An examination of employee participation in the private sector: Malaysian case studies

Balakrishnan Parasuraman

University of Wollongong

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An Examination of Employee Participation in the Private Sector: Malaysian Case Studies

A thesis in fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the degree

Doctor of Philosophy

from

The University of Wollongong

by

BALAKRISHNAN PARASURAMAN
B. Soc. Sc Hons (USM, Malaysia)
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MSc (Industrial Relations) (Stirling, UK)

School of Management and Marketing
March 2007
I, Balakrishnan Parasuraman, declare that this thesis, submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the award of Doctor of Philosophy, in the School of Management, and Marketing, University of Wollongong, is wholly my own work unless otherwise referenced or acknowledged. The document has not been submitted for qualification at any other academic institution.

Balakrishnan Parasuraman

30 March 2007
In loving memory of my father and my mother

Mr Parasuraman Manickam (66)
Ms Munichy Dharman (55)

(Kedah-born, Sungai Petani-bound)

who passed away on October 25, 1997 and April 18, 1986

Their legacy to their children:

We shall support you till you’ve achieved the highest level of education or as long as you want to study, but never ever give up when you know you can succeed’.
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<th>Full Form</th>
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<td>AEU</td>
<td>Airlines Employees Union</td>
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<tr>
<td>ASRC</td>
<td>Autoco Sports and Recreation Committee</td>
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<tr>
<td>CCP</td>
<td>Chinese Communist Party</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CCR</td>
<td>Cabinet Committee Report</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CA</td>
<td>Collective agreement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CB</td>
<td>Collective Bargaining</td>
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<tr>
<td>CFL</td>
<td>Chinese Federation of Labour</td>
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<td>CLA</td>
<td>Council of Labour Affairs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CUEPACS</td>
<td>Congress Unions of Employees in Public Sector and Civil Service</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DAP</td>
<td>Democratic Action Party</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EBAs</td>
<td>Enterprise Bargaining Agreements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ECOP</td>
<td>Employer Confederation of Philippine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EIWU</td>
<td>Electrical Industry Workers Union</td>
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<tr>
<td>EOI</td>
<td>Export-Oriented Industrialisation</td>
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<td>EP</td>
<td>Employee Participation</td>
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<tr>
<td>ESS</td>
<td>Employee Suggestion Scheme</td>
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<td>EWCs</td>
<td>European Works Councils</td>
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<tr>
<td>GDP</td>
<td>Gross Domestic Product</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HIP</td>
<td>Heavy Industry Policy</td>
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<tr>
<td>HICOM</td>
<td>Heavy Industries Corporation of Malaysia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HRM</td>
<td>Human resource management</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IR</td>
<td>Industrial Relations</td>
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<td>ISA</td>
<td>Internal Security Act</td>
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<td>ISI</td>
<td>Import Substitution Industrialisation</td>
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<tr>
<td>JCCs</td>
<td>Joint Consultation Committees</td>
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<td>LMCs</td>
<td>Labour-Management Councils</td>
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<td>MAPA</td>
<td>Malayan Agricultural Producers Association</td>
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<td>MAS</td>
<td>Malaysian Airline System</td>
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<td>MASEU</td>
<td>Malaysian Airlines Employees Union, Peninsular Malaysia</td>
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<td>MCA</td>
<td>Malaysia Chinese Association</td>
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<td>MCBA</td>
<td>Malaya Commercial Banks Association</td>
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<tr>
<td>MCEO</td>
<td>Malayan Council of Employers’ Organization</td>
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<td>MCP</td>
<td>Malayan Communist Party</td>
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<tr>
<td>MESA</td>
<td>Malaysian Airlines Executive Staff Association</td>
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<tr>
<td>MEOA</td>
<td>Malaysian Estates Owners’ Association</td>
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<tr>
<td>MGLU</td>
<td>Malaya General Labour Union</td>
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<td>MIEU</td>
<td>Metal Industry Employees Union</td>
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<tr>
<td>MLO</td>
<td>Malaysian Labour Organisation</td>
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<tr>
<td>MNCs</td>
<td>Multinational Corporations</td>
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<td>MMEA</td>
<td>Malayan Mining Employers’ Association</td>
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<tr>
<td>MSC</td>
<td>Multimedia Super Corridor</td>
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<tr>
<td>MTUC</td>
<td>Malaysian Trade Union Congress</td>
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<tr>
<td>NCCIM</td>
<td>National Chamber of Commerce and Industry of Malaysia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NEP</td>
<td>New Economic Policy</td>
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<tr>
<td>NICs</td>
<td>Newly Industrialised countries</td>
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<tr>
<td>Acronym</td>
<td>Description</td>
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<tr>
<td>NJCs</td>
<td>National Joint Councils</td>
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<tr>
<td>NST</td>
<td>New Strait Times</td>
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<tr>
<td>NUBE</td>
<td>National Union of Bank Employees</td>
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<td>NUPW</td>
<td>National Union of Plantation Workers</td>
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<tr>
<td>NUTW</td>
<td>National Union of Transport Workers</td>
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<tr>
<td>OECD</td>
<td>Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OSHA</td>
<td>Occupational Safety and Health Act</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PAS</td>
<td>Malaysian Islamic Party</td>
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<tr>
<td>PAEU</td>
<td>Postal Assistant Executive Union</td>
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<tr>
<td>PSD</td>
<td>Public Services Department</td>
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<tr>
<td>PST</td>
<td>Public Services Tribunal</td>
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<td>PSRC</td>
<td>Posco Sports and Recreation Committee</td>
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<td>PMGLU</td>
<td>Pan-Malayan General Labour Union</td>
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<tr>
<td>PMFTU</td>
<td>Pan-Malayan Federation of Trade Union</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PIO</td>
<td>Pioneer Industry Ordinance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RTU</td>
<td>Registrar of Trade Union</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SHC</td>
<td>Safety and Health Committee</td>
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<td>SSRC</td>
<td>Steelco Sports and Recreation Committee</td>
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<tr>
<td>TPS</td>
<td>Toyota Production System</td>
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<td>UMNO</td>
<td>United Malay National Organisation</td>
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<tr>
<td>UPCW</td>
<td>Union Postal Clerical Workers</td>
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<td>UPUS</td>
<td>Union Postal Uniform Services</td>
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<td>VSS</td>
<td>Voluntarily Separation Scheme</td>
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ABSTRACT

