The civil service is a major part of modern government. It carries out activities that affect many aspects of citizen’s lives. This is especially the case in Malaysia because of the large size and major role of the nation’s civil service. Thus, it is understandable that such matters as equal employment opportunities and performance of the civil service are of major concern to the country’s citizens.

Central to the performance of the civil service, or any organization, is its ability to secure needed human resources. Human resources contribute to innovation and are the major factor in encouraging organizational innovation and performance (Baron & Kreps, 1999; Laursen & Foss, 2012). An efficient, competitive, and resilient civil service depends largely on the quality of its human resources. The key to achieving these goals is through the implementation of human resource management policies that attract, develop, and retain the best talent. Success in securing needed human resources for the civil service depends directly on public personnel recruitment practices. However, it also depends, and no less importantly, on a prior factor: namely, whether the civil service is able to attract enough of the right kind of people from the labor force.

Malaysia is a multiethnic country. The three major ethnic groups in the country are Malay, Chinese, and Indian. According to the 2010 census, the population of Malaysia is 54.6% Malay, 24.6% Chinese, 7.3% Indian, and 12.8% other (mainly other natives) (Department of...
The Malaysian government is the major employer in the country. The introduction of the New Economic Policy (NEP) after the race-based violence on May 13, 1969, marked a sharp increase in the restructuring role of the Malaysian government. The number of civil servants has increased rapidly since the start of the NEP. Since 1990, civil servants have accounted for over 10% of the country’s labor force (employed persons) and for about 4% of the country’s population (Woo, 2011, 2013).

However, available data show that in 2010, among the 1.22 million civil service employees, only 6% were Chinese. Among the 1,121,692 applicants to government jobs in 2011, only 2% to 3% were Chinese or Indian (“1.22 Million Civil Servants,” 2010; “Until June 21,” 2010). Of the 1,458,679 applicants to government jobs in the first 3 months of 2013, only 1.67% of the applicants were Chinese (“80,000 Govt Posts To Be Filled,” 2013). Dissatisfaction with the increasing ethnic homogeneity of the civil service, as well as with its performance, has called into question the ability of the civil service to attract needed human resources to ensure both capacity and (ethnic) representation.

Ethnic preference is believed to be widely practiced in Malaysian public employment. It is also said that this practice compromises capacity. According to Esman (1972, p. 75), “the country paid a price in reduced administrative effectiveness” because public careers were “denied to many talented non-Malays.” A representative bureaucracy has the potential to improve the performance of the civil service. Representative bureaucracy has both symbolic and substantive effects (Mosher, 1968, pp. 10–14). An unrepresentative bureaucracy not only symbolizes unequal treatment but also likely leads to substantively unequal treatment to minorities. When most of the Malaysian government’s key and decision-making positions are in the hands of majority Malay representatives, the appointment of minorities into the civil service very much depends on the mindset (such as understanding and empathy) and behavior (such as bias, responsiveness, and discrimination) of those officials. And, education plays an important role in forming or influencing people’s mind-set and behavior.

This article examines how personnel recruitment practices in the Malaysian public sector affect ethnic representation and capacity in the civil service. The following section analyzes the Malaysian civil service in terms of attractiveness, size, and performance. Factors that influence choice of employment will also be examined. A discussion of Malaysian public personnel recruitment practices follows. The last section is a concluding discussion of the topics covered in this article.

THE MALAYSIAN CIVIL SERVICE

This section first looks at the attractiveness to job seekers of the Malaysian civil service. It continues with an analysis of factors that influence job seekers’ choice of employment. The purpose of this is to ascertain the main factors that pull job seekers to public employment and the main factors that push them away. The size of the civil service will then be examined. Performance criteria and standards are briefly discussed before this section concludes with an evaluation of the performance of the Malaysian civil service.

Attractiveness of Employment in the Civil Service

The attractiveness of public employment has been empirically assessed only in some developed countries, such as the United States (Kilpatrick, Cummings, & Jennings, 1964); Australia (Daniel & Encel, 1981); OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) countries (Aijala, 2001); the United Kingdom (“Which Sector Would You Rather Work In?” 2010); and Singapore (“Would You Prefer to Work in the Public or Private Sector?” 2010). There has been no corresponding systematic examination in most developing countries.

However, in Malaysia, the attractiveness of public employment has been empirically assessed by Woo (2011). According to Woo’s study, the Malaysian civil service is capable of attracting more than its share of local new
graduates in terms of overall numbers. Nearly half of graduating students, or 49.8% of Woo’s sample (1,200 respondents), were attracted to the civil service, while the civil service needed no more than 20% of the sample. In terms of the four aspects of capacity examined in Woo’s study, namely academic performance, proficiency in Malay, proficiency in English, and academic major, the civil service was still able to attract more than the necessary 20% of respondents. The Malaysian civil service can thus be said to be doing better than the private sector as a whole.

In terms of representation, Woo’s findings show that the civil service faces no difficulty in attracting a sufficient number of applicants from all ethnic and gender groups. However, representative recruitment may require some compromise of capacity measured by cumulative grade point average (CGPA). This compromise clearly applies both to the recruitment of Chinese applicants, to ensure ethnic representation, as well as to the recruitment of males, to ensure gender representation (Woo, 2011).

