E-Procurement: A Tool to Mitigate Public Procurement Fraud in Malaysia?

Khairul Saidah Abas Azmi[1] and Alifah Aida Lope Abdul Rahman[2]
[1]Essex Business School, University of Essex, UK
[2]School of Architecture, Computing and Engineering, University of East London, UK
ksbaba@essex.ac.uk
u1220872@uel.ac.uk

Abstract: The major aim of this paper is to explore and analyse the views of Malaysian public officials on how e-Procurement helps mitigate procurement fraud. While it is fully legitimate for private enterprises to bid for public works, in many cases there is inappropriate granting of public money to non-qualifying private business in a fraudulent manner. The visibility of fraud losses in the public sector has undermined the delivery of public services. Decrease of fraud incidents can improve the country's growth in terms of infrastructure, by providing facilities to improve healthcare and education, to combat poverty, and to fund security and defence. This paper analyses the implementation of E-Government in Malaysia, which has transformed the public service into a dynamic and diverse environment for government activities. Electronic Procurement (e-Procurement) can be used as a tool to mitigate fraudulent activities in public organisations by ensuring accountability, transparency and the achievement of best value for money contracts. In this qualitative study, a political economy approach was used to investigate the social phenomenon. Documentary analysis and semi-structured interviews via the Snowball Sampling Method (SSM) were conducted for investigating public procurement fraud in Malaysia. The personal views of 13 procurement officers from various Malaysian government agencies were examined. Their perspectives, views and individual experiences shed light on how e-Procurement helps to alleviate public procurement fraud in Malaysia. The findings showed that e-Procurement can (1) dispute political and economic forces in government purchasing processes, (2) manage demands and interference when rewarding government contracts, and (3) be used efficiently at the nexus of government and businesses. Thus, this study has a number of practical implementations and contributions based on the experience and views on e-Procurement by Malaysian public officials. It can also facilitate policy makers, enforcement agencies and researchers in understanding how to mitigate public procurement fraud using an automated and online environment. However, this study also concludes that e-Procurement is just a 'tool' to moderate public procurement fraud, not the solution to this problem.

Keywords: e-procurement, public procurement, fraud, political economy approach, Malaysia

1. Introduction

Concerns about fraud in public procurement have been of practical significance because of massive public spending and deficiencies among various public organisations (Caulfield, 2014). In many countries, public procurement has devoted a large share of public funds to procure necessary goods, services and works to deliver public services. For example, the World Bank reports the value of 10,838 contracts prior review as of February 2014 to be US$12.8 billion in various regions of the world (World Bank, 2014). This includes Africa (US$3.5billion), East Asia and the Pacific (US$2.2 billion), Europe and Central Asia (US$2.9 billion), Latin America and Caribbean (US$1.3 billion), Middle East and North America (US$0.3 billion), and South Asia (US$2.6 billion). Following this, ADB (2014) reported that procurement fraud has created long-term business opportunities between state officials and businesses. Such opportunities result to a wide range of activities: bribery and kickback for financial gains and incentive payments, bid rigging and collusive bidding, falsified amounts and many others. The World Economic Forum provided the frequency rates of bribery in public procurement in various countries in 2005: OECD (15%), East Asia (58%), South Asia (70%), Sub-Saharan Africa (60%), former Soviet Union (50%) and Latin America (58%) (OECD, 2008). As fraud in public procurement has affected many government contracts, transparent and accountable procurement practices are needed so as to prevent fraud and corruption and promote integrity. The introduction of e-Government and e-Procurement, which aims to provide efficient evaluation of bidding in a faceless environment and with less human contact, is seen as a 'tool' to mitigate public procurement fraud (Neupane et al., 2014, Roman, 2013).

The emergence of information and communication technology (ICT) has made Electronic Government (E-Government) a platform which can increase efficiency and effectiveness of the public-sector service delivery. The technological push for implementing e-Government results in transforming public organizations and it

promotes collaboration between business agents and the government. According to Mansor (2008), the need for the implementation of e-Procurement in Malaysia is driven from the ICT's evolution in order to: (1) ensure continuous supply of products and services, (2) achieve best value for money contracts, (3) encourage local industries growth, (4) encourage technology of transfer and (5) encourage use of alternative sources. As a result, e-Procurement is introduced to facilitate the acquisition of works, supplies and services for both government and suppliers in an online environment (Vaidya et al., 2006). The adoption of e-Procurement can provide more accountability and transparency in government procurement. E-Procurement is assumed to mitigate fraud and corruption in public procurement by decreasing the chances of committing fraud at every level of the procurement system by using ICT (Neupane et al., 2012). There is, however, limited investigation on how e-Procurement can reduce fraudulent activities within the procurement life cycle.

