 10 things listed in PH's 100-day agenda were to abolish the Goods and Service Tax (GST), to stabilize fuel subsidies, to solve FELDA-debt related issues, to introduce Employment Provident Fund (EPF) scheme for housewives, to improve minimum wages, to ease the burden of National Higher Education Fund Corporation (PTPTN) loan borrowers, to set up a Royal Commission of Inquiry into scandal-ridden institutions, to restore Sabah and Sarawak's autonomous rights as enshrined in the Malaysia Agreement 1963 (MA63), to conduct a comprehensive review of mega projects and to introduce scheme 'peduli sihat' (Buku Harapan, 2018). In order to facilitate this process, the Council of Eminent Persons (CEP) was formed and was responsible to advise PH in political and economic matters.

Easing People's Burden

PH championed the issue of easing people's burdens by reintroducing the SST, providing affordable housing, restructuring subsidies, and abolishing highway tolls. However, the move to abolish toll collecting was met with criticism since doing so

meant more debt being incurred. The government was forced to reverse that decision amid public disappointments over their wavering policy decision. At the core of this agenda is the abolishment of the Goods and Services Tax (GST). The implementation of the GST allegedly led to an increase in the general price of goods and a higher cost of living; hence a better situation could be expected by reinstating SST. However, this course of action – the reinstatement of the SST - would reduce revenue collection to RM 30 billion compared to RM 40 billion when GST was collected by the government. Such a political move took a toll on the government’s collection of tax revenue, thus putting the administration in a tight position due to mounting public debt. People criticized the changes in the cost of living after the SST was introduced. Even though the price of 291 items had been reduced, the overall cost of living has been profusely high, thus the reality was a bitter pill to swallow for many people on the ground. (Sandosam, 2018).

Mounting pressure due to higher cost of living forced the government to continue the household living aid also known as *Bantuan Sara Hidup* (BSH) with improved eligibility requirements set up to help those in need. The targeted groups would be divided into four categories, namely households earning below 2000 would be entitled to RM 1000, households earning 2001 to 3000 would be entitled to receive RM 750, households earning 3001 to 4000 would be entitled to get RM 500, and single individuals earning below 2000 would be entitled to receive RM 100. An additional disbursement was given to children with RM 120 per dependant with a maximum of four children per family. Another known ‘bread and butter’ issue was the fuel subsidy which was revised and so, as a result, the fuel price was stabilized. Different rules were established with, for example, vehicle owners driving cars below 1500cc could receive the subsidy of up to 100 litres per month while eligible motorists who own motorcycles below 125cc would be able to enjoy RON 95 petrol at lower prices with a subsidized price for 40 litres per month. In this policy proposal, owners of cars under 1,500cc and motorcycles under 125cc are entitled to a subsidy of 30sen (Ton and Timbuong, 2018).

Institutional and Political Reforms

On institutional and political reforms, substantial interest has been devoted to improve the reputation of the Royal Malaysian Police (RMP), to place term-limits on the Prime Minister and Ministers, to resolve corrupt-ridden institutions such as 1MDB, Felda and others, to revamp and to empower the Malaysian Anti-Corruption

Commission, to restore the credibility of parliamentary institutions, judiciary institutions and the public sector (Borneo Post, 2020). Calls for institutional reforms had come in the right time so as to improve a government administration that was saddled with onerously irrelevant measures and practices which had since become public knowledge. The overarching aims to reduce executive influence by restructuring the MACC, improving the RMP and judiciary's reputation were successfully reported to the public, this includes improvement in administration. For instance, there became a public appointment process in which few important positions, including judicial appointment, was set to be reviewed by the Parliamentary Select committee.