Factors relating to material rewards are the primary pull factors cited by those choosing public employment in Malaysia—as well as the primary push factors cited by nonchoosers of public employment (Woo, 2011, chapter 6). In order of importance, the top seven factors cited by Woo’s respondents as pull factors that attracted them to government jobs were job security, fringe benefits, fixed working hours, low job stress, sufficient pay, good promotion prospects, and many holidays. The first five factors together accounted for 74.3% of total cites. Clearly, the pull factors fall under two broad categories; namely, the category of material rewards, which the factors of job security, fringe benefits, sufficient pay, and good promotion prospects primarily relate to, and the category of lower job demands, which consist of the three factors of fixed working hours, low job stress, and many holidays.

As for push factors, the top seven factors cited as the main factors that pushed nonchoosers of public employment away from considering the sector, in order of importance, were unattractive pay, poor promotion prospects, not an interesting and challenging job, poor image, low autonomy, high work load, and poor working environment. The first three push factors accounted for 70.6% of total cites. The two main push factors, unattractive pay (68.7% of total cites) and poor promotion prospects (47.6% of total cites), relate to material rewards from the job. The second-most-common push factor, poor promotion prospects, merits further discussion. This factor is more frequently cited by non-Malay (mainly Chinese and Indian) nonchoosers than by Malay nonchoosers, and a major reason for this was the perception of discrimination in promotion. Almost one sixth of the total number of non-Malay nonchoosers in the study cited discrimination in promotion as a push factor. No Malay nonchooser cited discrimination in promotion as a reason for not joining the public sector. This probably explains the lack of attractiveness of Malaysian public employment to high-CGPA Chinese graduate job seekers in Woo’s (2011) study.

These findings clearly suggest the primacy of material rewards in influencing graduate job seekers’ choice of employment. While choosers are mainly attracted because they see material rewards in the Malaysian public sector as sufficient and secured, nonchoosers are pushed away mainly because they see the material rewards in the public sector as unattractive and the prospects of securing higher material rewards through promotion as poor. Woo’s findings also indicate the desire of Malaysian job seekers who are attracted to public employment to have a materially sufficient life and less work pressure.

The importance of sufficient material rewards and a better work-life balance among job seekers who seek Malaysian public employment seems to persist. Job security, sufficient pay, fringe benefits, and fixed working hours are still the main attractions of government jobs (“More People Intend to Become Civil Servant,” 2010; “PSC Appointed 14,257 Candidates,” 2013; “Public Sector Attracts Chinese, Indians,” 2013; “Public Service Commission,”...
2012; Tee, 2009). Those who avoid government jobs, on the other hand, see the salary scheme in the public sector as less flexible than in the private sector, and Chinese job seekers still have the negative perception that they would be discriminated against in public sector promotion decisions (“Fair Treatment,” 2012; “Malaysia Employees Federation,” 2010; “Who Does Not Like,” 2012).

Size and Performance of the Civil Service
The number of Malaysian federal civil servants has increased from 979,464 in 2000 to 1,222,947 in 2009, an increase of 24.9%. In the same period, the government’s expenditure on federal civil servant emoluments alone increased from RM14,608 million in 2000 to RM37,985 million in 2009, an increase of 160.0% (Ministry of Finance Malaysia, 2012; “1.22 Million Civil Servants,” 2010; Public Service Department, 2008; “Until June 21,” 2010). Available data indicates that civil servant emoluments have always been a big portion of the federal government’s operating expenditures. In a recent speech launching the Civil Service Labour Day celebration in 2014, the present Malaysian prime minister, Najib Razak, said that “the government has no plan to reduce the strength of civil servants in the country which currently numbers about 1.5 million” (Office of the Chief Secretary to the Government, 2014).

Is public employment in Malaysia high by international standards? Determining the right size of a nation’s civil service is a complex matter, and precise comparisons among countries are difficult due to differing definitions. However, Lucas and Verry, the chief technical advisers in human resources planning to the Economic Planning Unit of the federal government during the preparation of the Sixth Malaysia Plan (1991–1995), have presented revealing international comparisons (Lucas & Verry, 1999). Malaysia ranked third among eleven nations and second after Singapore among the nine East and South Asian countries in total government employment relative to total population. Malaysia both ranked third among the nine East and South Asian countries in total public employment relative to total nonagricultural employment, and in total public sector (including public enterprise) employment relative to nonagricultural employment. Lucas and Verry (1999) conclude that “by whichever measure, it seems that Malaysia indeed had a fairly large public sector by Asian standards as of 1987” (p. 229).

Two more recent reports lend support to Lucas and Verry’s conclusion. In 2003, Malaysia ranked first among six Asian countries in total public employment relative to total population. And in 2009, Malaysia’s civil-servants-to-population ratio was the highest in the Asia Pacific region (“Malaysian Civil Servants’ Salary Schemes,” 2006; Shad Saleem Faruqi, 2011). These comparisons are sufficient to show the large size and role of the Malaysian civil service and to underline the importance of its performance.

Evaluating civil service performance also faces difficult problems of measurement and standards to be used. However, Lim (2010) argues that it is both appropriate and feasible to evaluate civil service performance by looking at the satisfaction of stakeholders with the civil service, because “meeting the expectations of stakeholders is the raison d’être of the public service” (p. 3). The stakeholders here refer to the country’s citizens.

The public often regards corruption and unsatisfactory service delivery as significant performance deficits of the civil service. Government corruption has long been seen as worrisome. According to both rank and score in Transparency International’s Corruption Perception Index, little improvement has been made in political and bureaucratic corruption in Malaysia since 1995 (C. F. Lee, 2013; Lim, 2010).