In order to improve public service delivery, the Malaysian government has welcomed the initiative for using e-Government for many of its operations. The launch of e-Government under the Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC) in 1997 aimed at achieving the goals of Vision 2020. The implementation of electronic procurement (E-Procurement) was the first step taken for the improvement of government purchasing concerns. Scholars have addressed the implementation of e-Procurement as an electronic acquisition of goods and services in both the public and the private sector in Malaysia. Some scholars have focused on the innovation of e-Procurement (Mansor, 2008), the adoption of e-Procurement (Kaliannan et al., 2009a, Kaliannan et al., 2009b, Kassim and Hussin, 2013) and others focused on the transparency of public bidding (Alaweti et al., 2013). A considerable number of scholars have quite recently also addressed the expanding role of e-Procurement in Malaysia to combat fraud and corruption (Haron et al., 2013, Othman et al., 2009, Othman et al., 2011). Although the increasing use of e-Procurement has been acknowledged, little is known about the usage of e-Procurement in the public sector (Kassim and Hussin, 2013, McCue and Roman, 2012).

This study makes several contributions as follows. First, it shows how e-Procurement can help mitigate fraud and corruption in government purchasing (Elbahnasawy, 2014). Specifically, the exploration and understanding of views and opinions of the main stakeholders in procurement activities (procurement officers) can shed light on how e-Procurement can be a tool to mitigate public procurement fraud. Second, the extant literature on procurement fraud (see Matthew et al., 2013, Miroslav et al., 2014) has rarely crystallized the method used for investigating fraudulent activities. In contrast, this study aims to illustrate this method. This is discussed in more detail in the methodology section. A third contribution of this study is that it uses political economy theory as its theoretical framework. Finally, this research seeks to explore the practice of e-Procurement within the public sector agencies; an area of research which has been largely ignored so far (Supply Management, 2012, Walker and Brammer, 2012). This study investigates how e-Procurement affects the relatively neglected public-private interface (Shaoul et al., 2012).

The paper is divided into five sections. In the first section, we review the literature on e-Procurement and public procurement fraud in order to find and address the links between them and to provide a framework for this study. The second section briefly describes our research methodology and provides justification for it. The third section provides the results and a discussion on our key findings in relation to the implementation of e-Procurement to mitigate fraud. The fifth section discusses the challenges faced for and limitations of the study. The final section concludes the study and provides suggestions for future research.

2. Literature review

The use of ICT in government departments has transformed many public services (Aman and Kasimin, 2011). The development of ICT has inspired the implementation of e-Government in the public office. The implementation of e-Government in various government departments has had an impact on increasing public service delivery. Scholars have provided evidence on the use of the internet in speeding up public services (NAO, 2014, Yusoff et al., 2010), in creating opportunities for cost reduction (Roman, 2013), and in promoting transparency and accountability (Bertot et al., 2010, Krishnan et al., 2013). Generally, the implementation of ICT in government purchasing using e-Procurement has been widely applied to procure goods and services (McCue and Roman, 2012).

E-Procurement involves procuring goods or services via electronic means (Sun et al., 2012). Jonsson et al. (2011) and Gamal Aboelmaged (2010) suggest that the digitalization of the procurement system is aimed at the reduction of costs, a higher market transparency and a better coordination and collaboration. Moreover,

Gardenal (2013) illustrated that e-Procurement can be used to measure organizational performance. Within this context, the adoption of the e-Procurement platform engages procurement activities by employing ICT at all levels of the procurement cycle including selection of sellers, control over ordering supplies, purchasing, payment, receipts and reviews after procurement process in the electronic marketplace. Thus, the mechanism of e-Procurement, which increases transparency and accountability for many government contracts, has to some extent been designed with the aim of curbing fraud and corruption activities.

