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## **VOICES OF THE YOUNG MEMBERS OF THE RAKAN MUDA PROGRAMME: A STUDY IN KUCHING, SARAWAK**

**Kamsiah Ali****INTRODUCTION**

The young generation in Malaysia is said to act in opposition to the dominant beliefs, attitudes and practices of the JL majority of the population, and this is seen as a form of resistance to the values of society (Ministry of Youth and Sport, 1995: 3-13). The lives and interests of the young people, however, including their friendships and relationships have been shown to develop as a part of complex social changes and are not necessarily associated with or related to any conscious desire to oppose the dominant values of society (New Straits Times: 5/3/1997, p. 6; New Straits Times: 7/3/1997, p. 6; New Straits Times: 27/2/1997, p. 8).

Young people seek solutions to problems that concern them in their immediate world. Their access to knowledge, power and their opportunity to develop life skills will influence how they perceive themselves, their world and its problems, and the solutions that are available to them. As a person's knowledge about their options for self-development expands, their perceptions of the world will also differ. These lead to questions like what leads young people, particularly those who have experienced social, economic and educational disadvantage, to see greater possibilities for themselves in the world. What will help young people solve their problems in productive and socially useful ways?



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by

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## INTRODUCTION

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In 1994 the Ministry of Youth and Sport introduced the *Rakan Muda* (Youth) programme, aimed primarily at lessening the problems associated with juvenile delinquency. The immediate goal

of the programme is to establish services and infrastructure capable of supporting the needs of the young generation. *Rakan Muda* had two component programmes, the *Rakan Muda Lifestyle* (RML) and the *Rakan Muda Brigade* (RMB). The areas of concern identified by *Rakan Muda* deal with young people and their potential involvement in crime. I have therefore focused on how *Rakan Muda* functions as a crime prevention mechanism (RML). This paper is based on the experiences and opinions narrated by 30 young people who participated in interviews in Sarawak. They give their views on possible solutions to the social problems associated with them, on issues of empowerment and on the capacity and creativity of individuals to exercise power over their own lives.

For the purpose of discussion in this paper, I am looking at the role of the *Rakan Muda* programme as a general crime prevention mechanism rather than looking at specific sub-group activities. The theoretical insight that informs the paper as a whole is borrowed mostly from various work outside Malaysia. The key concepts such as young people, social control and moral panic and the framework used to elaborate this paper will be briefly discussed.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Young people and the question of control

To begin with, the apparent increases in crime in the country need to be questioned. In Malaysia the definition of youth (interchangeable with young people) is fraught with difficulties, not only because of variations in police crime statistics but also because there is no uniform definition. Definitions vary not only between departments but also within the Ministry of Youth and Sport itself, as responsibility for defining youth is delegated to a variety of government departments. In Malaysia, young people can: be in part held responsible for crime at the age of 10; be liable to pay full fare on public transport at the age of 12; cease to attend full-time

education at 12; undertake employment under the age of 18; vote, be sent to adult prison and be entitled to a driving license at the age of 18.

According to the Malaysian Federal Police Department (1997), the young people is made up of males and females aged between 10 and 18 years. However, the major definition of the Ministry of Youth and Sport extends the category to include those aged up to 25 years. Yet when implementing youth programmes, the Ministry extends the category even further to include people aged from 26 to 39 years (Ministry of Youth and Sport, 1994: 2). These inconsistencies help to illustrate that there is no clear age at which young people are seen to emerge from the "problematic" period in the Ministry's view. Legal definitions of childhood, youth and adulthood have been developed by the different institutions of government for different purposes and at different moments in history. This complication of definitions certainly does not aid a clear definition of "young people". For example, the police definition is used to check levels of youth crime while other definitions are used for the purpose of policy making, in particular by the Ministry of Youth and Sport when recruiting members for its *Rakan Muda* programme. In my study I have focused on youths aged between 15 and 26. In other words, I adopt one of the major definitions used by the Ministry of Youth and Sport when targeting its policies. This group forms the largest category of young people involved in the Ministry's programmes, and in particular the *Rakan Muda* programme.

Social control has been employed widely by social scientists to refer to almost any system or network of interactions, encounters and relations involving elements of power, authority, coercion or repression (Edward, 1975). Stanley Cohen in *Visions of Social Control* defines social control as: "all those social processes and methods through which society ensures that its members conform to expectations. These normally include internalisation, socialisation, education, peer group pressure, public opinion and the like as well as the operations of specialised formal agencies such as the police, the law and all other state power" (Cohen, 1985: 3).

This concept requires looking beyond the young generation itself to the larger picture of the processes involved in the social construction of youth problems and the corresponding questions of power and its exercise. What is taking place regarding youth crime in Malaysia can be explained by using Tame's (1991) two approaches: Traditional Conservatism and Authoritarian Populism. The Traditional Conservative approach view of crime includes not only that activity which endangers property or the person but morality as well. Hence, attacks on certain traditional values and people's respect for the authorities in Malaysia can generally be viewed as criminal. From this perspective, youth crime is not only a matter of free choice; it is also linked to certain intrinsic aspects of humanity. In particular, people are seen as possessing certain natural urges that go against the more civilised or divine purposes of society. In order to constrain these urges, it is necessary to establish a strong order based upon personal sacrifice, self-discipline and submission to authorities (Tame, 1991). Order must take supremacy over all else, including justice. In other words, it is a priority to maintain order for peace. Youth crime is said to be caused by the unwillingness of young people to accept discipline, the undermining of traditional loyalties (such as to the patriarchal family) and the pursuit of immediate individual gratification without appropriate hard work (Ministry of Youth and Sport, 1995).

According to this approach, punishment, in terms of preventive coercion, is an essential part of control. This not only follows from personal responsibility for one's actions but also because punishment has an important symbolic impact on society as a whole. That is, punishment has to be seen in terms of its effect on the promotion of moral solidarity through stigmatisation. Strong emphasis is placed upon the importance of morality in the maintenance of social authority. Thus someone who does something deemed to be wrong or harmful must be punished directly and appropriately in order to set the moral standard. This view generally results in anti-libertarian views with respect to pornography, sexual behaviour, drug use and abortion; that is, it favours intervention in areas regarded as victimless crimes. Indeed, the conservative point of view often favours increased state intervention in everyday social life because it