Public dissatisfaction with the delivery of public services is indicated by the volume of complaints received by the Public Complaints Bureau. Public complaints shot up to 14,700 cases in 2010 compared to 2,707 cases in 2005 (Prime Minister’s Department, 2013), suggesting increasing public dissatisfaction.

The ability of the police to ensure a safe living environment has also been widely questioned.
High crime rates are plaguing the daily lives of the public. Even the Malaysian home minister recently admitted that Malaysians had reason to be worried about the rising crime rate ("Ahmad Zahid," 2013).

In the Malaysian multiethnic context, equitable responsiveness to all ethnic groups is an important criterion of civil service performance. The perceived lack of responsiveness to underrepresented groups has raised concern over the shortage of non-Malays in the civil service. The Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) has shown concern over this trend since the 1980s (Lim, 2002). In the 2001 Kampung Medan incident, the mainly Malay police force was seen to be blatantly biased in handling the outbreak of violence between Malays and Indians. This seems to have awakened the country’s leaders to the dangers of a nonrepresentative bureaucracy (Lim, 2007).

The quality of the civil servants who hold positions in the civil service has also been questioned. There are indications that the government is experiencing the problem of “institutional decline” regarding its public sector institutions, and this is closely related to the quality of personnel in the public sector. As stated by Abdullah Ahmad, then group editor-in-chief of the New Straits Times Press, in an address to civil servants, many believe or fear that the Malaysian bureaucracy is filled with “second-raters” or worse (“Civil Servants Must Aim High,” 2003).

The quality of personnel has direct effects on performance. Doubts have been raised about the knowledge and analytical skill of senior civil servants and about their ability to contribute to effective policy making. Former prime minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi has lamented that “without the brightest minds conceptualising, adapting and driving public policies, good governance would remain an elusive ideal” (“Aim for System of Governance,” 2000). The present prime minister, Najib Razak, also stated (when he was Abdullah Ahmad Badawi’s deputy) that the civil service was “not good enough” and had to “renew and reinvent itself in line with changing needs and expectations of leaders and the public.” He has called for a new breed of civil servants who possess strong analytical capabilities and the ability to generate well-thought-out policy options (Najib Razak, 2005).

Failure of the top management of the government in handling recent crises has also invited huge criticisms. One of the incidents was the disappearance of the flight MH370, which was followed across the world. Inconsistencies in information revealed by ministers and top civil servants from various departments exposed the weaknesses and the limitations of the government’s leadership (Chen & Scott, 2014). Another recent crisis has included abductions in Sabah, a state in East Malaysia. The latest abduction, of a fish farm manager (a Chinese citizen) by a kidnap-for-ransom armed group from the Philippines in May 2014, has caused great concern among domestic and international communities (Chok, 2014). The abduction was the second incident within a month, and the third within the past six months. The ability of the Eastern Sabah Security Command (ESSCOM) to ensure security along the east coast of Sabah is being seriously questioned. Some, including members of parliament from the ruling parties, have dubbed the ESSCOM a “toothless tiger” or a useless “white elephant” (“RM300m ESSCOM,” 2014). The recent abduction not only damages the tourism industry, which has already been badly affected by previous abductions, but is also a major setback to the country’s efforts to recover from the impact and damage caused by the missing Malaysia Airlines flight MH370.

In short, the competency and ability of ministers and top civil servants to manage rapidly growing crises have been seriously questioned. The above discussion also indicates that the Malaysian civil service has failed to meet the expectations of its stakeholders.

In summary, based on Woo’s (2011) study, the frequent allegations that the Malaysian civil service is insufficiently attractive to new graduates cannot be true with respect to overall numbers. These allegations are likely less about
overall numbers and more about failure to attract enough applicants to ensure capacity and representativeness. Woo also found that the civil service was sufficiently attractive to ensure capacity and representativeness. The inability of the civil service to meet the expectations of its stakeholders then raises the following question: Are continuing fears about inadequate capacity completely unfounded? Unfortunately, the answer is, not necessarily, for reasons to be noted in the concluding section of this article.

RECRUITMENT PRACTICES IN THE MALAYSIAN CIVIL SERVICE
As discussed above, in general, Malaysian public employment is able to attract enough applicants to secure a capable and representative civil service. When study shows that the civil service is sufficiently attractive to all ethnic groups in the country, this directly raises the question of why the civil service is predominantly Malay. Despite frequent official denials, recruitment into the Malaysian civil service is widely seen as favoring Malay applicants.

The number of civil servants recruited into the Malaysian civil service increases almost every year. For example, 38,373 civil servants were appointed in 2007, and 52,369 in 2008, for an increase of 36.5%. A total of 47,335 civil servants were appointed in 2012, compared to 29,547 in 2011, for an increase of 60.2% (“The Appointment of Chinese Civil Servants,” 2013; “Until June 21,” 2010). In 2013, the Malaysian chief secretary to the government, Ali Hamsa, announced that with the civil service at 1.42 million strong, the country has sufficient civil servants to meet the country’s needs (“Ali Hamisa,” 2013). The Malay dominance in the civil service, however, is still a major concern to the public.