The complexity of the procurement system in the pre-contract, contract and post-contract phase makes it vulnerable to fraud and corruption (Heggstad et al., 2010). Inevitably, the process of rewarding a contract is influenced by the power relations of political and economic institutions whose aim is to sustain the status quo (Sargiacomo et al., 2015, World Bank, 2013). Sargiacomo et al. (2015), in particular, revealed that corruption in Italian government procurement is due to prevailing political and economic forces. Another study by Neu et al. (2015) showed that politics interfere with the processes of government procurement because of the key role that senior politicians, business elites, and bureaucrats play. Parallel to this, fraud in public procurement is entrenched with vested interests (Bakre, 2010). At the same time, public procurement fraud has to do with the relationship between the state and the private sector. The fact that the interactions between public and private organisations when procuring goods and services are legitimate seems to be just a myth since the relationship of public and private organisations mainly works to secure private interests (Pressey et al., 2014). Because of that, e-Procurement may provide a mechanism for a transparent evaluation and selection of the winner of a government contract and a way to fight dominant power relations, and the influence of vested interests on public-private interactions (Neupane et al., 2014).

The use of online technology for government procurement (e-Procurement) aims to reduce face-to-face interactions and, thus, increase market transparency, build trust, and limit fraud and corruption (Neupane et al., 2014, Vaidya et al., 2006). Neupane et al. (2014) listed numerous potential benefits of e-Procurement including, "standardising and monitoring procurement, increasing transparency, reducing personal discretion in purchasing decisions, enhancing fair competition amongst bidders, avoiding human interference, and maximizing value for money" (p.23). E-Procurement obviously means fewer human interactions. It also enhances competition which helps reduce the amount of personal decisions taken in relation to rewarding government contract. Therefore e-Procurement is an important tool to reduce the risk of fraud and corruption in public offices. This study aims to provide insights on how its implementation can be used as a 'tool' to mitigate public procurement fraud in Malaysia by using a political economy approach, which is a 'novel' theoretical framework in the field of e-Procurement studies.

3. Methodology

This study employed a political economy approach in order to investigate how e-Procurement in Malaysia helps to mitigate procurement fraud in the public sector. The study used two qualitative methodological tools, documentary analysis as secondary data of evidence and semi-structured interviews via the Snowball Sampling Method (SSM) as the primary data.

First, the documentary analysis and the collection of archival evidence are implemented in order to gain a broad understanding of the relations surrounding public procurement practices, fraud and corruption issues as well as of the initiative by the Malaysian government to curb fraud in public procurement through the employment of e-Procurement. The document analysis adopted for this research aimed to find public resources that can be used as reliable sources of evidence (Denzin and Lincoln, 2013). These secondary documents and archival records involved publicly available records. Examples of relevant public documentations and regulations are: the Financial Procedure Act, the Government Contract Act 1949, Treasury Instructions, Treasury Circular Letters, and Federal Contract Circulars. These documents have been mostly issued by the Ministry of Finance in Malaysia, which is the leading agency for e-Procurement. Moreover, the public records included government reports, newspaper articles, fraud charges and legal injunctions. Also, secondary sources of evidence also served as a preparation for the semi-structured interviews. Finally, publicly information from documentary archival analysis was used to verify and confirm the information from the semi-structured interviews (Bloomberg and Volpe, 2012).

Second, this study employed semi-structured interviews via the Snowball Sampling Technique (SSM). The semi-structured interviews were conducted with 13 procurement officers in various government agencies. Due

to sensitivity of the research, the name, position and the name of government agencies are not revealed. Public procurement officers play a substantive role in accessing, evaluating and decision making in rewarding the government contract. They face considerable risks when doing their day to day job and they are sometimes pressurized to obey demands from a higher authority (Sikka and Lehman, 2015). This study provides a platform for these procurement officers to voice their hidden and unheard opinions about procurement activities, fraud, corruption and other related issues within the Malaysia public sector. This study gives recognition to their opinions and experiences by constructing subjective meanings and conducting a narrative analysis. The uniqueness of this method lies in the fact that these people were given the chance to share their 'untold stories' and explain how they handle procurement fraud and related issues as part of their job. This method is suitable for this research because it allows the interviewees to address issues which are 'sensitive' and normally hidden. Since the participants had been working in the Malaysian public sector for a minimum of 5 and a maximum of 30 years it is assumed that they are able to share their views and judgments on the subject matter.

