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# Malaysian think tanks and university policy institutes: Reflecting or diverging from regional expectations?

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## Summary

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East and Southeast Asian think tanks are often described as small, new, multi-issue organisations that avoid offending central governments. To examine if these and other generalizations have predictive value, Malaysia was selected for systematic study. The country's 19 non-university think tanks were found to be larger and more productive than the Asian stereotype and showed indications of becoming more independent. University-based policy research centres were also examined. Scholars have recently expanded the working definition of think tanks to include these entities, but they have rarely been studied. Malaysian campuses were found to have 44 such policy-related institutes, most of them founded just since 2000, usually single-issue focused, operating with a large number of affiliated scholars, and already generating substantial citations and publications.

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Image: William Adams

## Introduction

In developing countries, think tanks play an especially important role, according to James McGann (2010). In such settings, he contends, think tanks undertake and encourage “*independent analysis and debate*,” promote civic participation, and develop “*specific transformational policies*” (2010:202). If the political system begins to liberalize, more space is opened for competing intellectual perspectives and alternative centres for policy prescriptions. Indeed, McGann argues that think tanks themselves help to create the “*legal and regulatory framework and political space so that civil-society organizations have the autonomy to operate*” (2010:202). Consequently, think tanks may serve as a stimulus to development and not simply a product of development.

Whether or not a causal relationship between the growth of think tanks and development is valid, the evidence does show a strong correlation. Increased cumulative resources can support more brain trusts dedicated to evaluating and proposing public policies. And countries with more capital usually have more public policy think tanks, as shown in Figure 1 for the 15 polities of East and Southeast Asia (Brunei, Cambodia, China, Hong Kong, Indonesia, Japan, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore, South Korea, Taiwan, Thailand, Vietnam, excluding North Korea). The correlation between their GDP and number of think tanks is .99. Even excluding the colossus of China, the correlation is .92, still very strong.

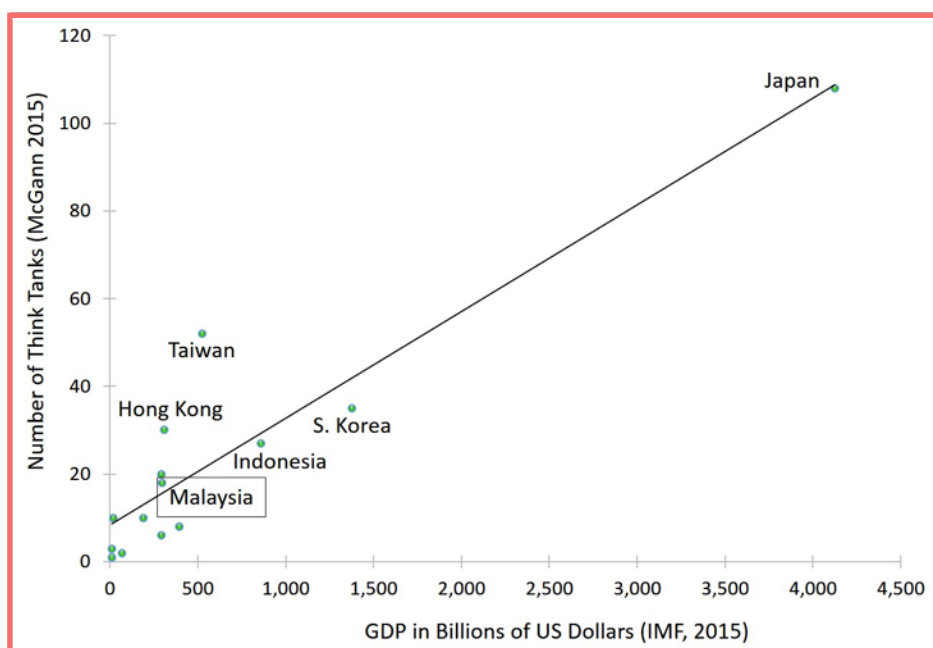
As home to some of the world’s most important emerging countries, Asia offers numerous opportunities to study the status of think tanks. According to the academic literature, think tanks in East and Southeast Asia tend to share certain characteristics such as size and role that distinguish them from those in Europe and North America. Are these various generalisations about Asia, reviewed in detail below, at all predictive? We examine the extent to which the Asian stereotypes accurately describe think tanks in the important and fairly representative country of Malaysia.

Figure 1 shows that Malaysia is almost exactly where the regression line predicts it should be, based on its GDP, with seven neighbours having more and seven having fewer think tanks. Malaysia is also near the median on a wide variety of other key measures in Asia. Among these, Malaysia ranks eighth in total GDP, seventh in GDP per capita, and eighth in growth rates, increasing an average of 6.2% per year, 1990 through 2007 (International Monetary Fund 2016). Malaysia is eighth in internet penetration and sixth in reputed corruption (Internet World Stats 2016; Transparency International 2015). In this pool, Malaysia ties with Singapore for the median ranking on civil liberties and political rights (Freedom House 2015).

In terms of overt political pluralism, Malaysia is again in the middle range in this region. The one-party rule eventually came to an end in Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, Indonesia, and the Philippines (Weiss 2015). In 2018, change came to Malaysia as well. In the historic general election, Malaysia's long-ruling coalition was defeated nationwide after six decades in power. Thus, for these and other reasons,<sup>1</sup> Malaysia is not an outlier and, along with being important in its own right, is a particularly good place to examine think tanks in Asian governance.