While the Malaysian civil service expanded rapidly following the implementation of the NEP (New Economic Policy), recruitment into the sector continued to be predominantly Malay. Since then, the civil service has become increasingly ethnically imbalanced. Data show that the proportion of Malay in the civil service increased from 64.5% in 1969–1970 (before the implementation of the NEP) to 77.0% in 2005 and to 76.2% in 2009, while at the same time, the proportion of Chinese and Indian civil servants have declined appreciably: from 18.8% and 15.7%, respectively, in 1969–1970 to 9.4% and 5.1% in 2005 and then to 6.0% and 4.3% in 2009 (Lim, 2013). The situation persists to the present. The domination of Malay in the civil service clearly contradicts the second objective of the NEP, namely, eliminating the identification of race with economic function. The increasingly ethnically homogenous civil service is far from reflecting the country’s multiethnic population composition, and clearly cannot be justified with the 1Malaysia philosophy.

Innovation in human resources practice, in any organization, does not merely correspond with growth or decline in the number of employees. Therefore, even though the number of new civil servants recruited into the Malaysian civil service increases almost every year, this growth does not necessarily contribute to innovation in public personnel recruitment practices—unless these new recruits contribute to improvements in efficiency, in meeting citizens’ expectations, or in attaining desired outcomes and quality. According to Green, Howells, and Miles (2001, p. 9), “the recruitment of new workers constitutes change but is an innovative step only where such workers are introduced in order to import new knowledge or carry out novel tasks.” It is evident that public personnel recruitment practices in Malaysia constitute change, though not innovation. At a minimal level, current recruitment practices seem unable to rectify the severely imbalanced ethnic composition of the civil service.

Some contend that innovation should be a core activity of the public sector (Mulgan & Albury, 2003). Innovation in a public sector context should involve the application of new ideas to improve outcomes, and should help “to improve performance and increase public value; respond to the expectations of citizens and adapt to the needs of users; increase service efficiency and minimise costs” (Mulgan & Albury, 2003, p. 2). Qualified and quality human
resources promote innovation. Research has shown that human capital and its management are important determinants of innovation outputs (De Winnie & Sels, 2010; Zhou, Dekker, & Kleinknecht, 2011). Roberts (1998, as cited in Jørgensen, Becker, & Matthews, 2009, p. 451) argues that the four dimensions of staffing, structure, strategy, and system support are central to successful innovation, and that ensuring that the organization has the right kind of people and manages them effectively are critical staffing issues.

As in the private sector, innovation in the public sector is motivated and driven by a variety of factors. One of the driving imperatives for innovation would be meeting the needs of or responding effectively to “new and changing government and community expectations in an increasingly complex environment” (Australian National Audit Office, 2009, p. 2). With their civil service being of large size and expenditure (specifically for employee emoluments), it is reasonable for Malaysians to have high expectations. The large size and scope of the Malaysian civil service has also raised concerns about whether it is sufficiently representative of all social groups. It is legitimate for the public in a multiethnic society to expect a sufficiently representative civil service, to reflect the composition of the country's population.

Research has shown that representativeness in civil service is important. It promotes the legitimacy of the bureaucracy (and the government) in that diverse groups have a greater sense of identification and a greater expectation of being fairly served when civil servants are visibly and sufficiently diverse (Lim, 2006, 2010; Meier & Nicholson-Crotty, 2002; Selden, 1997; Theobald, Nick & Haider-Markel, 2009). A representative bureaucracy is expected to ensure equitable job opportunities to all ethnic groups and a fairer distribution of resources and services. More importantly, in the process of implementing public policies, a representative bureaucracy is expected to be responsive to the needs of various ethnic groups, which in turn enhances the effectiveness and efficiency of the sector. Responsiveness of the civil service in meeting the expectations of various ethnic groups is very important in a multiethnic society, as Lim (2010) argues: “Without responsiveness, effectiveness is worthless at best; and without effectiveness, efficiency is nil as all resources used are simply wasted” (pp. 2–3).

Obviously, the increasingly homogeneity of the Malaysian civil service is incompatible with the expectations of the country’s multiethnic public. A highly unrepresentative civil service has serious implications for equity in administration and consequently for trust in the public service, government legitimacy, and national unity.

Incremental Innovation in Civil Service Recruitment

Likely because the Malaysian civil service has been able to count on a numerically plentiful supply of applicants, its recruitment practices have been generally passive rather than proactive. However, recently, to attract more non-Malay applicants, the Malaysian Public Service Commission (PSC) has taken the initiative of going beyond the “announce-and-wait” approach to recruitment. In early 2009, in its efforts to increase the number of non-Malay civil servants (and especially Chinese), the PSC initiated cooperation with non-Malay nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) such as the Federation of Chinese Association Malaysia (Hua Zong) to recruit Chinese civil servants (The Federation of Chinese Association Malaysia, 2010). Such joint recruitment drives between non-Malay NGOs and the PSC are rare, if ever heard of before. The joint recruitment drive could be viewed as a measure based on the Malaysian multiethnic community’s needs and expectations. PSC-NGO cooperation is clearly an innovation: it involves doing something differently and deliberately in order to achieve the objective of a more representative bureaucracy that is shaped by the multiethnic national community.