Another important mission addressed by PH has been the re-consolidation of public debt. This includes an extensive investigation on financial scandals and corruption on 1MDB, FELDA, MARA and *Tabung Haji*. There has been a comprehensive review of all mega projects awarded to foreign companies with special attention given to the Bandar Malaysia, Tun Razak Exchange (TRX) project, the East Coast Rail Link (ECRL) and the Mass Rapid Transit Line (MRT3). For the purposes of this review, the government established the Debt Management Office to pro-actively manage the overall government debt and liabilities, and to undertake comprehensive assessment of fiscal risk exposure (The Star, 2019). As a result, projects worth billions of Ringgit have been deferred, suspended and cancelled in view of the fiscal implication it could have on the total public debt (Shaniza Ong, 2019).

In order to ensure the long-term sustainability of the people, strategic measures as the EPF-scheme for housewives, new minimum wage levels and economic investments were introduced. However, the proposal to increase the minimum wage from RM 1000 to 1500 within five years was heavily criticized by employers due to the direct impact it would have on their cost of production. Considering the impact, the government's final decision involved increasing the minimum wage from RM 1000 to RM 1100 for Peninsular Malaysia, Sabah and Sarawak (Suresh Ram, 2019). Employees are expected to see consistent increments in minimum wage within five years. In promoting a healthier lifestyle, the Ministry of Health launched a non-smoking campaign to encourage smokers to quit smoking followed by a ruling on a ban on smoking in all restaurants which came into force in 2019. For the health scheme, the PH government introduced the National B40 Protection Scheme at a premium rate without insurance companies making any profit. The insurance covers 36 critical illnesses including AIDS, Alzheimer's, blindness, cancer and heart attacks (Kannan, 2018).

Additionally, the interests of both Sabah and Sarawak has been put into the limelight. In line with the Malaysian Agreement of 1963 (MA63), PH pledged to secure Sabah and Sarawak's right through decentralization of power. This is to restore Sabah and Sarawak status as the equal partnership with Peninsular Malaysia. The implementation of MA63 would rectify the economic inequality of people in Sabah and Sarawak and ensure the restoration of their rights and privileges. The PH government however failed in its bid to amend the federal constitution to make Sabah and Sarawak equal partners in the country's federation when they only secured 138 votes out of 148 needed to pass the bill (The Straits Times, 2019). The debate on the equal status and rights of Sabah and Sarawak would continue relentlessly without any concrete solutions.

Making Malaysia More Inclusive, Moderate and Respected Globally

On a different note, considerable progress has been made in making Malaysia more inclusive, moderate and respected globally. Recent years have witnessed attempts by the PH government in protecting disabled people, reducing crime, strengthening family and social institutions, empowering civil society, and improving the educational system and the reputations of public universities. Reforms in the educational system stretches the policy and administrative capacities of schools and higher education institutions. Many initiatives have been developed to review the educational system in order to keep it abreast with the industrial revolution 4.0. This can be seen through the deliberative decision made by the Ministry of Education to set exam-free settings for primary school pupils from Year 1 to Year 3, dropping the Malaysia Education Quality Standard auditing exercise in order to relieve teachers from the burden of clerical duties (Hazlina and Murniati, 2018). Priorities have been set for teachers to elevate their job performance by focusing on their core teaching responsibilities.

Likewise, a whole-hearted commitment was shown in empowering women. PH had been determined to increase participation of women in policy making and appointments at top government positions. This can be seen through the appointment of the Chief Justice and Central Bank Governor. Apart from this, issues such as extending retirement age, pension scheme and scheme '*peduli sihat*' were attended adequately. On the welfare of people with disabilities (OKU) and Orang Asli, collaboration with Non-Governmental Organizations was strengthened, and improvements towards special education and the academic performance of Orang Asli students nationwide were

considered (Bernama, 2019). Conspicuous success was recorded by PH in making Malaysia more respected globally, prompted by the public demand to improve integrity and credibility of the government. Strategic integrity frameworks were introduced and translated into many program structures and policy actions at the federal level. Reforms of key institutions including the judiciary, Attorney General's Chambers, the police, the Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission (MACC) and the Election Commission (EC) were among the measures employed to improve the integrity of public sector institutions. More intensive measures such as the independency of institutions under parliament purview and changing key appointed officers were carried out. PH appears to be genuinely committed to enhancing the quality of governance by implementing the National Anti-Corruption Plan (2019-2023) to replace National Integrity Plan (NIP). This manifesto is the backbone of the continuous and consistent efforts of Pakatan Harapan to fully address governance, integrity and corruption in a 'New Malaysia'.