In regard with the Snowball Sampling Method (SSM) of finding willing participants to be interviewed, Ritchie et al. (2014) explain that this method is useful because it involves asking people who have already been interviewed to recommend other people who are suitable to answer the interview questions. In a classic snowball sampling description by Goodman (1961), 'each individual in the sample is asked to name different individuals in the population…each individual may be asked to name his 'best friends' or 'individuals with whom he most frequently associates' (p.148). Christopoulos (2009) provides evidence that the snowballing method helps gather expert professional knowledge that is often considered confidential, sensitive or privileged in a hidden public domain. Christopoulos (2009) discusses the case study of an expert survey through Peer Esteem Snowballing (PEST) which explores hidden and sensitive issues narrated by authoritative and reliable key informants. It is assumed that the experts are more likely to give reliable and valid information about the subject in which they have a wide range of expertise (Dorussen et al., 2005). Therefore, the snowballing method helps the researcher to find the next reliable expert through a chain of nominations and re-nominations.

What is more, the Snowball Sampling Method (SSM) is useful in gaining a high level of trust from the interviewees in responding to question regarding a very sensitive and difficult topic to investigate. The SSM employed in this study was taken from Cohen and Arieli (2011). The advantages of SSM are as follows. First, SSM is useful when used in a conflict environment; investigating public procurement fraud is a difficult topic, and using SSM allows for the possibility to expose conflict-related issues such as internal security, the politically sensitive elements or sensitivity and controversial issues. Second, SSM supports the need to study a population that is hard to reach (Petersen and Valdez, 2005, Valdez and Kaplan, 1998). The population for the study is hard to reach and not easily accessible due to the social and political status of government officers. Third, SSM provides a flexible, creative and daring way to approach participants and seize opportunities for interview sessions. Fourth, SSM creates a high level of trust between the researcher and the participants. The introductory sessions conducted via the SSM provide a platform for pleasant and cooperative interactions. Fifth, SSM 'smoothes' the interview process by giving the researcher the opportunity to assure the participants that their personal information (e.g. name, positions, office) are considered confidential. Finally, SSM provides the opportunity for researchers to inform and show the participants that they understand their position; in this case both authors of this paper are also public officials. In other words, this study takes an empathetic approach by showing the participants that the researchers are also in their shoes.

The data was transcribed, translated and then analysed using thematic analysis. The thematic analysis was used to analyse the rich data collected from the in-depth interviews and from the documentary analysis. The technique involves noting down the most common themes by coding and creating a template of sub themes and then combining them with other relevant themes (Braun and Clarke, 2006, Guest et al., 2012). This is a highly flexible method because one is able to modify, add or withdraw as well as establish new themes when needed. By employing this method, Myers (2009) argues that the analysis and interpretation of qualitative data such as documents can be incorporated and form similar themes with the interview data . Thus, interconnected meanings of various sources of data and various methods of data analysis can provide a thick description of a social phenomenon (Holliday, 2007).

4. Results and discussions

The results and findings of this study, which are thematically organized, show how e-Procurement mitigates public procurement fraud in Malaysia. The emergent themes showed that e-Procurement: (1) can escape the influence exercised by political and economic forces when rewarding government contracts, (2) manage demands and interference from third parties, and (3) is useful at the nexus of public-private relations.

4.1 Political and economic forces

The interest of political and economic forces in government procurement takes the form of fraudulent activities and corruption in the public offices (Rose-Ackerman, 1999). A number of previous studies showed the role of political and economic forces and power relations in deviating the principles of transparency and accountability in a procurement process (Dastidar and Mukherjee, 2014, Thai, 2009). For example, the protectionist policy which has been implemented in Malaysia to favour domestic companies has to some extent resulted to fraud and corruption activities. Fraud and corruption in Malaysian public procurement is associated with the entrenched power of political and economic institutions in distributing public resources. In this context, one can say that distribution of public funds may open up an opportunities for fraud and corruption through rent-seeking activities, political patronage, cronyism and favouritism (Gomez et al., 2013, Sundaram and Hui, 2010). What is more, when the procurement bidding process is not transparent, but there is conflict of interest, a bidder can be selected not due to their capacity but due to their relation with the ruling party (Khalid, 2014, Welsh and Chin, 2013). Therefore, E-Procurement helps reduce the risk of abuse, fraud and corruption by giving transparent information from all bidders.

