

Malaysia's new economic policy: Fifty years of polarization and impasse

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Abstrak

The New Economic Policy has transformed Malaysia since 1971. Pro-Bumiputera affirmative action has been intensively pursued and continuously faced pushback. This paper revisits three key junctures in the NEP's fifty-year history that heightened policy debates—and the ensuing persistent polarization and stalemate in policy discourses. First, at its inception in the early 1970s, despite substantial clarity in its two-pronged poverty alleviation and social restructuring structure, the NEP was marred by gaps and omissions, notably its ambiguity on policy mechanisms and long-term implications, and inordinate emphasis on Bumiputera equity ownership. Broader discourses have imbibed these elements, and they tend to be more selective than systematic in policy critique. Second, during the late 1980s, rousing deliberations on the successor to the NEP settled on a growth-oriented strategy that basically retained the NEP framework and extended ethnicity-driven compromises. Third, since 2010, notions of reform and alternatives to the NEP's affirmative action program have been propagated, which despite bold proclamations again amount to partial and selective—not comprehensive—change. Affirmative action presently drifts along, with minor modifications and incoherent reform rhetoric stemming from conflation of the NEP's two prongs. Breaking out of the prevailing polarization and impasse requires a systematic and constructive rethink.