

# Should scientists care about politics?



A RENOWNED scientist once told me that we can only make real impacts by walking in the corridor of power. Meanwhile, critics argue that some of the so-called academics have been overly seeking recognition through political engagement, unethically getting promotions through special channels, and unworthily attaining a status beyond their true academic achievements.

Let's not talk about those who are just fooling around and cheating, but should a scientist – a genuine one – stay away from politics? Does linking science to politics tarnish the halls of science?

Science is based on objectivity, focusing on the process of establishing facts through testing and experimentation. Scientists make observations, ask questions, develop hypotheses, devise methods, conduct experiments, analyse results, and finally attempt to answer the research questions with the evidence and conclude. This process may be repeated, and new evidence obtained may challenge and overturn previous hypotheses and conclusions.

Political decision-making takes people as the basis and is full of subjectivity and value judgments. It involves not only rational considerations, but also emotional factors stem from differences in culture, region, language, religion, etc. These processes are completely different from scientific analyses which strictly require

objectivity. The two seem to be so different, just like oil and water. But in reality, science and politics may be inextricably linked.

On the one hand, politics depends on science. Science has long influenced politics and plays a vital role in policymaking. We have seen some clear examples during the Covid-19 pandemic: determining the mechanism of infection requires scientific studies; deciding what to do about it is a matter of politics.

If politicians are allowed to simply pat their heads and make decisions without input from scientists, the consequences can be disastrous (think about Trump).

In fact, scientists have been influencing our national policies all the time. In many countries, scientists sit on a variety of policy advisory committees at the national and sub-national level, providing policymakers with scientific evidence and interpreting what science tells us.

Furthermore, many civil servants have undertaken systematic scientific training. If we look closely, some even have Master's or Ph.D. training in sciences. These technocrats, all over government agencies, are important links between science and politics. They work closely with elected representatives and scientists to design policies that affect all of us in this country.

Influences can also come from a broad group of scientists outside the system. There are many scientists in universities and various independent institutions who analyse and critique the policies by publishing academic papers or commenting in newspapers and various media. Their voices may have significant social ramifications, driving the government to re-examine the policies on a scientific basis.



Science has long influenced politics and plays a vital role in policymaking. — Image via The MIT Press Reader

On the other hand, science also depends on politics. Scientific research requires funding at all stages from research design to publication. In Malaysia, public funds are the main source of funding. The questions are who decides the budget allocated to scientific research and who can get how much funding.

A democratically elected government, when allocating resources, will first consider the needs of voters to determine the direction of state-funded scientific research. It is up to the Cabinet and the Parliament to decide what research areas are prioritised and how national resources are allocated. Members of Parliament are elected by voters to defend their interests. The way the money is distributed thus involves politics.

In addition to government grants, research funding can also come from wealthy donors, private foundations, industry organisations, non-profit

organisations, various groups, and even religious bodies. Naturally, more funding will go into scientific research related to lucrative sectors, such as coal, oil, and natural gas extraction. There are also prominent environmental organisations that receive generous donations and spend a lot on various scientific research activities on environmental issues.

International organisations, such as those under the United Nations system, also have a large amount of funding from membership and sponsorship to spare on research. The political negotiations involving the interests of various countries are even more complicated – look at the COPs.

As such, science and politics seem inseparable.

Separating science from politics may lead to disastrous, horrible consequences. We may see strange data sets that do not conform to reality, when officials artificially manipulate

the process of data collection and analyses with political considerations rather than science. A prominent example is the erroneous emission and land use data in some developing regions.

The story of 'Mr. Corn' can be a good reminder of the risk of neglecting science.

In the 1950s, Nikita Khrushchev, the then-leader of the Soviet Union, saw corn expansion as the solution to address food security. To ensure the domestic food supply, Khrushchev pushed for a rapid expansion of corn cultivation throughout the territory. In just one year, the sown acreage of corn rose from 4.5 million hectares in 1954 to 18 million hectares in 1955. Khrushchev was lucky with two successive years of warmer weather and thus abundant harvest, making himself 'Mr. Corn' who brings miracles to the country.