Regulator 4 argued that, '

> *E-Procurement helps by showing that only relevant bidders can bid for selective government contracts. If the bidders have not submitted all the relevant requirements to the system [for example they did not provide the Ministry with the hard and soft copies of procurement documentation], we will automatically withdraw their application. This is clearly stated in all government purchasing instructions and it is addressed to all bidders in e-Procurement.'*

With e-Procurement, the system obliges the bidders to submit all the relevant information. Failing to do so, the system automatically rejects the application, regardless of whoever may favour a particular bidder. Hence, a transparent process of selecting and rejecting the bidder makes it possible to mitigate fraudulent practices within the procurement life cycle.

Next, the ability of e-Procurement process to be unbiased towards certain groups (from political and economic institutions) helps reduce the level of fraud and corruption in government contracts. It is said that fewer interactions with the potential bidders may prevent the bribes and kick-backs, collusive bidding, mispricing, conflict of interest situations and many other fraud schemes in public procurement (Caulfield, 2014, World Bank, 2013). In relation to that, Regulator 10 stated that,

> *'E-Procurement does not favour and it is not biased towards certain companies. We evaluate the companies based on the information they give us - their financial conditions, their previous experience, their products and services and all other relevant matters. We do not have to meet them personally. There are fewer human interactions in this way and this process is thus less vulnerable to fraud and corruption.'*

Lastly, e-Procurement is able to choose the best value for many contracts for any government projects. EBidding, as one of the beneficial models being developed in the e-Procurement system, provides a different way to procure goods and services with a greater efficiency of the purchasing process. Regulator 11 said,

> *'I prefer to use EBidding for any procurement process in my department. The bidders need to give us their best value during the bidding time so as to get the contract. They do not know our budget for that contract. This system encourages open competition among the bidders. Thus, at*

the end, those offering the lowest price will get the contract. During the bidding process, we do not know whether a company has any links with any 'big cable' [from political and economic institutions]. I strongly believe that this helps for more transparent and value for money contracts in the government department.'

In short, e-Procurement provides an avenue to alleviate fraud and corruption activities in the government procurement. Public procurement fraud is mitigated through the implementation of the e-Procurement system which allows for transparent transactions, value for money contracts and an opportunity to conduct one's work with the highest integrity. Political and economic forces cannot easily dispute with the e-Procurement system since it is an online interactive environment.

4.2 Demands and Interference in rewarding government project

Decisions to reward government projects are subject to valuation by the procurement committee via a technical and finance committee. This committee is responsible for evaluating procurement documentations submitted by contractors based on the key principles of government procurement: (1) public accountability, (2) transparency, (3) best value for money, (4) open competitors, and (5) fair and equitable government procurement (Adham and Siwar, 2012).

In order to adhere to the principles of government procurement, the committee members and procurement officers should not be influenced by or accept interference from any parties for any decision regarding the award of a government contract. Grødeland and Aasland (2011) discuss procurement officers that obey the unreasonable or unjust laws in the procurement practices in order to return favours to their contacts. A recent major scandal in Canada exposed fraud and corruption in the sponsorship program as the government bureaucrats acted at the discretion of their political master (Neu et al., 2013). Thus, e-Procurement plays a role by effectively managing the demands of or interference from people with a vested interest when rewarding the government procurement.

Regulator 6 discussed their experience in handling e-Procurement via EBidding by saying that

'EBidding has saved me from interference from others, whether these are my ex-bosses or the higher ranking officer. I can give them proof that the price they offered for an item was too high and that there was a cheaper price offered by another contractor. The system chooses the lowest price offered by the bidders. At the end of the bidding process, the system shows us the winner. That's how eBidding works.'

However, many procurement officers did not deny having experienced interference in rewarding a government contract. They claimed that interference and exercise of influence mostly came from vested interests, including politicians, top bureaucrats and business leaders. To some extent, the decisions of rewarding a government contract to a non-viable company came from abuse of power in the public office (Global Witness, 2013, The Malaysian Insider, 2013). However, abuse of power within the state apparatus is not easily proven. Therefore, e-Procurement helps to safeguard the procurement officers from being a 'scapegoat' and being alleged for fraud and corruption. This is confidently argued by Regulator 8 below.