What is the role of think tanks in Malaysia? The topic has received little attention since Khoo's (2004) valuable profiles of several think tanks more than a decade ago. Are the broad generalisations in the academic literature about think tanks in East and Southeast Asia (truncated as Asia hereinafter) sufficiently predictive to describe their status in Malaysia?

**Figure 1: GDP and number of think tanks in East and Southeast Asia**



Source: Authors' scatterplot of think tank data from McGann (2015) and GDP estimates from the IMF (2016).

## Literature review

The literature on think tanks in Asia often makes broad generalisations revolving around (1) structural characteristics, (2) style and scope of activities, and (3) government relationships.

1. Structural descriptions of Asian think tanks have focused on (a) their relatively recent establishment; (b) their overall size and resources, and (c) their proximity to the central government.

McGann (2015) contends that the expansion of think tanks has been driven by globalisation, democratisation and decentralisation of power, demands for independent information and analysis, increased complexity of policy issues, technology, activist movements, economic crises, and political paralysis. Think tanks multiplied in Europe and North America, from the 1960s until 2010 when they may have approached a saturation point and their proliferation began to subside (McGann *op. cit.*).

1. For more on Malaysia's political, social, and historical setting, see the work of scholars such as Zin (2014), Khoo (2014), Harding and Chin (2014), Tajuddin (2012), and Gomez (2007).

Their rise in Asia was not until the 1980s and may well have peaked in the 1990s, according to Diane Stone (2000) who has written extensively about think tanks in East and Southeast Asia.<sup>2</sup>

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**The literature on think tanks in Asia often makes broad generalisations revolving around (1) structural characteristics, (2) style and scope of activities, and (3) government relationships.**

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In comparison to most Western think tanks, those in Asia are relative newcomers and can be described as typically modest in size and funding (McGann 2012). This, it has been argued, is due in part to underdeveloped corporate philanthropy and private support (Weaver and McGann. 2000; Stone 2000). Of course, most think tanks in wealthy OECD countries are not giants like Chatham House in London, the Brookings Institution in Washington, DC (plus Doha and New Delhi), or the RAND Corporation headquartered in Santa Monica with offices around the world. Nevertheless, the literature suggests that the Asian versions are considerably smaller than those typically found in the West.

Think tanks are not necessarily found in the shadow of the central government. In the United States, for example, despite gravitating somewhat to the Washington, DC metro area, think tanks are also dispersed across the rest of the country with prominent clusters found in New York, Massachusetts, and California (McGann 2015). However, Asian think tanks are said to be located in or near the capital city (Nachiappan, Mendizabal, and Datta 2010; Weaver and McGann 2000; Stone 2000), not only due to the proximity to political power but also because many were initially created as government entities.

2. A second series of generalisations concerns the basic posture and scope of Asian think tanks regarding (a) issue breadth, (b) regional networking; (c) communal orientations, and (d) overt advocacy.

With regard to their topical scope, the prototypical Asian think tank has been described as “*multi-issue in focus*”; few are specialized (Stone 2000:385). Regional networking among think tanks, particularly in Southeast Asia, has been “*welcomed by governments*” as a valuable supplemental channel for regional dialogue and relationships (Wanandi 2008:7). The Association of Southeast Asian Nations’ network of Institutes of Strategic and International Studies (ASEAN-ISIS) is often cited as especially influential (Zimmerman 2015; Nesadurai and Stone 2003).

Despite the strong ethnic communal groups in some Asian countries, Stone says that they rarely divert their inward social service activities to more outward organized political activities (2000:385). Thus, policy research think tanks linked to communal groups are uncommon. Another feature that is said to be rare in Asia is the aggressive promotion of policy recommendations – a characteristic more common among Western think tanks. Strong advocacy think tanks are not thought to be flourishing, or even to have been planted, on the Asian landscape. They are “*almost unknown*” (Stone 2000:385).

3. A third set of generalisations involves the delicate relationship between think tanks and the strong central governments of Asia: In particular, (1) how closely they are tied to the government, both structurally and financially, and (2) whether they avoid awkward topics such as democratisation, corruption, or government transparency that might appear to challenge the regime’s legitimacy.

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2. At least one major exception to this generalization is China with over two hundred new think tanks since 2013 (Mendizabal 2016).



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Structurally, Asian think tanks are said to be fairly new organisations of modest size, usually in the capital city area. They are characterized as mostly multi-issue and often oriented to regional networks, but rarely focusing on communal concerns or engaging in assertive advocacy. Do these patterns reflect the status of think tanks in Malaysia or are these generalisations of Asian organisations so broad and sweeping that they have little predictive validity for an individual country, no matter how representative it may appear?

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Regarding think tanks' relations with government, the conventional wisdom over the past two decades has been challenged by a new view. The earlier literature emphasized that Asian think tanks are regime enhancing rather than regime critical (Yamamoto and Hubbard 1995:5); they are state directed (Nachiappan, Mendizabal, and Datta 2010:22); and state centred rather than societally centred (Stone 2000:383). Indeed, many were set up by the government and often continue to work under the umbrella of government. Others were semi-independent, public-private entities, neither entirely autonomous nor entirely controlled. Think tanks, especially in Southeast Asia, have been characterized as “*conciliatory towards the incumbent regime rather than courting disfavour,*” with “*constricted independence and state monitoring,*” and thus avoiding topics such as “*regime transition, democratization, or civil society development*” (Stone 2000:385). Thus, their advice would be cautiously confined to incremental recommendations rather than daring to “*challenge fundamental policy directions in a country*” (Hamre 2008:2).