It must be noted that any reform is, and has always been, accompanied with effective regulatory changes. Some reforms require legislative approval to be enforceable. However, PH faces formidable difficulty in securing support from two-thirds of Members of Parliament. Due to inadequate support, PH failed in its bids to grant equal status to Sabah and Sarawak, and to repeal the repressive Anti-Fake News Act. This would erode public trust and confidence towards PH's ability to abolish draconian laws in Malaysia. The public questioned the capability of PH to reform law, especially when many decisions were u-turned due to one reason after another. This includes the withdrawal of the National Security Act (NSA) bill in the House of Representative. Despite the constraints, there have been some successes stories reported in regards to regulatory reforms such as the lowering of the voting age to 18 years old, the peaceful assembly initiative of 2019, the Educational Institution (Discipline) Amendment bill of 2018, the private higher education (Amendment) bill 2018, and the Universities and University Colleges (Amendment) bill 2018. These bills' primary purpose has been to increase participation of students in political activities.

The transformative steps to improve government performance via institutional reforms did not go unchallenged. In fact, Pakatan Harapan's reform agenda was criticized from the very beginning on several grounds. Hiccups along the reform processes are to be expected due to inadequate experiences of its cabinet members. People have lamented the reversing of many decisions by PH and many have been pessimistic about their ability to fulfill promises and deliver results. The capability of

PH in managing political reforms, let alone institutional reforms, was criticized due to resistance coming from bureaucrats. Reform agendas are rationed by factors that including shortage of key resources. Therefore, an analysis on reforms initiated by PH through the lens of public opinion is vitally important. It helps us gauge public sentiment and their perception after 22 months of PH being in power. This serves as the report card to assess *Pakatan Harapan* actual achievements in fulfilling their political manifesto and public expectations. At this point, the study would be useful in guiding political parties on planning and developing better strategies for greater public support in the future.

Building Governance Capacity: Strengthening Public Trust and Good Governance

Trust is a multidimensional concept which can be operationalized into generalized trust, public trust, and social trust which aims to promote civic participation in the political process (McLeary and Cruise, 2015). A great number of studies have indeed illuminated the relationship between trust and participation in organizations, political institutions, as well as economic growth (Eran and Fany, 2003; Slangen, *et.al.*, 2003; Ari and Rinna, 2010 and Mahyudin and Stephen, 2017). In the context of organizational management, administrative performance is treated as a precondition to trust. Hence managerial quality leads to administrative performance and ultimately trust in governance (Eran, *et.al.*, 2003). On the grassroots level, trust could be measured through the quality of service provided by government bodies. Improvements in quality, delivery and timeliness have been identified as determinant factors of public confidence and trust towards government (Dasman and Hermanto, 2019).

A study by Ari and Rinna, (2010) discovered that ethical conduct among public officers are a fundamental aspect in elevating public trust in public sector organizations. In striving towards good and reliable governance, it is expected that there be zero toleration towards corruption and unethical actions since immoral behaviors would jeopardize both public trust and good governance. On a theoretical note, trust is the best component of social capital and is significantly related to various outcomes including the practice of good governance. Administrative ethical practices have always been recognized as a critical tool for determining good governance and the trust of the citizenry (Momna, *et.al.*,2016). Good governance enhances the trust of the public in organizations (Berman, 2006) whereas distrust grows from a lack of transparency,

corruption, and an imbalance of resource distribution which would turn into a major stumbling block to good governance. The manifestation of the Malaysian experience is such that desirable governance principles like competency, accountability and public trust are hardly attainable and on steady decline due to poor governance. These key governing principles are all considered critical components of good governance (Wei, et.al., 2017). As such, more reforms in public service are needed in order to sustain good governance and reputation of public institutions in Malaysia (Loo, 2018).