Unfortunately, Mr. Corn used up his luck when cooler

years arrived in the 1960s. The overenthusiastic Soviets continued to expand corn acreage recklessly, without carefully considering the climatic and social conditions. Eventually, productivity plummeted drastically. The glaring failure in agriculture significantly contributed to Khrushchev's removal in 1964.

In Southeast Asia, a terrible mistake was made by Suharto in the 1990s.

Due to decreasing land availability for rice in Java, Suharto decided to convert more than one million hectares of peatland in Central Kalimantan to paddy cultivation. Experts pointed out the risks of this Mega Rice Project, but science was totally eclipsed by politics. Irrigation became impossible when a lengthy El Nino drought struck in 1997. Enormous fires raged through the province, destroyed farms, and took many lives. It was estimated that the amount of carbon released into the atmosphere could be more than the total emission by the EU in a year.

In our era, we rely on scientists to solve one of the biggest crises that the human race ever faces, i.e., climate change. Given the urgency of the climate crisis, the involvement of scientists in the decision-making process is more important than ever.

In my opinion, scientists should take politics seriously. A better understanding of the political dynamics will make the voices of scientists stronger, allowing science to be used to protect human civilisation and our Mother Earth.

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## Analysts: GTA should just disband after racial narrative rejected by voters

**KUALA LUMPUR:** Several analysts said Gerakan Tanah Air (GTA) led by Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad should be disbanded after its abysmal showing in the 15th general election, suggesting that its components' pro-Malay message during campaigning had failed to resonate among its intended target group.

The political analysts polled pointed to how the coalition and its dominant component Parti Pejuang Tanahair failed to make the most of their racial narrative, by losing all 125 parliament seats it contested.

Both Pejuang and GTA's 15th general election defeats were not a shock. On the contrary, they were expected.

"What was quite surprising though was the scale of the defeat. Both Pejuang and GTA should just wind up. They are toothless without Tun Dr Mahathir," Universiti Sains Malaysia political science professor Ahmad Fauzi Abdul Hamid told Malay Mail.

With such a bleak assessment, Ahmad Fauzi said younger leaders within the coalition should consider migrating to other political parties in the long term for their own good and political future.

He reiterated his previous assessment, stating that GTA would only prevail as long as Dr Mahathir is at the helm.

Despite veteran statesman Dr Mahathir fronting it, the coalition – contesting under Pejuang's logo and Parti Bumiputera Perkasa Malaysia's (Putra) logo in Kelantan – only managed to obtain 11,373 total votes or 0.71 of the popular vote among the total registered voters.

In contrast, Perikatan Nasional (PN) captured 73 seats in its general election debut, despite playing the same ethno-religious card and also presenting itself as a 'cleaner' coalition without Umno's political baggage.

Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM) senior lecturer Mazlan Ali said Dr Mahathir should disband GTA after his recent remark on his wish to 'focus on writing



Dr Mahathir attends the announcement of Gerakan Tanah Air (GTA) ahead of the 15th general election at Bangi Convention Centre on Nov 2, 2022. — Malay Mail photo

about the history and activities of the country," which some saw as a sign of him announcing his retirement from active politics.

Dr Mahathir failed to defend his Langkawi seat – his first electoral defeat in 53 years.

The seat was won instead by PN candidate Datuk Mohd Suhaimi Abdullah, with a majority of 13,518 votes. Dr Mahathir lost his deposit as well.

Dr Mahathir's loss came despite a widespread appreciation for his contributions in Langkawi and his home state of Kedah, in what is likely to be the end of the country's longest-serving leader with a one-sided political career.

Senior fellow at the Singapore Institute of International Affairs Oh Ei Sun predicted doom for

both Pejuang and GTA, pointing to their similar 'leader-centric' political setup.

"As the leader seems disinterested in continuing with his political struggle, these political tools would fade into oblivion," he said, referring to Dr Mahathir.