Employee participation refers to a wide variety of policies, mechanisms, and practices that enable employees to take part in decision-making, frequently at the level of the enterprise or workplace. The subject of employee participation (EP) in the organisation has attracted a great deal of international interest as attested by the considerable amount of research in the issue. However, whereas the issues have been fairly well researched in OECD countries, especially those in Europe, EP has been rather less emphasised in Asia. The few studies that have been conducted on EP in this Malaysia have been from the organisational behaviour perspective with a narrow set of variables under consideration. The present study makes significant contributions across all areas of EP for scholarly researchers as well as practitioners and policy-makers in Malaysia.

The primary objective of this study has been to provide an insight into why private companies (Steelco, Autoco and Posco) in Malaysia have developed direct and indirect forms, and what have been the major determinants and influences on the choice of forms of EP. The next objective of the study is to understand whether or not unions and non-managerial employees have any capacity to influence management final decision-making process at the firm level. To achieve these research objectives, a qualitative case research strategy was selected, which was appropriate given the paucity of information on EP in the Malaysian private sector. An extensive empirical research was undertaken through interviews with national union leaders, employers, managers, union representatives, and non-managerial employees. In addition to the interview technique, direct participation, memos, and reflective journal data were also utilised in this study. The results of the interview, direct observation, memos and reflective journal were triangulated for validity of study. These methods were also discussed in terms of their academic contributions to understanding why EP was implemented at company and workplace level, and concomitantly to study the capacity of the unions and non-managerial employees to influence management final decisions.

The findings from the case study research of Steelco, Autoco and Posco found new factors, only rarely discussed in the international EP literature, to be important. These included mergers and acquisitions, privatisation policy, Malaysia’s Look East Policy, cross-cultural management styles and the influence of British colonial system.

Other major research findings are related to the second objective of this study. The research results from studying Steelco, Autoco and Posco demonstrated that unions and non-managerial employees have very limited capacity to influence the management final decisions at company level. This is due to the Industrial Relations Act (managerial prerogative clause) 1967, the management attitudes towards union and workers, cultural orientation and values among Malaysia employees, and ineffectiveness of the Code of Conduct for Industrial Harmony 1975. The findings of present research have some implication for analytical models of EP, particularly the Favourable Conjunctures Model. As a consequence, a new model of EP which incorporates these findings from the Malaysian private sector is proposed in this research.

The study concludes that this research not only contributes to the academic literature on EP but it should be of value of practitioners in industrial relations and human resource management, unions, the government agencies (Ministry of Human Resources Malaysia). In future research, similar studies can be applied more widely in Malaysia.
Such knowledge is too wonderful for me, to lofty me to attain, I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well (Psalm 139:6,14).

First of all, I praise almighty God who gave me strength and spirit to complete this thesis even though I was going through some difficulties and rough times.

This study was made possible through the cooperation and help of many people and institutions. I owe a great honour to my supervisors, Professor Ray Markey, Associate Professor Di Kelly and Dr Terri Mylett for giving me a chance and, especially, for their willingness in giving me guidance so that I could finish my thesis. In their own ways, they have given me meaningful help, encouragement, motivation, and spirit. Professor Ray Markey was the one who encouraged me to study and explore employee participation in Malaysia. Besides that, his great interest in employee participation in Asia made easier for me to discuss any topics during meeting times with him. Dr Terri Mylett, my co-supervisor who is always motivated, encouraged, and helped me throughout this research process whenever Professor Ray Markey was on study leave. I also owe this achievement from Associate Professor Di Kelly who became my principal supervisor after Professor Ray Markey left to Auckland University of Technology, New Zealand in April 2005. It was very hard time for me without Professor Ray Markey, however, I managed to complete my thesis with the continuous support from Associate Professor Di Kelly.

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The greatest debt in this study is, of course, to the people from the Malaysian Trade Union Congress (MTUC), Malaysian Employers’ Federation (MEF), Ministry of Human Resources, Metal Industry Employees’ Union (MIEU), managers, union representatives, and employees from the three organisations (Steelco, Autoco and Posco) who were the subject of my thesis. Many were under great pressure from the demands of their work but they participated willingly and openly. I also specially acknowledge Mr Ramachandran because through him I was able to gain access in Steelco.

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Last but certainly not least, I also dedicate this thesis to all my family members: my late father Parasuraman, late mother Munichy, brothers Paul Murthy, Joshua, Henry Gunong and sisters Sarah Meena, Mary and Martha. They have taught me the virtues of enduring and understanding and have allowed me the choice and flexibility to develop my academic endeavours. Especially my Sister Mary who taught the importance of knowledge in my life since I was in the primary school. Finally, I would like to say that God who is Almighty, will bless all of you.