Developing trust towards political institutions is perceived to be one of the preconditional factors to sustainable political legitimacy. However, a betrayal of trust by powerful political figures in the past had inevitably deteriorated the level of trust towards the government. According to Nurisyal and Norhaninah (2020), power personalization among political leaders with neoliberal ideologies has been a factor in the corruption in emerging nations such as Malaysia. This can be seen in a number of cases such as 1MDB, FELDA, MARA, and SRC International, etc (National Anti-Corruption Plan, 2019-2023). On this ground, restoring public trust in government is vital since trust determines the success or failure of political institutions. In reaction to this, PH put into action a motion to establish trust and reliable governance through political and institutional reforms. The corruption and mismanagement of the previous government intensified the need to legally, structurally and administratively revamp both political and public institutions. This in turn would greatly enhance competency, accountability and transparency (C.A.T) of the government of the day. Thus through embracing these principles, public satisfaction, quality of governance and public trust could be recovered and is the precondition to a better government (Ari and Rinna, 2010 and Mahyudin & Stephen, 2015). However, PH faces a long and hard road towards the future. Imminent political reforms were swept away and rebuilding a 'New Malaysia' was diminished due to political unrest which led to the PH government collapsing after 22 months in power. Thus, the following hypothesis can be inferred from the literature on political trust and governance:

H1: Institutional reforms positively influence public trust towards *Pakatan Harapan* (PH) government.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Based on the scope of the study, the depth of the problem will be assessed using quantitative techniques. Public perception towards institutional reforms, expected outcome of reforms and the relationship between institutional reforms and public trust were examined quantitatively using a survey questionnaire comprised of close-ended questions. A self-administered questionnaire was used in the study with a total of five constructs developed and measured using itemized and five point Likert-scaling. Accordingly, 21 items were developed to measure institutional reforms carried out during the PH administration. These items covered fiscal, regulatory and administrative initiatives measured using itemized scaling ranging from poor to excellent. For C.A.T, the study developed six items to measure competency, five items for accountability and four items to assess the level of transparency. All items are measured using itemized scaling from 1 ‘not improved at all’, to 5 ‘fully improved’. Respondents’ perception on the level of public trust is measured using six questions with responses that range from 1 ‘strongly disagree’ to 5 ‘strongly agree’.

The self-administered survey was conducted among undergraduate students with 203 local students majoring in political science participating in the study. A convenience sampling techniques was used, thus forsaking the generalizability aspect of the study. SPSS version 26 has been used to run descriptive analysis and to measure the relationship between variables. On reliability notes, an internal consistency test was conducted. The best technique for assessing reliability is given by Cronbach’s Alpha where the Alpha values range between 0 and 1, with a high value indicating a high level of consistency among the items (Uma Sekaran, 2000). Notably, all constructs have exceeded the minimum acceptable level for reliability threshold. Table 1 reveals reliability test for all constructs.

Table 1: *Reliability Test*

Variable	Cronbach’s Alpha (α)
Institutional Reforms	0.835
Competency	0.638
Accountability	0.843
Transparency	0.871
Public Trust	0.901

FINDINGS

A total of 203 respondents participated in the study. Out of the 203 respondents, 37.4% respondents are male and 62.6% are female within an age group of 20 to 25 years old. Based on their parents' income, 42.3 percent of the respondents are coming from the B 40 group (total income < RM 4,849), 29.9 percent from middle income (total income < RM 10,959) and 27.9 percent from high income group (total income > RM 10,961). The B40, M40 and T20 exist to clarify household income to the top 20 %, middle 40 % and bottom 40 %. The study highlights respondents' economic status, hence it is considered as one of the factors influencing public views on government policy (Manstead, 2018).

Institutional reform covers three main areas, namely in the areas of fiscal, regulatory and administration. These reforms, in essence, are laid down to improve government's competency, accountability and transparency. These expected outcomes are likely to restore public trust, confidence and credibility of government which has been facing a deficit in public opinion over the past few years. The study reveals that 48.8% of respondents believe that reforms can boost public support for PH while 52.2% of respondents perceive reforms as an instrument to improve government competency, accountability and transparency.