Since the PSC began to cooperate with non-Malay NGOs in recruiting non-Malay civil servants, the response of the public has been encouraging. Such PSC-NGO joint recruitment activities always receive positive responses.
from Chinese job seekers, and have also attract-
ed the attention of major local Chinese newspa-
papers, in which joint recruitment drives are
often seen as important events and given detailed
coverage (“The Appointment of Chinese Civil
Servants,” 2013; “First Three Months,” 2013;
“Good Respond,” 2010; “Khor Tsu Koon,”
2009; “Public Service Commission,” 2012;
“Until June 21,” 2010). Recruitment of non-
Malay (Chinese) civil servants is not something
new. However, the current change in the per-
ceptions and behaviors of non-Malay (Chinese)
job seekers in seeking public employment is
something new. And, according to Koch and
Hauknes (2005, p. 8), innovative:

Innovation is a change of behaviour that
is new to the relevant agent, but not ne-
cessarily new to society as a whole. If a
civil servant deliberately introduces a new
way of doing his or her professional obli-
gations or activities, with the purpose of
providing an improved service, this is an
innovation, even if someone else might
have done something similar elsewhere.

Following such innovative recruitment prac-
tices, PSC Chairman Mahmood Adam agreed
that interest among non-Malays in joining the
civil service has increased and that the joint
recruitment efforts paid off (“Non-Malays Rush
to Join Civil Service,” 2013; “70 pc More Non-
Malays,” 2013). This type of innovation could
be categorized as a system interaction innova-
tion, which involves new or improved ways
of interacting with other organizations and
knowledge bases or the establishment of new
patterns of cooperation and interaction (Hal-
vorsen, Hauknes, Miles, & Røste, 2005; Koch
& Hauknes, 2005).

Table 1 shows public service recruitment num-
bers from 2004 to 2007. Recruitment led to an
increased proportion of Malays (from 65.4% in
2004 to 82.4% in that time period), while re-
cruitment of Chinese, Indian, and other groups
(mainly other natives) led to falling percentages
(from 13.1%, 8.9%, and 12.6%, respectively,
in 2004 to 3.4%, 3.1%, and 11.1% in 2007). It
is clear that recruitment practices in that period
further weakened the notion of representative
bureaucracy in Malaysia.

Quota requirements and the low rate of
applications of non-Malay compared to Malay
are often cited as the two main official reasons
for the low appointment rates of non-Malay
civil servants. Table 2 shows the number of
public applications from different ethnic groups
from 2004 to 2007. While it is true that
compared to the percentage of applicants
who were ethnically Malay, the percentages
of Chinese and Indians were low, Lim (2010)
argues that it is the actual number and not the
percentage that is important. Tables 1 and 2
show that in terms of quantity, the number

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2004</th>
<th>2006</th>
<th>2007</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malay</td>
<td>4,187</td>
<td>65.4</td>
<td>22,618</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>841</td>
<td>13.1</td>
<td>1,045</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indian</td>
<td>568</td>
<td>8.9</td>
<td>1,150</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>806</td>
<td>12.6</td>
<td>3,352</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>6,402</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>28,165</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Data from Lim (2010).
of Chinese and Indian applicants who were recruited were small compared to the numbers who applied. Hence, the underrepresentation of Chinese and Indian civil servants cannot be explained simply by the low percentages of applicants.

Quota requirements based on constitutional provisions, according to former Chief Justice Mohamed Suffian Hashim (1976), are only applicable to five services: namely, the Malaysian Home Service and Foreign Service, the Judicial and Legal Service, the Custom Service, the police force, and the armed forces. These five services collectively cover only a small share of all civil servants. Clearly, public personnel recruitment practices are more decisive in creating a representative bureaucracy than are quota requirements, a point that has been made by Means (1986). In summary, the increasing homogeneity of the Malaysian civil service is closely related to recruitment practices in the public sector.

Representative bureaucracy is one of the democratic norms. This is to ensure a responsive civil service to all regardless of ethnicity and also to ensure the absence of ethnic bias in formulating and implementing public policies. Many strategies have been suggested to pursue an appropriate and ethnically diverse representation policy in Malaysian civil service staffing or recruitment practices. The strategy that seems most useful is the 60–40 recruitment system, which was proposed to the Ninth Malaysia Plan (2006–2010) in a study entitled *Towards a Representative and World Class Civil Servant* (Asian Strategy & Leadership Institute, 2006). The 60–40 recruitment system is an incremental innovation. Incremental innovations are innovations that would incrementally improve already existing products, processes, or services (Koch & Hauknes, 2005). In fact, such innovations have been carried out since joint PSC-NGO recruitment began in late 2008, if not earlier.

Table 3 shows public service recruitment from 2008 to 2011. The percentages of Chinese and Indian civil servants have increased, from 4.4% and 4.5%, respectively, in 2008 to 5.2% and 4.7% in 2009 and to 8.0% and 5.4% in 2011. The incremental increases of Chinese and Indian civil servants is consistent with the concept of incremental innovations.

The pertinent question to ask is this: Does the incremental recruitment strategy alter or improve ethnic representativeness in the civil service? Apparently, the answer is no. As suggested by the data discussed earlier in this section, the percentages of Chinese and Indian civil servants have decreased overall, from 18.8% and 15.7%, respectively, in 1969–1970 to 9.4% and 5.1% in 2005 and then to 6.0% and 4.3% in 2009.
As confirmed by PSC Chairman Mahmood Adam, Chinese applicants tend to prefer higher-level positions, which require university qualifications (“The Appointment of Chinese Civil Servants,” 2013). Hence it could be more accurate to focus on civil servant representation in the management and professional group, which requires university qualifications. In 2005 (before PSC-NGO joint recruitment began), the percentages of Chinese and Indian civil servants in the management and professional group were 9.4% and 5.1% respectively. At the end of 2009, about a year after the joint recruitment initiative, the percentage of Chinese civil servants had increased to 10.7%, while the percentage of Indian civil servants remained at 5.1% (Lim, 2013, pp. 180 & 183).