Erin Zimmerman (2016) rejects this view, as it has been rendered “*largely out of date*” due to rapid changes in Asia. Many Asian think tanks, she asserts, now flourish in “*an increasingly diverse policy community*” where they “*enjoy high levels of autonomy and are largely free of government influence.*” Even think tanks affiliated with the government are “*becoming more critical of government policies*” in order to demonstrate their relevance and gain credibility to obtain outside funding (Zimmerman 2016:2).

Regarding relations with government, we will examine whether the Malaysian evidence supports Zimmerman's reassessment. On all other issues where a consensus reigned, we can compare our findings on Malaysia to prevailing generalisations: Structurally, Asian think tanks are said to be fairly new organisations of modest size, usually in the capital city area. They are characterized as mostly multi-issue and often oriented to regional networks, but rarely focusing on communal concerns or engaging in assertive advocacy. Do these patterns reflect the status of think tanks in Malaysia or are these generalisations of Asian organisations so broad and sweeping that they have little predictive validity for an individual country, no matter how representative it may appear?

## Scope and methods

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To study think tanks, one must first define them. So disputed are the boundaries of the term *think tanks* that OnThinkTanks.org has a series of seventeen articles that ponder the definition.<sup>3</sup> Based on

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3. On Think tanks series on the definition and terminology of think tanks. See, for example, Perez-Leon, E., 2016, [Defining the Think Tank Label](#), and Mendizabal, E. 2010, [On the definition of think tanks](#).

the paradigmatic case of the Brookings Institution, one narrow view is that true think tanks are, in the words of James Smith (1991:xiii), “*private, nonprofit research groups*” focusing on public policy. This strict definition used by Smith, as well as Rich (2004), Abelson (2002), and others, illustrate what Stone (2005:3) characterized as the “*Anglo-American tradition*” of viewing think tanks as “*relatively autonomous organizations with separate legal identity that engage in the analysis of policy issues independently of government, political parties and pressure groups.*” Enrique Mendizabal (2010) finds that this perspective does not fit the reality of most of the world and “*only exist in the imaginary of those who idealized the Brookings and Chatham Houses of this world.*”

Moving toward broader definitions, scholars began to encompass under the rubric of think tank almost all public policy research entities, regardless of institutional independence or affiliation. Diane Stone (2005:3) found that, especially in Asia, think tanks are “*conceived in terms of a policy research function and a set of analytic or policy advisory practices, rather than a specific legal organizational structure.*” Likewise, McGann dispensed with the constraint that think tanks must be “*constituted as independent nongovernmental organizations*” (2010:58) and began to include those “*affiliated with political parties, governments, interest groups, or private corporations*” (2012:27).

Employing Stone’s and McGann’s broad definition, we searched extensively online and combed academic literature for references to Malaysian think tanks. We excluded from our final list research centres that were purely technical in nature without any policy focus. As of January 1, 2016, we identified 19 Malaysian think tanks. (See Appendix A.) Our final list was examined by three public affairs faculty members at universities in Kuala Lumpur who did not see any omissions.<sup>4</sup>

Once these think tanks were identified, we used documentary analysis of reports, press releases, news media coverage, academic citations, and websites. The latter proved to be a particularly useful resource. A website has become essential for any organisation that wants to document its status, promote its activities, and, especially in the case of think tanks, disseminate its research findings (Adams 2015).<sup>5</sup> These 19 think tanks had websites that correlated strongly with their staff size. Those with more researchers (and thus presumably more resources) had sleek, sophisticated websites that featured considerably more publications and conferences. Think tanks with fewer identified researchers tended to have more modest websites and featured fewer accomplishments. Overall, these websites provided insights on the scope and activities of each organisation. In addition to the documentary analysis, we obtained confidential input from researchers at several leading Malaysian think tanks to supplement our findings.

Another dimension of our study is a parallel analysis of public policy-related research institutes operating under the auspices of universities. University-based centres have usually been ignored in prior research. McGann did not explicitly add affiliation with universities until his 2015 update. Along with McGann, others (e.g., Pautz 2011; Stone 2005) have explicitly included university institutes under their think tank umbrella. However, the literature on think tanks in Asia and elsewhere still rarely encompasses university policy institutes. Even McGann’s 2015<sup>6</sup> worldwide think tank ranking did

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4. In Malaysia, as elsewhere, some think tanks become established and endure, while others may close their doors or shift their mission. Two of the 19 in our study have moved away from policy research since the conclusion of our data collection. Results reported in this paper are thus, like all data collection products, a snapshot of a particular point in time.

5. Malaysians may not be as connected to the internet as the Japanese or South Koreans are, but over two-thirds are. And internet use is much higher among the more politically engaged – the urban, educated, and relatively affluent segments of the population (Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission 2014).

6. The last ranking before our data collection.



Image: Wasim Wacosri on Creative Commons

not include policy institutes at Malaysian universities. If, as Pautz argues, the definition of think tanks should be based on their function, not on their organisational form, public policy research organisations should not be excluded just because they are housed at a university campus.

Two of the few sources that assess the role of policy research at universities are On Think Tanks<sup>7</sup> and, to a lesser extent, the Think Tank Initiative. A study sponsored by the Think Tank Initiative concluded that in the *global south* many barriers and mutual suspicions divide university institutes from other think tanks (Myles 2014). However, Malaysians seem not to perceive such a sharp division. When the Institute of Strategic and International Studies, a leading non-university think tank in Kuala Lumpur, organized a 2016 conference on the future of the country's think tanks, two of the 13 speakers from policy research organisations represented university institutes, suggesting some comity and mutual respect across the institutional chasm.

