**PORTFOLIO REVIEW OUTCOME SUMMARY**

**MALAYSIA PROGRAM**

This document mainly explains outcomes of the key questions and answers raised during the June 22nd, 2015 Presidential portfolio review of the Malaysia Program’s work on supporting free and fair elections. The portfolio review has raised questions on how the Malaysia Program would continue to support increasing civil society participation in good governance and the priorities in gearing up for the 2018 General Elections.

1. **Participants**

Portfolio lead: Mary Agnes James: Program Assistant Malaysia Program

Discussants: Christopher Stone: President, Open Society Foundations; Ibrahim Suffian: Ex- Malaysia Advisory Committee and Director of Merdeka Centre for Opinion Research

Moderator: Martin Hala: Regional Manager, Asia Pacific Regional Office

Other participants: Binaifer Nowrojee: Director, Asia Pacific Regional Office; Sana Ghouse, Program Officer, Asia Pacific Regional Office; Hatia Jinjikhadze: Deputy Director, Open Society Georgia Foundation

1. **Summary of the portfolio review**

The review started with a short presentation of the Malaysia Program’s work on the General Elections in Malaysia. It was watched closely and was a time of high expectations. OSF started working on the General Elections in 2010 in anticipation that the elections would be announced in 2011, two years after Prime Minister Najib replaced Ahmad Badawi. The dates were uncertain but the elections was finally held in 2013. As a result of beginning to engage in this work at an early stage, there was a long period of time in the run up to the elections when the former Southeast Asia Initiative and other parts of the OSF network were involved in grant making to Malaysian civil society on election related work. Later on because of the perceived importance of the 2013 elections, and George Soros’ personal interest in the elections, it was decided that OSF would heightened the level of agency in the work and leverage its network of networks, bringing in outside expertise and conducting advocacy in Washington DC.

While the majority of support was through grant making, the Malaysia Program took on more than the traditional grantmaker’s role, and actually became the driver of the work.

The grant making aspect was perceived to be the most successful intervention. Among the various interventions, it was the best planned, resulting from numerous conversations from the ground and thus reflected locally identified needs. As a result of grant making, large scale local election monitoring occurred for the first time, and the first dedicated media monitoring project was undertaken.

OSF’s support for the grantees was instrumental for the galvanizing of public participation and supporting civil society efforts, but that one could not ignore the fact that public motivation for change was also very high which resulted in massive turn out at the registration drives and helped foster local philanthropy for Malaysian civil society. However, OSF support was particularly impactful for youth participation with hundreds of thousands of youth mobilized.

Mobilizing the network of networks was perhaps the least successful intervention and the one that faced the most challenges, mostly due to poor communication and coordination. A huge limiting factor for its effectiveness was that it was put together too quickly with very little input from the ground and mobilized too late. The advocacy drive was really coming from outside and it was difficult to find local spokespersons for it. Post-election international advocacy would have perhaps been more effective, with better communication.

The post-election cry of electoral irregularity was quietened somewhat by the fact that it took groups a long time to gather documentation, thereby losing some of the momentum and how this could be used as part of demands for electoral reform.

We were taken aback by the level of vilification of George Soros (and the OSF by association) in the official media. Though hardly unexpected after more than a decade of official hostility, the extent and intensity of the attacks still came as a shock. As a result, we had to work quietly and minimize our public exposure. Staff only attended public events and not private/ close door meetings. The then SEAI Director, Maureen Aung-Thwin, was denied entry into Malaysia after the July 2011 Bersih rally which the blogs reported was OSF funded.

In terms of working with other donors, there was a good collaboration with limited overlap. While other donors such as the International Republican Institute and The Asia Foundation funded the same organizations, support was for different programs, and our work was very different from many of them who were also engaged in supporting capacity building of political parties. OSF support was very civil society focused which differentiated it from the other donors.

Chris Stone felt that the portfolio looked scattered. He reflected that in other countries where OSF has engaged in supporting election work, the lessons have been that you have to be persistent and build capacity engaging with the groups that are working day in and day out on the issues in order to be effective in achieving the goals and objectives.

Mary noted that the grants list did not completely reflect the reality of the grant making. Some grants were made in 2011 but because the elections did not happen then, no cost extensions were given to those grants to continue the work, so in fact the work did continue in 2012 and beyond. Other groups such as Malaysiakini were groups that the Malaysia Program and the Program for Independent Journalism was funding more generally so while there was specific funding for Kini.tv for election reporting, supporting the group in helping create the enabling environment for free and fair elections was always ongoing through other support outside of an election year. Martin echoed the fact that with some grantees it was difficult to draw the line between electoral work and other work that we have supported. Many grantees were supported on issues of creating an enabling environment and strengthening democracy, all of which fed into levelling the playing field around election times.

It was acknowledged there was still a lot to be learned in term of how that documentation and data is used as part of policy reform and as part of advocacy for election reform.

Chris Stone then reflected on a bigger question of how clear the Malaysia Program is about its goals and objectives of a free and fair election and the goal of the opposition winning. He felt that these two lines seemed blurred throughout the portfolio review paper.

Mary noted that the Program was very clear that it was not working with political parties or groups that were linked directly to campaigns for any political party. As such, funding of certain groups was stopped when individuals in those groups begun running for political positions. There was a clear distinction that we were standing on a platform for free and fair elections.

Martin noted that the opposition was a coalition of many groups, so while civil society largely gravitates towards opposition, it is a mixed bag of groups with different platforms which means there are challenges even when looking at the opposition. He noted that the Malaysia Program has no illusion about the opposition.

1. **Outcome and Follow Up**

Moving into next elections, Ibrahim feels that there had to be increased focus on the strong Muslim segment that was growing. Based on the polling that has been done, it appears that they have not bought into the reform. With a strong ethnic element in Malaysia in the political discourse and a government that is also very unpopular, there is a need to widen the constituencies engaged in the discourse and to bring more voices into the fold.

Thinking about the next election in 2018, the Malaysia Programneed to start thinking about advocacy around policy reform at this stage, seeing what possibilities are emerging to engage with the Election Commission, for example.

Another area of work is the empowerment particularly amongst indigenous groups, youth, women and rural areas. There is a need to look at the election monitoring work from the last time and build on the lessons to understand on how it can be supported in a more structured way.

There is a need to also think of post-election asks at an early stage, on developing strategies for advocacy after the election date.

Also, there is value in the network of networks, however the process of leveraging this network would need to start in 2016.

Binaifer noted that with the collapse of the opposition, voting numbers are going to be split, and so the work going forward is really about creating a clearer playing field and for identifying policy reform that is needed for free and fair elections. She said that the Malaysia Program has not identified clear policy targets and that there was a need to go after very specific issues. She noted that the Program continues to stay very close to opposition affiliates and that perhaps needs to be re-examined. She also suggested not having a US based firm doing PR work would be important for any international advocacy engagement in the future.

Sana noted that recent events in Southeast Asia have shown that the formal ASEAN mechanisms are not going to be useful for any advocacy work with the principle of non-interference / non-intervention so prolific, even as the community moves towards economic integration. In the absence of using the formal ASEAN mechanisms though there is scope to examine how regional based groupings could be used to leverage the work of Malaysian civil society and help with capacity building or knowledge exchange. She mentioned the ASEAN Parliamentarians for Human Rights as a useful regional advocacy grouping but also the Southeast Asia Press Association.

In summary, the Malaysia Program needs to build on the election related work and have a clear focus on working towards the next elections expected to be held by 2018.