This situation is encouraging, although the increase (for Chinese civil servants) is small. This type of incremental innovation should be carried out continuously to slowly rectify the current extreme ethnic imbalance. The incremental strategy should be maintained for another reason: It is a rather painless strategy, unlikely to offend the sentiments of Malays because it does not involve any sudden change in the civil service. Large changes are likely to incite resistance to the innovation.

**TABLE 3.**
Civil Service Recruitment, 2008–2011

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2008</th>
<th></th>
<th>2009</th>
<th></th>
<th>2011</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malay</td>
<td>41,177</td>
<td>78.6</td>
<td>34,536</td>
<td>68.0</td>
<td>20,976</td>
<td>71.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>2,286</td>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>2,660</td>
<td>5.2</td>
<td>2,365</td>
<td>8.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indian</td>
<td>2,367</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>2,398</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>1,581</td>
<td>5.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>6,542</td>
<td>12.5</td>
<td>11,162</td>
<td>22.0</td>
<td>4,625</td>
<td>15.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>52,372</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>50,756</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>29,547</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source. Data from *Sin Chew Daily* (2010, August 27) and *Sin Chew Daily* (2013, January 3).

**TABLE 4.**
Civil Service Recruitment, 2011–2013

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2011a</th>
<th></th>
<th>2012a</th>
<th></th>
<th>2013b</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malay</td>
<td>20,976</td>
<td>71.0</td>
<td>33,427</td>
<td>70.6</td>
<td>5,160</td>
<td>73.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>2,365</td>
<td>8.0</td>
<td>2,630</td>
<td>5.6</td>
<td>374</td>
<td>5.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indian</td>
<td>1,581</td>
<td>5.4</td>
<td>2,354</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>403</td>
<td>5.7</td>
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<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>4,625</td>
<td>15.7</td>
<td>8,924</td>
<td>18.9</td>
<td>1,106</td>
<td>15.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>29,547</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>47,335</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>7,043</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Data reported for 2013 is from the first three months of the year only.
Source. aData from *Sin Chew Daily* (2013, January 3). bData from *Nanyang Siang Pau* (2013, April 4).
Political Responsiveness in Civil Service Recruitment

The discussion above shows that innovations applied by the PSC have resulted in mild improvement. However, recently released data show decreased recruitment of Chinese civil servants across the civil service as a whole. As shown in Table 4, the percentages of Chinese job seekers being recruited into the civil service overall have fallen, from 8.0% in 2011 to 5.6% in 2012 and then to 5.3% during the first three months of 2013 (“The Appointment of Chinese Civil Servants,” 2013; “A Record of Application,” 2013).

Whether the decrease in recruitment among Chinese job seekers during this period will further weaken the already-existing underrepresentation of Chinese Malaysians in the civil service cannot be verified without the necessary data—that is, breakdowns of civil servants by ethnic groups that have yet to be released to the public. However, consistent with the logic presented in this article, public personnel recruitment practices are likely to affect the ethnic composition of the civil service. In other words, the current underrepresentation of Chinese Malaysians in the civil service will probably be exacerbated due to the lower rates of recruitment of Chinese job seekers.

Two possible explanations can be offered. First, managers of public personnel recruitment do not realize that the PSC-NGO joint recruitment and incremental increases in recruitment of non-Malay applicants (and particularly Chinese applicants) are innovations that will probably be able to rectify the severity of the ethnic imbalance in the civil service. The incrementally increased recruitment of non-Malays into the civil service over the period from 2009 to 2011 was probably a result of Malaysian civil servants responding to their political leaders. The 1Malaysia project was brought forth by Najib Razak soon after he assumed leadership of the United Malay National Organisation (UMNO) party and the federal government. The 1Malaysia project apparently was introduced in response to the cross-ethnic appeal of the opposition coalition, Pakatan Rakyat (PR); 1Malaysia was widely “seen and billed as a ‘Najib idea’” and was not seen to enjoy “wide-spread support among his cabinet and his own party” (Farish Ahmad Noor, 2013, p. 98). Support for the 1Malaysia project waned when it failed to gain traction among the wider Malaysian electorate, especially the Chinese electorate, in the 2013 general elections.

The second possible explanation has something to do with the practice and attitude of public managers in charge of public personnel recruitment. Means (1986, p. 105) argues that “hiring practices, not quotas” have been decisive. According to Lewis (1977), innovations will be rejected if inertia, stasis, and maintenance of the status quo are considered more important:

Inertia, stasis, and a commitment to the status quo are probably more characteristic of public bureaucracy than are initiation and innovation...The nontechnical managers of public bureaucracy, generalist professionals...may reject useful innovations that they perceive to be injurious to the organization. (pp. 166–167)

Another point is worth making, to show the commitment of public officials to maintaining the status quo (the dominance of Malay civil servants in the Malaysian civil service). Recently released data show that non-Malay job seekers have demonstrated “a giant leap in the interest” in applying for government jobs (Lee, 2013). However, it is not the increase in the percentages of non-Malay applicants but the increase in actual appointments of non-Malay civil servants that is significant. Data indicate that total number of civil servants appointed, of all ethnic groups, increased from 2011 to 2012. However, the percentage increases in appointments of non-Malay civil servants were still lower than that of Malay civil servants—as indicated in Table 5. The lowest increase, of merely 11%, was for Chinese civil servants, while the percentage of Indian civil servants joining the service increased 49% (both increases resulted...
still in a very low percentage representation among the civil service as a whole).