Table 2 shows respondents' views on several reform initiatives from June 2018 to January 2020. About 55.6 per cent of respondents appraised the continuation of Bantuan Sara Hidup (BSH). This program is highly warranted as direct cash assistance would ease household burden in regard to daily expenses. In regards to fiscal management, measures undertaken to reduce public debt (79.1%), to replace GST with SST (60.3%), to review mega projects (66.5%) were perceived highly by majority of the respondents and rated above par. Even though outcomes were not fully delivered, people perceived such initiatives as highly desirable.

Table 2: *Institutional Reforms (Administrative, Regulatory and Fiscal Reforms)*

Item	Poor %	Fair %	Average %	Good %	Excellent %
1. The management of public debt by MOF	3	18.2	48.3	26.9	3.9
2. The abolishment of GST	24.6	15.1	32.2	25.1	3.0
3. The 2019 budget tabled by PH government	4.0	15.5	52.0	24.5	4.0
4. The allocation of resources for various policy sectors	6.5	14.6	44.7	29.6	4.5

5. The setting of petrol price and subsidy by PH government	10.0	18.9	36.3	32.8	2.0
6. The continuation of Bantuan Sara Hidup (BSH) to B40 group	6.9	9.9	27.6	45.3	10.3
7. The comprehensive review on mega projects (MRT3, ECRL) awarded to foreign companies	6.4	28.1	30.5	25.6	9.4
8. The enactment of lowering voting age	14.8	22.7	19.7	30	12.8
9. An attempt made by PH to repeal National Security Act (NSA)	6.0	12.4	47.3	25.9	8.5
10. An attempt to repeal Anti-Fake News Act	11.8	17.7	18.2	33.5	18.7
11. proposal to limit Prime Minister and Chief Minister term to two maximum years	2.0	11.8	29.1	32.5	24.6
12. The amendment (c) of Section 15 (2) of Universities and University Colleges Act 1971 UUCA that allows students to take part in political party activities	4.9	5.9	16.3	46.3%	26.6
13. The implementation of standardised minimum wage for Peninsular Malaysia, Sabah and Sarawak	1	10.0	22.4	34.8	31.8
14. The proposal to set up parliamentary select committees for the appointment of top government officials	-	12.7	41.1	37.1	9.1
15. The setting of Management Debt Office to manage and review country's fiscal and public debt	1.0	13.3	30.5	48.3	6.9
16. The new appointment of Chief Commissioner of MACC	2.0	16.7	40.4	32.5	8.4
17. The appointment of new Chairman for Electoral Commission (EC)	1.0	10.9	42.8	33.8	11.4
18. Reducing teachers' clerical tasks by MOE	1.5	9.9	19.7	42.4	26.6
19. PH's effort in empowering women in policy making	2.0	5.9	14.8	48.3	29.1
20. The implementation of medical coverage for B40	3.0	5.9	18.2	44.8	28.1

Improvement on regulatory aspects is also evident according to the data as most of the regulatory measures were positively perceived by respondents. The attempts on amending the Universities and University Colleges (Amendment) bill 2018 (72.9%), introducing a new minimum wage (66.6%) and new voting age (42.8%) were highly commended. The government's decision in increasing the minimum wage was timely in lieu of the rising cost of living. Issues such as empowering youth and students' rights were championed by PH and brought much hope in the political movements coming out of the 'New Malaysia' initiative. Likewise, more than 50% of respondents viewed the proposal to limit the terms of the Prime Minister and Chief Ministers as a significant move. On empowering women, 77.4% of respondents rated all initiatives as laudable.

However, some regulatory amendments were unsuccessful due to inadequate support from legislative members. For instance, the decision to amend the National Security Act (NSA) was reverted and as a result, a more comprehensive review needs to be done for positive results. Reforms brought by PH were indeed recognized despite the failure to amend initiatives such as the fake news, NSA bills, among others.