'E-Procurement helps us not to be a scapegoat for any alleged fraud and corruption cases within the procurement process. The system is crystal clear in showing who is feasible and who qualifies to get the contract. The transparency and efficiency of the system can eliminate outside interference'.

Somasundaram and Damsgaard (2005) show that any meddling in rewarding government project can be minimized by strictly using e-Procurement in any government purchasing. The use of e-Procurement provides a 'barrier' for any broader spectrum of interference from vested interests. Therefore, the rewarding of government contracts follows key principles of government procurement.

4.3 Interactions between government and business

Inevitably, the nexus between government and business organizations is evidenced in many government purchases. The fact that it is legitimate for private enterprises to bid for public works has to some extent increased fraud and corruption activities. The intimate relationship between the state and business organizations has opened up opportunities for fraud and corruption practices in relation to bidding

government contracts (McCampbell and Rood, 1997). By abusing their position in the public offices, business leaders with a closely-connected relation with some politicians and top bureaucrats can easily secure a government contract (Sargiacomo et al., 2015, Sikka and Lehman, 2015). The intertwined relationship of government and business organizations is now affected by the use and usefulness of e-Procurement in mitigating public procurement fraud in Malaysia.

Regulator 5 discussed the interactions between public and private organizations for any government contracts.

'To comply with the needs of e-Procurement, a contractor must provide us their specialty and licence so as to prove that they qualify to conduct or supply the goods and services. For example, if we want to have a contractor with a specialised expertise to commence the government projects, they must be registered in advance with a special code in the e-Procurement system. We will definitely reject any applications that fail to fulfil any important requirements [for example, relevant and appropriate certificates of qualifications to do specialised work] for a specific contract.'

The special code used in the e-Procurement process represents one imperative element employed by the contractors so as to satisfy the various government departments. The contractor cannot simply elude the e-Procurement system by having a close connection with those in power as the system requires them to register the product and the services they are specialized in. As a result, the e-Procurement system is able to restraint public procurement fraud in Malaysia in the interactions between public-private organisations.

The interactive online environment implemented by the e-Procurement provides a platform to improve public service delivery and offer quality of interactions among citizens and business actors (Kassim and Hussin, 2013). Furthermore, McCue and Roman (2012) suggest that the internet-based practice procurement aims to transform the traditional manual procurement system to procure goods and services from various suppliers and conduct everything electronically. In that sense, various suppliers have the opportunity to offer their products and services to a broader range of buyers in the government agencies (Aman and Kasimin, 2011). Without commitment from and adoption of the e-Procurement in government purchasing by government agencies and suppliers alike, the e-Procurement cannot reach its fullest potential and provide the benefits of the automation to the entire procurement cycle.

Regulator 7 strongly suggested that,

'The implementation of e-Procurement helps the government agencies and businesses interact efficiently and effectively in a faceless environment. I believe that these criteria [i.e., the automation of the system and its faceless environment] allow the e-Procurement to minimize the risk and abuse of fraud and corruption in any government procurement'.

Therefore, the implementation of the e-Procurement system which requires the use of a special code for particular goods and services, and the adoption of electronic procurement between government and businesses can mitigate public procurement fraud in Malaysia.

5. Challenges and Limitations

As the topic of this study is considerable very sensitive and difficult to investigate, there are some challenges and limitations of the study as follows. (1) The study investigates a sensitive and controversial issue in Malaysia: public procurement fraud. This research is regarded as politically sensitive in nature which may or may not affect its participants. Therefore, participants may be afraid of having to face any (bad) consequences for them or their families. Thus, participating in this research involves fear of 'exposure'. This research also involves lack of trust towards researcher. (2) With the atmosphere of distrust, there is also further lack of political freedom. What is more, there is no freedom in media reporting especially in a political context of a as semi-authoritarian regime like Malaysia (Suaram, 2015). Thus, this makes it difficult to conduct the research openly. (3) Because of the lack of trust towards researcher, it was difficult for us to secure access for an interview. There was lack of response due to mistrust, denied access to enter government agencies, with the claim that it may jeopardize security and confidentiality issues. Most of the potential participants were afraid to participate in this research. Thus, it is a very challenging task to find and approach willing participants to discuss a very sensitive topic.