The lowest increase in appointment rate between 2011 and 2012, for Chinese civil servants, probably lends some support to the first-presented explanation, in which public managers of personnel recruitment do not need to be responsive to a concept (1Malaysia) that has fallen out of favor among their political leaders. These data probably also lend some support to the argument of Lewis (1977), in which a commitment to maintain the status quo of the civil service may lead to reluctance among public managers to implement innovations that they perceive may threaten the numerical dominance of Malay civil servants (status quo) in the civil service.

What are the main factors that contribute to such a mind-set and such behaviors among Malay public officials? One of the explanations may lie with their education. After the May 1969 race riot, various schools and educational policies were created exclusively for Malay students, including the establishment of residential schools and MARA Junior Science Colleges among others. These schools are basically linguistic and cultural—or ethnic—silos. At higher levels, the government has created ethnically exclusive matriculation programs and colleges, and quota-based university admissions. Although some of these schools and programs were later opened to non-Malay students, non-Malay enrollment remains insignificant. This has created ethnic segmentation in secondary and higher education.

It is generally believed that people form their values and beliefs largely during childhood and early adulthood. This period, according to Aberbach, Putnam, and Rockman (1981, p. 200), “constitutes a critical period during which a kind of ‘imprinting’ often takes place.” Schools are generally recognized as crucial to socialization during childhood and early adulthood. Ethnic-silo-style educational experiences are unhealthy, especially to the successive generations of Malays who continue to play the leading roles in the country’s politics, government, and public administration.

In Malaysia, ethnic representation in the civil service is often seen as a matter of employment opportunities. Many Malays who have gone through the type of education described above consider public education and public sector jobs to be, as the former chief secretary to the government, Sidek Hassan, put it, their “birthright”—because they are the “indigenous, the bumiputra, and the ones with the only right over it” (Sidek, 2010). Hence, it is not surprising if they defend this “birthright” with all resorts. This “birthright” view is strengthened via the amendment of Article 153 of the Constitution by the UMNO-dominated government, which basically “legalizes racial discrimination” (Lee, 2013, p. 236). Officially, public personnel recruitment policy is color-

### Table 5.
Civil Service Recruitment, 2011–2012

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2011</th>
<th>2012</th>
<th>Difference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Malay</td>
<td>20,976</td>
<td>33,427</td>
<td>12,451</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>2,365</td>
<td>2,630</td>
<td>265</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indian</td>
<td>1,581</td>
<td>2,354</td>
<td>773</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>4,625</td>
<td>8,924</td>
<td>4,299</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>29,547</td>
<td>47,335</td>
<td>17,788</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source. Data from Sin Chew Daily (2013, January 3).
blind. But in practice, due to a lack of cross-ethnic understanding and empathy, many Malay public officials who have discretionary power in selecting and appointing tend to bias recruitment decisions in favor of their own ethnic group.

CONCLUSION

The Malaysian civil service is able to attract a sufficient quantity of applicants to meet its needs for capacity and ethnic representativeness. However, ensuring representative recruitment of Chinese Malaysians may require some compromise in merit as measured by CGPA. Compared to other ethnic groups in Malaysia, Chinese graduates with stronger academic performance are less likely to choose public employment.

Woo's (2011) study findings show that the civil service is able to attract more than its fair share of well-qualified graduates. However, the performance of the civil service is widely seen as not good enough, and inadequate capacity is widely seen as among the major reasons for unsatisfactory performance. Why is capacity still inadequate when the civil service is able to attract more than its fair share of well-qualified graduates? Two commonly heard factors help to explain this seeming paradox.

One factor is that the standard of education in Malaysian schools and public universities has suffered a serious decline. This has provoked concern not only among ordinary citizens but also among the country's political leaders, including former MCA President Chua Soi Lek (“Chua Soi Lek,” 2011) and former Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi. The latter has called for an “overhaul” of government schools (“School System Overhaul,” 2004), and even an “education revolution” (Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, 2004).

Therefore, it is possible that even the better-qualified graduates, on paper, may lack the capacity required to uplift civil service performance. The standard of English proficiency in secondary and postsecondary education has declined to such an extent that adequate grades or a good self-rating in English proficiency may still not reflect adequate command of the language. The declining standard of English proficiency among graduates has become a serious issue in Malaysia, exemplified by the shocking admission by a top education ministry official recently that two thirds of the 70,000 English-language teachers in the country failed to reach a proficient English level. It is said that improving the English standard among students poses “the most acute challenge” of the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013–2025, which was launched in September 2013 (Azman Ujang, 2013; Doss, 2012; Educationfactory, 2013; Hariati & Lee, 2011). It is widely feared that the quality of education has also declined in other, more important respects as well. Weaknesses in the education system affect all sectors and have attracted serious public and government concern.