Because we separately analyse policy research entities outside and inside universities, we use different terms for clarity. Those outside universities we refer to by the traditional term *think tanks*. Those in academia will be called *institutes* or *centres*.

After finding 19 non-university Malaysian think tanks, our online search identified another 44 public-policy-related research institutes at Malaysian universities. All operate at one of six large public universities, except for one located at a private university (Universiti Tenaga Nasional). As these university-based policy centres have been the subject of little prior research, this part of our research is exploratory. Rich (2004:12) and Weaver (1996:566) speculated that researchers at universities face several disadvantages: The academic reward structure puts a premium on theory-building aimed at refereed journals, rather than on writing reports and papers on topical policy issues. The need to publish academic research, usually while also teaching, hinders scholars' capacity to generate timely, policy-relevant research. In addition, university researchers are, Rich (*op. cit.*) surmises, far less likely to be in close contact with policymakers. Despite these potential handicaps, we identified dozens of university-based institutes that do engage at least to some degree in public policy research. As we examine how the 19 non-university think tanks in Malaysia compare to the Asian expectations in terms of structural characteristics, style and scope of activities, and government relationships, we separately compare patterns found among the 44 university institutes.

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7. Studies at On Think Tanks have focused on such topics as on the role of universities and think tanks in Africa, Latin America, and South Asia; on structural and funding issues; and especially on collaboration between universities and non-university think tanks. See [www.onthinktanks.org/series/625-2](http://www.onthinktanks.org/series/625-2).

## Findings: structural characteristics

As noted earlier, structural descriptions of Asian think tanks have focused on (a) their founding timetable; (b) their overall size and resources; and (c) their proximity to central government. Did those sweeping assertions about the region accurately predict the patterns found in Malaysia?

### Founding timetable

**Did the creation of think tanks in Malaysia fit the alleged Asian timeline little grown until the 1980s and peaking in the 1990s?**

**Table 1. Establishment of Malaysian think tanks and university centres**

	Non-university think tanks (N=19)	University centres (N=41*)
1959-1979	5%	0%
1980-1989	21%	0%
1990-1999	32%	20%
2000-2009	21%	68%
2010-2015	21%	12%

\* Excludes 3 with unknown start dates

Source: Authors' 2015 analysis of think tank web sites.

Non-university think tanks in Malaysia did indeed emerge in the 1980s and with new one peaking in the 1990s. (See Table 1.) The early exception was the Malaysia Social Research Institute, founded in 1959, just two years after the country's independence. If any others were founded during the 1960s or 1970s, none have survived. In the 1980s, four think tanks were established. In the 1990s, the creation of new thinks in Malaysia hit a decade high with six, peaking as the Asian generalisation suggested. However, growth has not ebbed as much as predicted. From 2000 through 2009, four were launched, along with another four during 2010-15. This pattern did not apply to Malaysian universities, which started debuting their policy-related centres later. A few were opened in the 1990s, but the surge came between 2000 and 2009 when a large majority (73%) sprang up; four more started during 2010-15.

### Size and resources

**Do Malaysian think tanks fit the generalisation of Asian think tanks as being modest in size and resources?**

Asian think tanks are said to be relatively weak in terms of institutional development, with fewer staff and smaller budgets. While size and structure have no international benchmark, Stone (2005:4) writes that "*the most well-known think tanks in the world tend to be the larger mature institutes with stable sources of funding that secure a resident research staff (usually 20 or more researchers).*" Stone's suggestion of 20 researchers as a criterion was a good starting point for classifying larger, well-funded think tanks. Because some organisations combined administrative and research roles, we counted all staff and raised the threshold for large to 25.



**Table 2. Estimated staff size of Malaysian think tanks and university centres**

	Non-university think tanks (N=17*)	University centres (N=41**)
5 or fewer	6%	3%
6-24	53%	63%
More than 25	41%	34%

\* Excludes 2 with missing data

\*\* Excludes 3 with missing data

Source: Authors' 2015 analysis of think tank web sites.

As shown in Table 2, over one third of the non-university think tanks in Malaysia (41%) were large, with more than 25 staff members. A majority (53%) had more than five but fewer than 25 staff members, so while they were not behemoths, neither were they Lilliputian. Only one was quite small with five or fewer employees.

How does this compare to wealthier countries with think tanks with a longer history such as the United States? Despite considerable research on US think tanks, no recent data could be found regarding their size. We culled the best available data from the 1,104 profiles in a unique directory that included staff size for most think tanks (Hellebust and Hellebust 2006). Among the 845 organisations reporting staff size, only 19% were in the large category (25 or more), 42% were in the intermediate category (6-24 staff), and 39% were small (5 or fewer staff). Aided by the fame of organisations such as Brookings, Carnegie, Pew, and RAND, US think tanks may gain a reputation of being huge institutions with hundreds of researchers, but such titans are outliers. Thus, the best available evidence suggests generally that, compared to the United States, Malaysia had a much higher proportion of large think tanks and far fewer small ones.

Malaysian think tanks may not rival the richly endowed Brookings Institution, but Brookings is not typical anywhere. On this point, Malaysia does not reflect the Asian stereotype. Malaysian think tanks are not unusually small. And, assuming staff size is a reasonable proxy for organisational resources, and controlling for cost of living differences, this also suggests that, contrary to generalisations about Asian think tanks, those in Malaysia may not be especially underfunded relative to those common in the United States.