It should be noted that the implementation of new administrative measures was perceived positively. Efforts to improve public sector management, to revamp public appointments, ways of managing public debt, reducing teachers’ clerical tasks, and new types of health coverage were highly regarded with more than 45% of respondents rating these reforms as good. Despite ongoing challenges, most of the reforms carried out by PH were rated above par; however, much still remains to be done in the endeavor towards a better Malaysia.

Competency, Accountability, Transparency (C.A.T) and Public Trust

Institutional reforms are central to improving government performance. In the context of this study, institutional reforms are seen as the predetermined factor in enhancing government competency, accountability and transparency. These are the key elements of good governance and perceived to be closely associated with public trust. With regards to governments’ C.A.T, this study reveals that the overall initiatives towards greater C.A.T are viewed positively by the public. However, the pace of reform is slowing down. Table 3 presents the perception of respondents in regard to the degree of C.A.T improvement after reforms were carried out.

Table 3: *Competency, Accountability and Transparency (C.A.T)*

Competency	Not Improved at all %	Poorly Improved %	Slightly Improved %	Improved %	Fully Improved %
The cabinet members are competent in carrying out their responsibilities	10.3	13.3	48.3	26.1	2.0
Public servants are behaving in a competent manner	2.0	20.2	46.3	28.6	2.0
Government formulates many promising new ideas that improve citizens’ life	3.0	15.8	51.2	26.1	3.9

Public leadership and management in Malaysian public service are well qualified and have high professional standards	3.0	12.3	54.2	27.6	3.0
provide quality solutions for public needs	4.4	17.7	45.8	30.0	2.0
Government agencies respond to public requests quickly	3.9	20.7	42.4	29.1	3.9
Accountability					
Cabinet members demonstrates strong sense of accountability	3.9	21.7	50.2	22.2	2.0
PH government is accountable in every actions taken in various policy areas	4.9	27.6	38.4	25.1	3.9
Misused of power among public authorities has been on decline	5.4	19.7	48.3	19.7	6.9
public authorities are honest	4.9	28.6	50.7	13.8	2.0
The mistakes of public officials are corrected without delay	4.9	30.5	34.0	29.6	1.0
Transparency					
All policy decisions made by PH government is very transparent	3.9	17.7	49.8	28.6	-
Government's transparency in policy making	2.0	16.7	43.8	34.5	3.0
The implementation of laws and regulation	1.0	10.3	51.7	35.0	2.0
Transparency in the appointment of top government official	3.0	15.4	54.7	25.9	1.0

The findings reveal that the government competency level has slightly improved with more than 45% of respondents believing that public servants are more competent and more responsive to public demands. Their ability to formulate and implement policies is apparently improving with nearly 51.2% of respondents believing that many new policy ideas were created to improve citizens' standard of living. Nonetheless, significant improvements on the accountability aspects is also notable. About 50.2% of respondents agree that cabinet members have successfully demonstrated a strong sense of accountability. This can be seen through the policy decisions across sectors. Uncompromising actions taken by PH against the financial scandals was critical since

the public views such moves as beneficial with 48.3% of respondents believing that cases involving misuse of power and corruption were properly handled; this improved accountability of the public authorities and the government in general. With regards to transparency, 49.8% of respondents agree that transparency in policy decisions were improved - this includes transparency among top government officials (54.7%). The computed mean value for all three constructs from competency ($m=3.11$, $SD=.716$), accountability ($m= 3.01$, $SD=.696$), and transparency ($m=3.13$, $SD= .652$), implies that a majority of respondents agree that there is a slight improvement in the government's C.A.T.

Eliminating corruption and mismanagement are decisive moves to restore trust towards the government. On this note, concerted efforts were carried out to fight corruption in Malaysia. Table 4 presents a descriptive analysis on public trust towards government. The finding depicts that a majority of the respondents are still divided in trusting public authorities, political leaders, and public sector organizations. The public seems divided when it comes to trusting the government (28.3% disagree, 27.2 % agree) and political leaders (28.3 disagree, 30.3% agree). Obviously, improvement of public trust is less perceptible. This perhaps could be attributed to repeated reversals of important decisions and internal conflicts within the PH coalition which led to its fracturing.