The other widely cited factor is that public personnel recruitment practices may fail to take in the best applicants. Despite frequent official denials, recruitment into the Malaysian civil service is widely seen as favoring Malay applicants. Greater emphasis on merit criteria in recruitment is needed to improve capacity and performance in the civil service. The severe ethnic imbalance in the civil service is probably due to the practice of ethnic preference in recruitment. The increasingly homogenous workforce in the civil service is an unhealthy phenomenon that weakens trust in and legitimacy of the government; reduces the responsiveness, effectiveness, and efficiency of the public sector; and has a negative impact on national unity.

On the behavior of Malay public officials in favoring their own ethnic group in recruitment practices, this article can only suggest an explanation resting in how educational experiences influence people's mind-set and behavior. Identifying exactly which aspects or characteristics of education lead to the observed results or behaviors will require another specifically designed study.

Demographic trends show that Chinese and Indian minority groups in Malaysia are becoming smaller. These minority groups ultimately depend on Malay public officials to have sufficient understanding and empathy to defend their rights and future. According to Goodin (2000),
public officials are encouraged to adopt a form of “internal-reflective” deliberation. Deliberation, in this account, is a matter of making people “imaginatively present” in the minds of deliberators, with the hope of ensuring broader representativeness. To make non-Malays “imaginatively present” in the minds of Malay public officials (deliberators), cross-ethnic understanding and empathy are important.

Admittedly, educational and recruitment policies both are caused by something more fundamental, namely the ethnic identity and competition that is perpetuated by political parties to win power. That said, educators in Malaysia should work within the constraints of the political context. The most appropriate time to foster cross-ethnic understanding and empathy among the younger generation, and the young Malay generation especially, is at the early stage of their (primary) education. This is to “imprint,” to borrow Aberbach, Putnam, and Rockman’s (1981) term, the concept of cross-ethnic empathy and understanding into young minds. The imprinted concept should be continued and enhanced by educators through teaching and learning processes at higher levels of education (secondary schools and higher). Fostering cross-ethnic empathy and understanding through education hopefully would produce future generations and leaders who have greater appreciation for the importance of representative bureaucracy in a modern democracy.

While there are signs of innovative practices taking place toward rectifying the significant overrepresentation of ethnically Malay civil servants within the Malaysian civil service, greater efforts from public managers of personnel recruitment and stronger political will from political leaders are needed to ensure a more representative bureaucracy in Malaysia.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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NOTES

1. In Malaysia, there are numerous native groups (other than the Malays). For example, in Sabah and Sarawak (the two states located in East Malaysia), there are at least 30 and 40 ethnic/subethnic groups, respectively. Most of these groups are recognized as indigenous people. The special position of these natives is safeguarded under Article 153 of the Federal Constitution on par with Malay privileges. The term “other natives” here mainly refers to these native groups.

2. Some of the data cited was originally reported from Malaysian local newspapers such as the Borneo Post Online, Harian Metro, Nanyang Siang Pau, New Straits Times, Oriental Daily News, Sin Chew Daily, Sinar Harian, The Malay Mail/The Malay Mail Online, The Star/The Star Online, and The Sun Daily.

3. Woo’s (2011) study was carried out in 2005. Please see chapter 8 for details regarding the calculation of the percentage of recent graduates that Malaysian public employment must attract in order to fill its graduate-level human resource needs.

4. Sufficient pay and fringe benefits are obviously material in nature, while job security is about the security of material rewards in the future. Good promotion prospects are about the amount of material rewards in the future, although this job characteristic also affects status and authority.

5. It is said that the focus of the NEP (New Economic Policy) on the public sector contributes to the issue of institutional decline among government institutions. It is widely believed that governmental institutional decline is due to ethnically-based quota employment patterns or to the quota system applied during the intake of students into universities. For details, see Gomez, Saravanamuttu, and Maznah (2013) and H. G. Lee (2013).

6. ESSCOM is a Malaysian security area that covers 1,400 kilometers of the east coast of Sabah. Its purpose is to strengthen maritime security in the eastern part of Sabah and prevent terrorist activities in the waters of Sabah, while at the same time ensuring that trade and business activity are not affected. ESSCOM was established in March 2013, following the 2013 crisis in which 235 armed militants from a group called Royal Security Forces of the Sultanate of Sulu and North Borneo
invaded Lahad Datu, a town located in the east of Sabah. The objective of the group was to assert the unresolved territorial claim of the Philippines of eastern Sabah. Over RM300 million has been spent on ESSCOM. For details, see ESSCOM TIMES (Prime Minister’s Department, 2014).

7. The 1Malaysia concept was launched on September, 16, 2010, by Prime Minister Najib Razak. and is aimed at nation building. 1Malaysia caters the needs of all sectors of the plural society and aims to ensure equal distribution of wealth among all of the society's ethnic groups.

8. UMNO (United Malay National Organisation) is the dominant party in the Malaysian ruling race-based coalition, National Front or Barisan Nasional (BN). After the 2008 general elections, in which the BN lost control of five states, the dominant UMNO party was faced with the prospect of a weakened UMNO-led ruling coalition, where its non-Malay component parties—namely the Chinese or mainly Chinese parties of the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) and the Malaysian People's Movement Party or Parti Gerakan Rakyat Malaysia (Gerakan), and the Indian party Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC)—were struggling to stay afloat. The positions of MCA and Gerakan were further weakened in the ruling coalition due to their near-total failure in the 2013 general elections.

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Public Sector Recruitment in Malaysia


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