University-based research institutes usually have quite different models of staffing, drawing heavily on academic members of the faculty who are not full-time researchers; thus, their staff numbers are not directly comparable to non-university think tanks. Among the 41 in Malaysia with staffing information, over one third (34%) were large (25 or more); and most of the rest (63%) were mid-sized (6 to 24). Overall, this suggests an ambitious scope, even if many of the affiliated individuals might have to spend more time teaching than conducting research for the centres. Only two were so small that they had a staff of five or fewer.

Beyond mere size, another indicator of activity is producing research that is sufficiently noteworthy to gain external attention. To measure public visibility, we inspected news media references during 2014 and 2015. In 2015, Alexa.com ranked the top two online Malaysian news sites as [TheStar.com.my](http://TheStar.com.my) (website for the country's largest English-language print newspaper) and [Malaysiakini.com](http://Malaysiakini.com). The Star is

owned by a component of Barisan Nasional, the ruling coalition from 1959–2018; Malaysiakini.com is a major online source for views more critical of that regime.<sup>8</sup>

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Our content analysis showed that many Malaysian think tanks have been securing an impressive amount of news coverage, often in both outlets. Four of them garnered an average of over one reference per week each in either or both of these two key news outlets combined;<sup>9</sup> another five received an average of at least one reference per month. Thus, as shown in Table 3, a total of 9 of the 19 were rather prominent at these two news sites.<sup>10</sup>

As some think tanks might tend to target the academic policy community, and not just the attentive public, we examined references in Google Scholar during this same 2014–15 period. Again, findings suggest that these are indeed active organisations. Most of those obtaining news media attention are also prominent in the academic world. Moreover, another five think tanks that were not high profile in Malaysian news were each cited on average at least monthly for their conferences, articles, reports, and papers<sup>11</sup> in academic publications.

Altogether over two-thirds of these think tanks obtained a large amount of attention in either or both types of communication channels (news media and academic publications). What about the remaining six think tanks? Five seemed to be viable organisations although not producing much publicly citable output. One was quite new. Nevertheless, in terms of staff size and citable products such as conferences, papers, reports, and so forth, most non-university Malaysian think tanks were manifestly productive and dynamic to a degree that belies the Asian stereotype.

While we lack data on media coverage of each think tank in the United States or the United Kingdom, it is safe to say that the average Malaysian think tank achieves – with the impressive numbers in Table 3 – far more national visibility than does the average counterpart in the US, where some 1,800 vie for attention, or the U.K. where nearly 300 compete (McGann 2015).

Most university research centres were rarely cited in the two news outlets, but most did appear in Google Scholar during 2014–15: One fourth were cited rather often, 48 times or more by academic publications (25%); many were cited fairly often, 24 to 47 times (23%). Half were cited a few times and only seven had no references. This suggests that – despite academia’s reputation for moving at a glacial pace – most of these centres are successfully producing research worthy of publication and citation.

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8. On the rise of Malaysiakini.com and other alternative media in Malaysia, see Tapsell 2013; Weiss 2013.

9. Penang Institute; Institute for Democracy and Economic Affairs (IDEAS); Malaysian Institute for Economic Research (MIER); Institute of Strategic and International Studies (ISIS).

10. Seven managed to be cited often in both of these divergent publications. One (the Maritime Institute) was cited by [TheStar.com.my](http://TheStar.com.my) but ignored by [Malaysiakini.com](http://Malaysiakini.com), while Institut Rakyat (affiliated with an opposition party) was often cited by Malaysiakini.com but given little attention by TheStar.com.my.

11. Think tanks varied considerably in how they reported their publications and other activities, so it was more consistent and consequential to measure their output’s visibility.

**Table 3. References to Malaysian think tanks in the news media and academic publications**

Average citation frequency, 2014-2015	Non-university think tanks (N=19) <sup>⊕</sup>	University centres (N=44)
<b>TheStar.com.my &amp; Malaysiakini.com</b>		
Very High (96+) at least twice a month	21%	0%
High (48-95) at least monthly	26%	0%
Medium (24-47) at least bimonthly	0%	0%
Low (12-23) at least quarterly	11%	2%
Very Low (1-11) less than quarterly	26%	16%
None	16%	82%
<b>Google Scholar</b>		
Very High (96+) at least twice a month	26%	9%
High (48-95) at least monthly	21%	16%
Medium (24-47) at least bimonthly	11%	9%
Low (12-23) at least quarterly	11%	14%
Very Low (1-11) less than quarterly	21%	36%
None	11%	16%
<b>Both news and academic visibility</b>		
High or very high on both	21%	0%
High or very high on one	47%	25%
Medium on one not both	5%	9%
All others	26%	66%

\* Some columns add to 99 or 101% due to rounding.

Source: Authors' content analysis of TheStar.com.my, Malaysiakini.com, and Google Scholar for the years 2014-15.

## Location

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### **Are Malaysian think tanks, like others in Asia, positioned strategically near the capital?**

Most Asian think tanks are said to gravitate to the capital city. In Malaysia, this generality is strongly supported by evidence. The metropolitan area of Kuala Lumpur, Putrajaya, and Selangor has less than 26% of Malaysia's total population but is home to 79% of its non-university think tanks. Headquarters of the rest were in Penang, Perak, Sabah, and Sarawak, respectively. However, even the Penang Institute in the far north of Malaysia runs a satellite office in Kuala Lumpur.

University-based institutes are also disproportionately found in that same Klang Valley area (70%). The University of Malaya, the country's largest university, is home to 18 in Kuala Lumpur. Those located outside the Klang Valley (13 of the 44) are in Penang (6), Kedah (4), and Johor (3). Overall, the *capital concentration* claim is strongly supported by the location of Malaysia's think tanks, whether inside or outside of universities.