(4) By using a personal contact and networking, we were able to secure some interview sessions to start with. Then, the SSM provide us with opportunities to get more participants and gain the trust of other people

through recommendations. Without any doubt, the SSM is a useful and efficient way to generate positive responses (Goodman, 1961, Heckathorn, 1997). (5) At the beginning of each interview, we needed to rephrase and offer appropriate knowledge on all applicable Acts that seized the words and actions of our participants because they are Malaysian public officials. Showing an understanding of their position played a prominent role in convincing most of them to be interviewed. Most importantly, we needed to convince the participants that the interview sessions were only for research purposes and were strictly confidential. By providing satisfactory explanations and by having an empathetic approach we managed to get their consent to conduct an interview.

(6) As this research mostly relates with government agencies, there were also bureaucratic procedures to be followed. For example, there were 'red tape' procedures, protocol and etiquette to be followed when contacting the potential participants. Sometimes, we would wait for a whole day outside an office only to secure an interview, we were put on hold on the phone for most of the time and many appointments were cancelled at the last minute. The meetings were sometimes postponed, or even stopped half way through. (7) There were some logistics challenges when we needed to travel a long way from one government agency to another, or towards places agreed by the participants which we were not familiar with. The travelling was exhausting. For us to be in the area that was not familiar was quite dangerous and intimidating. Hence, if the interview was cancelled at the last minute or suddenly stopped, the research became more complicated and limited. (8) Lastly, it was very time consuming to transcribe as well as translate the interview transcripts from Malay to English.

6. Conclusion

Through the lens of the political economy approach this research sheds light on how e-Procurement is able to curb public procurement fraud in Malaysia. The findings indicate that (1) e-Procurement can be used as a 'gatekeeper' for all bidders in ensuring that they follows the 'rules' as stipulated in the system. By using e-Procurement, the bidders must comply with all rules otherwise their application will simply be rejected (Alaweti et al., 2013). The system is not biased; rather it chooses the best value for money contract. Thus, e-Procurement is able to stop any political and economic forces from interfering with procurement processes. (2) e-Procurement helps to safeguard many public officials through its transparent and efficient system. It can be used as a 'barrier' to avoid unnecessary demands and interference from people with a vested interest. (3) e-Procurement is also useful in dealing with intertwined relationship between public and private organizations. Despite facilitating business to business transactions, e-Procurement does not compromise the way they do business. The system 'demands' and makes it compulsory to the supplier to give proof of their capability to do specialize things for government agencies (e.g. proof of experience, certificates of qualifications). Therefore, businesses cannot simply get away with fraudulent transactions by having connections with the powerful group. The system is clear and unbiased, with fewer human interactions. Therefore, e-Procurement can be used to minimize the risk of public procurement fraud.

The paper has taken a qualitative approach in exploring the views and perspectives of Malaysian public officials in relation to the aids of e-Procurement in alleviating fraud in the public offices. The most important contribution of this study is that it explored and gained an understanding of this very difficult matter from the personal experiences of 13 procurement officers. As such, the study was able to gather professional knowledge that is often confidential, privileged and hidden from the public domain (Christopoulos, 2009). Therefore, the efficient use of Snowball Sampling Technique (SSM) for the current study significantly contributed to the investigation of this social phenomenon. The detailed implementation of SSM (as explained in methodology section) can be considered by other researchers, too. In regard to this, the rich mosaic of views on curbing public procurement fraud through e-Procurement can have practical implementations and contributions for policy makers, enforcement agencies and researchers. Further, the political economy approach gives fruitful evidence to 'unpack' the praxis of e-Procurement in curbing public procurement fraud in Malaysia. The fact that this study has a lot of contributions does not mean that it is without its challenges and limitations in investigating public procurement fraud in Malaysia (as explained in section 6). Other researcher can take those into account when investigating other social practices.

A number of points have to be raised in future research regarding the use of e-Procurement as a tool to mitigate public procurement fraud. Different methods, for example quantitative or mixed methods and different theoretical frameworks could be employed in future studies. It would also be beneficial to study

different settings (e.g. the private sector). Finally, more participants could be involved for a more robust research. However, one need to bear in mind in future studies as well that e-Procurement is only a 'tool' employed to mitigate public procurement fraud in Malaysia. It is not the one and only way of fighting and eliminating fraudulent activities in the Malaysian public sector.

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