Rozhan Othman, a senior partner at Human Capital Development Sdn Bhd, also echoed their sentiments that Dr Mahathir should continue with his rest from politics.

"GTA never had much traction in the first place. Looking at GTA from the point of the ideological spectrum, it has difficulty carving out a niche for itself.

"In business, we'd say that GTA does not have a unique value proposition," he said.

GTA was formed by Dr Mahathir ahead of the 15th general election, and after he severed ties with the PH pact he had led to victory in the 14th general election. PH has since formed the federal government.

Besides Pejuang, GTA's members include Putra, led by Malay supremacist group Perkasa's former president Datuk Ibrahim Ali, Islamist party Barisan Jemaah Islamiah Se-Malaysia (Berjasa) which put candidates from hardline group Ikatan Muslimin Malaysia (Isma), and the Parti Perikatan India Muslim Nasional (Iman).

Ahead of campaigning, Dr Mahathir insisted that despite its pro-Malay stance, GTA is not racist or hostile to non-Malays. — Malay Mail

## Pahang Regent gives nod to BN-PH govt with Wan Rosdy as MB

**KUALA LUMPUR:** The Regent of Pahang has consented to a state government that will be formed by Barisan Nasional (BN) and Pakatan Harapan (PH).

In a statement yesterday, Comptroller of the Pahang Sultan's Household Datuk Ahmad Khirrizal Ab Rahman said Tengku Mahkota Tengku Hassanal Ibrahim Alam Shah has also consented to appoint Datuk Seri Wan Rosdy Wan Ismail as the state's menteri besar.

"His Highness Tengku Mohkota Tengku Hassanal Ibrahim Alam Shah has agreed to attend and listen to the suggestions, motions, and wishes of the political party leaders involved, following the 15th general election results for the Pahang state assembly.

"His Highness has further agreed to the forming of Pahang state government consisting of BN and PH," said Ahmad Khirrizal.

Wan Rosdy's swearing-in ceremony will be held at 11am today at the Istana Abu Bakar in Pekan.

Earlier yesterday, Indera

Mahkota MP-elect Datuk Seri Saifuddin Abdullah had called BN 'greedy' for demanding to form a coalition government in Pahang.

Saifuddin, who is Bersatu's state governing body chairman, said the party that received the largest mandate from the people is Perikatan Nasional (PN) and urged that the will of the people be respected.

He reportedly said that PN had from the beginning stated its readiness to negotiate to form the Pahang government but not with PH.

Saifuddin had been elected in the past under Umno/BN (Temerloh MP in 2008), and later under PKR/PH (Indera Mahkota MP in 2018). He is now with Bersatu/PN.

In the recently concluded GE15, PN won 17 seats in the Pahang state assembly, followed by BN with 16 and PH with eight.

Meanwhile, the election for the Tioman state seat has been scheduled for Dec 7 following the death of the PAS/PN candidate. — Malay Mail

## Kelantan state assembly approves anti-party hopping enactment

**KOTA BHARU:** The Kelantan State Legislative Assembly yesterday approved the amendment to its Constitution to enable the anti-party hopping law to be enforced in the state.

Deputy Menteri Besar Datuk Mohd Amar Nik Abdullah tabled the motion for the proposed amendment and it was unanimously supported without debate by state assemblymen at the third meeting of the fifth term of the 14th state assembly.

The purpose of the amendment is to ensure that the anti-party hopping law is in line

with what has been decided at the Federal level in Parliament," he said when winding up the Bill.

Meanwhile, state assembly Speaker Datuk Abdullah Yakub said the amendment was carried out in accordance with the Constitution (Amendment) Act (No. 3) 2022 and the Provision for the Prohibition of MPs from Party-Hopping that came into effect on Oct 5.

The Act obtained the consent of the Yang di-Pertuan Agong, Al-Sultan Abdullah Ri'ayatullah Al-Mustafa Billah Shah on Aug 31 and was gazetted as Act A1663 on Sept 6. — Bernama