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## Findings: scope and posture

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A second series of generalisations revolve around the alleged posture and scope of Asian think tanks regarding (a) issue breadth, (b) regional networking, (c) communal orientation, and (d) overt advocacy. Are these practices mirrored in Malaysia?

### **Issue breadth**

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#### **Do Malaysian think tanks follow the asserted Asian pattern of having a multi-issue portfolio rather than a narrow policy niche?**

In Malaysia, this notion was supported in non-university think tanks. A majority (68%, 13 of 19) were multi-issue, covering several or many public policy topics. Only five of the 19 (26%) focused on just one or two policy areas. However, most university institutes were narrowly focused. They overwhelmingly (80%) targeted a single subject area. Five (11%) addressed two topics and only four (9%) were multi-issue.

### **Regional networking**

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#### **Asian think tanks are described as putting an emphasis on regional networking, but is that true of Malaysian think tanks?**

Consistent with the generalisation in the literature, a majority of the non-university think tanks (53%) had regional affiliations. The Institute of Strategic and International Studies (ISIS, a now unfortunate acronym) is the Malaysian think tank most engaged with regional organisations. In addition to its partnership with ASEAN-ISIS, its most important network, it is affiliated with several other regional



groups such as the Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia Pacific, Network of East Asian Think Tanks, and the Pacific Economic Cooperation Council. While not usually as extensive as those of ISIS, other Malaysian think tanks have regional relationships. For example, the Institute for Development Studies in Sabah is affiliated with the Asia-Pacific Development Centre, the Commonwealth Association for Local Action and Economic Development; and the Association for Development Research and Training Institutes of the Asia Pacific. Some university-based institutes had regional links as well (32%).

## **Communal links**

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**Despite strong ethnic communities in some Asian countries, think tanks have not been noted as having such orientations; but is that true in Malaysia with its distinctive Malay, Chinese, and Indian communities and with the government's ongoing support of the majority Muslim heritage?**

In the past, the Chinese and Indian parties that were coalition partners in the Malay-dominated Barisan Nasional operated their own think tanks, but those have faded away. As of 2015, consistent with the Asian stereotype, we could not find any active non-university think tanks in Malaysia that were sponsored by or focused on a particular ethnic group. In universities, we did find three centres that touch on public policy as it relates to various ethnicities, although their researchers tended to take a more sociological approach rather than focusing primarily on public policy relationships.

Ethnicity is not entirely synonymous with religion, although most of the country's Muslims are Malay. While some Indian, Chinese, and other Malaysians are also Muslim, researchers have contended that Islam is such an integral part of the Malay identity that it represents a close proxy for a communal orientation (Guan 2011; Hoffstaedter 2011; Shamsul 2001). Two important non-university think tanks address the role of Islam in public policy – Institute of Islamic Understanding (IKIM), and the International Institute of Advanced Islamic Studies. These are substantial entities with many publications. Stone (2005:10) described IKIM, in particular, as a “*powerful symbol*” of the government’s “*commitment to Islamic values and principles*” designed “*to promote within Malaysia and project internationally a moderate and tolerant form of Islam and an alternative to Islamic fundamentalism.*” In universities, we identified another three similar Islamic-oriented research institutes: Institut Islam Hadhari, Hala Products Research Institute, and the Centre for Advanced Studies on Islam, Science and Civilisation. Overall, Malaysia fits the generalisation of Asian countries not having many strictly ethnically-oriented think tanks, but it has notable examples of think tanks that feature Islam's relationship to public policy and associated topics.

## **Advocacy**

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**Is aggressive policy advocacy as rare in Malaysian think tanks as it is said to usually be in Asian think tanks?**

That generalisation does hold true in Malaysia. We could not find examples of think tanks that aggressively promote and actively lobby their recommended policies (whether or not under the guise of education) along the lines of assertive US think tanks such as the Heritage Foundation and Centre for American Progress. Some researchers at Malaysian think tanks may have relationships and influence behind the scenes, but their usual modus operandi appears to be subtler than blatant, public campaigning.

The closest Malaysia comes to having an advocacy think tank is the thoroughly libertarian Institute for Democracy and Economic Affairs (IDEAS). Researchers at IDEAS have been especially outspoken in promoting their positions in public forums and establishing outreach venues, such as short courses at their Akademi Merdeka in order to advance a free market, limited government perspective. The approach

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used by IDEAS, however, is more the exception than the rule. Overall, the literature’s generalisation that Asian think tanks rarely fit the advocacy model is a fair characterisation for Malaysia.

In universities, we could only find one centre that boldly championed policy activism: Centre for Research on Women and Gender (KANITA) at Universiti Sains Malaysia, a public university. Its mission statement’s strong, explicit commitment to advocacy and activism was unique among Malaysian think tanks, whether inside or separate from universities:

*“As a Centre of Excellence, KANITA is committed towards research, transfer of knowledge, advocacy and community engagement, utilizing and promoting a gender and social equality framework. It strives to impact on the academe, the state, women and the society at large.” [Kanita](#)*

Image: William Adams



## Findings: regime relationship

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The third set of generalisations involves the sensitive relationships between think tanks and the formidable central governments of Asia, in particular, (1) their structural and financial ties to the government and (2) their willingness to tackle awkward issues such as democratisation, corruption or government transparency.