However, the PH government has achieved a fair bit throughout their administration, especially in policy making process. It is interesting to note that 42.2% of respondents agreed that public engagement in policy making has significantly improved and this was evident with the increase in stakeholders through policy engagement in the policy making process.

Table 4: *Public Trust*

Item	Disagree %	Neutral %	Agree %
Public trust towards government has improved	28.3	44.4	27.2
Public trust towards public sector organizations has improved	23.2	41.4	35.3
Public trust towards political leaders has improved	28.3	41.4	30.3

Public trust towards public authorities has improved	19.2	52.5	28.3
Public engagement in policy making has significantly improved	13.1	44.4	42.4
An increase in government’s competency, transparency and accountability has improved overall public trust on public institutions	16.1	49.5	34.3

A correlational analysis was performed to measure the degree of association between institutional reforms, the three governing principles in C.A.T and public trust.

Table 5: *Correlation Matrix*

Variables	Competency	Accountability	Transparency	Public	Ins.Reforms Trust
1. Competency	1	.632	.516	.485	.468
2. Accountability	.632	1	.656	.592	.657
3. Transparency	.516	.656	1	.551	.521
4. Public Trust	.485	.592	.551	1	.570
5. Ins.Reforms	.468	.657	.521	.570	1

As presented in Table 5, the institutional reforms are positively linked to government competency, accountability and transparency. The findings indicate institutional reforms are highly associated with accountability at $r = .657$, followed by transparency at $r = .521$ and moderately related to competency at $r = .468$. This data implies that the more extensive the reform, the higher the level of government competency, accountability and transparency. Indeed, reforms introduced by the PH government have been moving in the right direction towards targeted outcomes.

Nevertheless, the study also indicates that institutional reforms and public trust are positively related at $r = .570$. The findings supports the *Pakatan Harapan* stance on the expected outcome of reforms since these measures have been designed to elevate public trust towards the *Pakatan Harapan* government (The Star, 2019). The restoration of public trust is the primary agenda of the PH administration, therefore institutional and political reforms are considered to be fundamental moves directed towards that agenda. This is vital since there would be a significant trust deficit due to past corruption and other malpractices. The moderate relationship implies that the chances of improving public trust towards government through effective and strategic institutional reforms are strong.

Next, an in-depth analysis has been performed to evaluate the level of influence that the institutional reforms have on public trust. A simple linear regression analysis is used to determine the degree of influence between the independent variable, namely institutional reforms, towards public trust.

Table 6: *Simple Linear Regression*

Variable	R	R Square	Anova	Coefficient			
				F	Sig	t	Sig
1. Institutional Reforms	.570 ^a	.325	96.591	.000	9.828	.000	

*Predictor Variables: Institutional Reforms

*Dependent Variables: Public Trust

Table 6 presents the coefficient result for regression analysis. As shown in the table above, the predictor variable is useful in predicting the dependant variable. The relationship between independent (Institutional Reforms) and dependent variable (Public Trust) is significant at $p \leq 0.05$. As such, the variability in public trust is explained by institutional reforms. The R square explicates the percentage of the variance in the dependent variable. Approximately 32.5 percent of the total variability in public trust can be accounted for by institutional reforms. The hypothesis predicts the influence that institutional reforms have on perceived public trust. The strength of influence the independent variable has on the dependent variable indicates that the null hypothesis is rejected. The prediction of the relationship between the independent variables and dependent variables is well-supported. Based on the t and F values, this study therefore concludes that institutional reforms significantly influence public trust towards the government. This relationship signifies the importance of political and institutional reforms in the government’s policy agenda.