## Government links

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**Are most Malaysian think tanks closely linked to and constrained by the government, overtly or through self-censorship (according to the usual academic template for the region since the 1990s), or is this view outdated with think tanks more independent, as Zimmerman (2016) now contends?**

Four non-university think tanks are connected to state governments. In the Malaysian federal system, despite growing centralisation, state governments are still sovereign and alternative centres of political power to the national government. One of these state think tanks was in Penang under the control of (what was at the time of our data collection) the opposition, while one was in Perak, where the opposition had sometimes been at the helm. And, regardless of nominal party affiliation, the two states (Sabah and Sarawak) across the South China Sea in Eastern Malaysia both operate think tanks and often resist the orders from mainland Malaysia. Thus, think tanks of these four states may be arms of government, but could offer countervailing voices (as the Penang Institute often did) to think tanks that were linked to the national government in Putrajaya.

Six think tanks are under the umbrella of central government, with structural links or substantial financial support. For example, ISIS is not only staffed with many former leaders of Malaysia's diplomatic service but, in its close advisory capacity, receives government contracts and grants. The remainder (9 of 19) have little or no reliance on government, either state or national, for financial support. They draw on support from wealthy individuals and sometimes businesses and other organisations, such as political parties. We interpret this overall pattern as falling in between the old literature's image of Asian think tanks as tightly coupled to the central government and Zimmerman's narrative of newfound independence.

## Sensitive topics

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**Are Malaysian think tanks so inhibited by the government that they shun potentially sensitive topics such as corruption, transparency, and democratization?**

We searched mission statements of all 19 non-university think tanks, although the nine with few or no government bonds would be the most obvious candidates for emphasizing these three topics. We found one that mentioned the priority of "*fighting corruption*" and "*strengthening ethics*." Another pledged to work to improve "*the government system, democratic processes, and transparency*." Looking more closely at conferences, publications, and statements featured on their websites, we found one especially striking instance when two think tanks jointly and sharply criticized the way the government ran the general election of 2013 calling it "*only partially free and not fair*" (Centre for Public Policy Studies 2013; Institute for Democracy and Economic Affairs 2013). While neither think tank went so far as to call the final outcome illegitimate, their critique was scathing nonetheless. That same year, another think tank concluded that the Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission "*has proven to be singularly ineffective in rolling back the scourge of corruption*" (Institut Rakyat 2013).

Altogether, we were able to find four think tanks that challenged the regime publicly on the sensitive subjects of corruption, democratisation, and transparency. This represents nearly half of the nine nongovernmental think tanks and indicates that Malaysian think tanks are not uniformly timid adjuncts to the powers that be. And what about the other five? There may be some degree of self-censorship or a think tank focused on international relations or economic analysis, for example, may simply want to concentrate on its core mission rather than pivot to address these other topics. Overall, contrary to what we had read about Asian and Malaysian think tanks, mostly written a decade or more ago, we



observed more independence, more diversified funding sources, and less obsequiousness that we were primed to expect.

Senior researchers at four major, non-government think tanks offered interesting, confidential replies (not for attribution) when we asked whether they “*felt inhibited by the government or others in publicly voicing any policy recommendations or research findings.*” Two responded, “*not at all inhibited,*” with one stating, “*we are independently funded so we maintain our freedom.*” A third respondent was not ready to be absolute but said “*not inhibited in any significant degree.*” Only one acknowledged feeling “*somewhat inhibited.*” None said “*very inhibited.*” Assessments from these respondents aligned with our general findings regarding non-government think tanks.

At the January 2016 conference of Malaysian think tanks, the topic of independence was raised in discussions (Koshy 2016). The chief executive of the Asian Strategy and Leadership Institute (ASLI), Tan Sri Michael Yeoh, urged, “*we need to promote and encourage courageous conversation and be willing to accept the controversy that goes with such conversation and dialogue.*” All others agreed (Koshy 2016). The chief executive of ISIS, Tan Sri Rastam Mohd Isa, added, “*A think tank is there to provide policy recommendations and advice. If they don’t accept, move on and, yes, we should stand by our research.*” That such ideas needed to be spoken, rather than be taken for granted, implies that independence is still a lingering if diminished issue.

## Summary and conclusions

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Outside universities, Malaysian think tanks do fit some of the generalizations about East and South East Asian think tanks. As said to be typical of the region, their establishment in Malaysia peaked in the 1990s. Most cover multiple policy issues and are indeed clustered near the capital. High profile advocacy does appear to be uncommon. Also, as predicted, a majority participates in regional networks.

At the same time, in several respects, non-university Malaysian think tanks did not correspond to the Asian expectation. Compared to most US think tanks, those in Malaysia are not unusually small; and most are active enough to successfully garner attention in leading news media as well as in scholarly publications. Contrary to past literature and closer to Zimmerman’s impressions, about half operate with little or no central government funding. And about half of non-government think tanks have gone so far as to incorporate sensitive topics such as corruption, democratisation, and transparency into their policy portfolio. Indeed, two went as far as to publicly challenge the fairness of the ruling coalition’s victory in the 2013 general election.

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**Compared to most US think tanks, those in Malaysia are not unusually small; and most are active enough to successfully garner attention in leading news media as well as in scholarly publications.**

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Researchers on think tanks have only recently expanded the definition of their object of study to encompass academic centres than engage in policy research. Therefore, the literature on East and Southeast Asia cannot be faulted if past generalisations about think tanks do not apply to those situated on university campuses. While they are also likely to be located in the capital region and rarely engage in advocacy campaigns, Malaysian university centres diverged from both Asian expectations and from nearby non-university think tanks in three ways: Those on campus are newer, most were established only after 2000; most target a single-issue area; and few have formal links to regional networks (See Table 4).



**Table 4. Malaysian think tanks and university centres**

	Non-university think tanks (N=19)	University centres (N=44)
Established after 2000	42%	82% *
Large staff (>25)	41%	34%
Capital area location	79%	70%
Multi-issue focus	68%	9%
Regional networks	53%	32%

\*of 39 with known dates

Source: Authors' 2015 analysis of think tank web sites.

In common with non-university think tanks, most of those in universities also departed from the Asian stereotype by having a large staff and pool of affiliated researchers. As evidence of their productivity and profile, about half of the university institutes were cited by name on average at least quarterly in the academic publications in Google Scholar; some were cited much more often. Also in common with non-university think tanks, several notable university centres address religion (Islam) and public policy. Almost all the academic centres do correspond to the Asian image of conducting public policy research under government auspices as all but one are in public universities, rarely focusing on potentially provocative topics such as corruption, democratisation, and transparency.

Comparing think tanks in Malaysia to academics' impressions of those in the wider region was instructive. Certainly, none of the cited scholars claimed that their generalisations were universal, but one might have reasonably supposed that Malaysia – a country that, as we observed, often near the median among East and Southeast Asian polities on many key measures – would fit the regional profile. And yet practices in Malaysia diverged in many ways from predicted patterns. Generalisations about think tanks may not be particularly predictive for two reasons. Country-specific factors can override presumed regional tendencies, producing less accurate generalisations and considerable country-to-country variation. Moreover, the governance landscape and political space for think tanks may be changing so fast that generalisations that were appropriate five or ten years ago may not be valid today. In Malaysia, both non-university and university policy research institutes, despite being relatively new, were found to be substantial, productive, and recognized contributors to the policy conversation.

The political future of Malaysia will be worth tracking for another reason as well. In May of 2018, the country was rocked by a general election that dramatically ejected the coalition that had governed Malaysia for all six decades since its independence. It was the first democratic change of power in the country's history. Suddenly, the entrenched political establishment was ousted and the world of Kuala Lumpur and capital Putrajaya was turned upside down. As new officials take the reins of power and the status quo is overturned, there will surely be numerous opportunities for fresh policy prescriptions. Think tanks should move swiftly to promote their research and position themselves as valuable resources for policy analysis.

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## Appendix A:

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### **Non-University Think Tanks (Malaysia 2015)**

Asian Strategy and Leadership Institute (ASLI)  
Centre for Public Policy Studies (CPPS)  
Institut Darul Ridzuan  
Institut Rakyat  
Institute for Democracy and Economic Affairs (IDEAS)  
Institute for Development Studies, Sabah (IDS)  
Institute of Islamic Understanding (IKIM)  
Institute of Strategic and International Studies (ISIS)  
International Institute of Advanced Islamic Studies (IAIS) Malaysia  
Khazanah Research Institute  
Malaysia Social Research Institute (MSRI)  
Malaysian Institute for Economic Research (MIER)  
Maritime Institute of Malaysia  
Penang Institute  
Sarawak Development Institute  
SEACEN Research and Training Centre  
Sedar Institute (Socio-Economic Development and Research)  
Stratad Asia Pacific Strategic Centre (SAPSC)  
Third World Network (TWN)/ FTA Malaysia

## Appendix B:

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### **University Public Policy Research Centres (Malaysia 2015)**

Centre for Advanced Studies on Islam, Science and Civilisation  
Centre for Global Sustainability Studies  
Centre for Innovative Planning and Development (CIPD)  
Centre for Marine and Coastal Studies  
Centre of Electrical Energy Systems  
Centre for Construction, Building and Urban Studies (CeBUS)  
Centre for Legal Pluralism and Indigenous  
Centre for Malaysian Indigenous Studies  
Centre for Population Health (CePH)  
Centre for Poverty and Development Studies (CPDS)  
Centre for Research in International and Comparative Education (CRICE)  
Centre for Research in Waste Management  
Centre for Telecommunication Technology (UTM MIMOS)  
Centre for Testing Measurement and Appraisal (CeTMA)  
Centre for Transportation Research (CTR)  
Co-operative and Entrepreneurship Development Institute  
Halal Products Research Institute (IPPH)  
Institut Islam Hadhari

Institut of Climate Change (Institut Perubahan Iklim)  
Institute for Energy Policy and Research  
Institute for Environment and development (LESTARI)  
Institute for Environmental and Water Resource Management (IPASA)  
Institute of Advanced Technology (ITMA)  
Institute of Agricultural and Food Policy Studies  
Institute of China Studies (ICS)  
Institute of Malaysian and International Studies (IKMAS)  
Institute of Occidental Studies (IKON)  
Institute of Ocean and Earth Sciences (IOES)  
Institute of Social Science Studies (IPSAS)  
Institute of Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohammad Thoughts  
Institute of West Asian Studies (IKRAB)  
National Advanced IPv6 Centre  
National Poison Centre  
Northern Corridor Research Centre (NCRC)  
Pusat Penyelidikan Pembangunan Wanita (KANITA) Women's Development Research Centre  
River Engineering and Urban Drainage Research Centre (REDAC)  
Services Research and Innovation Centre (ServRi)  
Social Security Research Centre (SSRC)  
Solar Energy Research Institute (SERI)  
Southeast Asia Disaster Prevention Research Institute (SEADPRI)  
Spatial-Environmental Governance for Sustainability Research (UMSERGE)  
University Malaya Centre for Family Development (UMCFD).  
University of Malaya Centre for Addiction Sciences (UMCAS)  
University of Malaya Malaysian Centre of Regulatory Studies (UMCoRS)