DISCUSSION

Reform, in essence, seeks to build institutional capacity and public trust. The breadth and depth of institutional reforms signaled the PH’s long political commitment to build a ‘New Malaysia’. There was vigorous public support for the anticipated changes brought by the new government in rebuilding the capacity for governance. The findings in this study reveal that most of the institutional reforms introduced by PH

were well appraised and rated. Similar observations can be seen in the government's competency, accountability and transparency (C.A.T). Improvements in C.A.T has been largely perceived well by respondents, however it does not directly equate to public trust. The degree of trust towards the government and political leaders has been ascending but at a moderate level. The self-reversals of several decisions made by the PH administration thus deterred a quick rebuilding of public trust. This had been largely contributed by the incompetency of political executives due to a lack of experience in political administration. In this context, support from bureaucrats is essential for political leaders to understand the nuances in administration and governance. Evidently, building governance capacity through political and administrative reforms requires enormous political commitment, bureaucracy, and political will.

These onerous responsibilities are not only shouldered by political leaders but bureaucrats as well. As the machinery of government, the public bureaucracy plays a profound role in institutional reforms. Their morale, support and commitment are instrumental for change to be carried out. After being ruled under BN for 60 years, the intimate relation between the political and the bureaucracy posed great challenges to PH. The greatest challenge lay in gaining support from public bureaucrats. It must be noted that the recalcitrance to reform should never be underestimated and that political determination without adequate support from the bureaucrats would jeopardize the reform agenda. Their heightened commitment is one of the major impediments since changes on the ground have been very slow to happen. Thus, in order to steer the process, support from public bureaucracy is indispensable. Indeed, bureaucrats are the driving force in the fundamental reforms of key institutions and political governance in Malaysia.

Nonetheless, the internal political conflicts within the PH coalition and inadequate experience among cabinet members have largely hampered the reform-agenda. The formation of the political coalition during GE14 had successfully conferred political legitimacy to PH. However, political ties seemed to deteriorate due to disagreements in policy decisions across the board. For instance, issues related to Unified Examination Certificate (UEC) for independent Chinese secondary schools had caused public uproar (Ida Lim, 2020). The narrative brought by the opposition on the effect of UEC on our educational system had intensified the issue. Many groups claimed that recognizing UEC would be seen as a betrayal to the *Bumiputera* and would

compromise Malaysia's national identity (Ahmad Farhan, 2020). Negative public sentiments were apparent on a range of issues which put the political coalition at risk and had therefore weakened PH. The real challenge being faced by PH was that failure in managing public sentiments could very well lead to failure in policy decisions.

Overall, when assessing PH's performance through reform initiatives, this study unveils many successful attempts which are aligned with people's hopes and expectations. The path of reform entails formidable challenges, especially in enhancing state institutional capacity and government performance. The study found that all measures implemented by PH are decisive and rated above mid-points. Reform led to improvements but the overall political and administrative impact has remained limited. In the context of this study, the variability of public trust is conditioned by institutional reforms. However, an administration of 22 months is woefully inadequate for trust to be fully restored, despite the improvements in government transparency and accountability. This is evidenced through Malaysia's score on Corruption Perception Index (CPI) where Malaysia's score has gone up 6 points to 53 and is ranked 51 out of 180 countries (The Straits Times, 2020). The upward trend is largely contributed by the PH government's commitment and determination to make Malaysia free from corruption. *Pakatan Harapan's* decisive moves on institutional reforms have indeed significantly rebuilt the reputation and credibility of the government.

CONCLUSION

Among *Pakatan Harapan's* primary agendas was introducing and enabling both political and institutional reforms. Driven by political will, the PH reform agenda effectively marked the new administration's commitment to build 'New Malaysia'. In building a 'New Malaysia' as well as the required overall governance capacity, there is a need to have a framework for good governance; this would be followed by institutional reforms which are seen as the predetermined factor to strengthen government competency and accountability. This, in turn, would largely induce public trust towards government and political leaders. The research findings reveal that government's C.A.T and public trust have slightly improved after reforms were introduced. However, the path of reforms had not gone far enough for the *Pakatan Harapan* coalition. Expecting the reform process to be a smooth journey is wishful

thinking since unending political challenges are expected. However, unwavering institutional reforms is vitally important for a better Malaysia in the future.

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