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The Resurgence of Social Activism in Malaysia

By Ooi Kee Beng

INTRODUCTION

Malaysia's Parliament has to be dissolved by the end of April 2013, following which Malaysians must go to the polls within 60 days. Nothing significant about that, except that this 13th general election is a critical one which will decide how the country's politics will develop in the coming decade.

A two-party system is now in place, thanks to the spectacular results of the 12th general election five years ago which brought opposition parties to power at the state-level. Of the many reasons ventured for this shift, the one that cannot be ignored is the impressive rise in social activism. A strong sense of empowerment has come to the fore, which the ruling coalition continues to have a difficult time managing.

The consolidation of oppositional forces in general, not only party-based ones, has been extraordinary. This makes the status quo untenable; something that the government of Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak realizes but is unable to accept wholeheartedly.

This is partly because the social activism of the 21st century is very differently configured, compared to earlier decades.

UNITY DESPITE DIVERSITY

Resistance to the central power in Malaysia has more often than not, happened along racial and religious lines. This is not strange, given the extreme multicultural nature of its popula-

tion as well as the nature of the conservative compromise between the retreating British colonialists and the elite ostensibly representing the various ethnic groups.

The major security concerns that surrounded the birth of the country as the Federation of Malaya in 1957 were communism and communalism; as well as external threats posed especially by Indonesia. By 1965, what emerged after the dust settled following the change in government in Indonesia, and the departure of Singapore, was a parliamentary democracy that was also a nominal 13-state federation where nine states were headed ceremonially by royal houses.

Geographically, the country is now divided into two parts by the southern end of the South China Sea. In simple terms, all the parts of archipelagic Southeast Asia that the British had controlled, excepting Brunei, which chose to stay out, and Singapore, whose inclusion in 1963-65 proved untenable, came together to form one complex country.

The issues that the country's nascent civil society concerned itself with back then tended to be about ethnic rights and citizenship rights.

One of the country's most powerful civil society movements took form already in the early 1950s—the Malaysian Chinese Education Movement. Generally known as the Dongjiaozong, it fought to retain mother tongue education. By 1969, when the National Language Bill was passed in parliament, Malay became the sole national language, leading to great discomfort among non-Malays. Inter-ethnic tensions were high.

Racial riots broke out on May 13 that year, following general elections in which the federal government lost significant ground and the sultanate of Selangor was on the verge of being ruled by a state government run by non-Malays.

Governance in Malaysia was changed forever. Harsh laws were put into place to curb discussions about ethnic rights and other sensitive matters; “The Father of Malaysia” Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman retired; the ruling coalition of three race-based parties was expanded into the Barisan Nasional, and the major party, the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), became decidedly dominant; local elections were banned for good; and most importantly, a powerful affirmative action programme favouring the Malays was put in place.

The New Economic Policy (NEP) was put in place. It was formally a worthy attempt to remedy historical economic imbalances between ethnic groups and to fight poverty. Planned to last for 20 years, it sought a balance between leftist sentiments wishing to minimize the wealth gap on the one hand, and conservative obsession with Malay rights on the other. It sought to give substance to the notion of Malay Special Position that was so prominent in earlier discussions about the national Constitution.

However, the NEP quickly subsumed class discourses under a race discourse that soon became interwoven with Islamic terminology, especially under Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamed (1981-2003). In the process, a two-tier citizenship structure was created which worsened ethnic divisions in the country and exacerbated the non-Malay brain drain from the country.

NGO activities then tended therefore to be about cultural rather than human or other rights, and issues that may not have appeared racial in character were usually a front for inter-ethnic contestations. In 1984, for example, the Consultative Council of Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism and Sikhism was formed solely in response to Islamisation policies implemented by Mahathir.

In spirit, the NEP continued even after 1990, however, but with Mahathir counteracting rising opposition by injecting more tolerant concepts such as Bangsa Malaysia (Malaysian nationality) and Vision 2020 (Malaysia as advanced and harmonious nation by that year) into the equation.

Between 1990 and 1998 therefore, developmentalism and Malay-centrism functioned as intertwined pillars for Malaysian nation building. The impressive economic growth that the country and the rest of the region experienced during that period saw racial tension in Malaysia sink to its lowest.

The deterioration of major institutions was easily ignored while the country was gaining substantial wealth and international influence in the 1990s.

AN EARLY SPRING

One could well argue that Southeast Asia had its Arab Spring much earlier than in the Middle East. In 1998, Indonesia's strongman Suharto was deposed, while in Malaysia, a battle royal broke out between Mahathir and his erstwhile political heir, Anwar Ibrahim, who as Deputy Prime Minister and Finance Minister was in charge of managing the economic crisis that had broken out in the region.

By sacking Anwar on 1 September 1998, Mahathir inadvertently unleashed an enormous wave of resistance to his continued hold on power, to elite corruption and to the predominance of his party UMNO and its allies.

And so, the high influential *Reformasi Movement* was born.

Anwar refused to fade into oblivion and instead toured the country to raise support and to oppose Mahathir. This recalcitrance led to a public trial for sodomy that was carried out under such dubious conditions that it shamed the Malaysian judiciary. Although Anwar was imprisoned for six years for abuse of power (his conviction for sodomy was overturned in 2004), the movement against Mahathir continued to grow.

Many would argue, this made it risky for his coalition if Mahathir were to seek another mandate after the bad results of the 1999 elections.

In many significant ways, it is this new movement that inspired the widespread social activism and resistance that we see in Malaysia today. Many of the young opposition politicians and activists that people the opposition parties today trace their political awakening to the demonstrations of 1998. It is most probably the success of this preceding activism that continues to encourage the strategy of mass rallies held in Malaysia witnessed over the last five years.

The strong and sustained hold on power that UMNO and the BN enjoyed for so many years had had the effect of creating a mindset in the opposition of seeing itself as champions of obstinate—and eternal—resistance. This helps explain many of the strategies opposition leaders such as Lim Kit Siang adopted over the years, and provides insight into the relationship between the political opposition and individuals and organizations within civil society, and into their behaviour. Race and religion informed the political sphere, and information flow was tightly controlled by the central government.

The line between opposition parties—especially those nominally supportive of multiculturalism and secularism—and civil society groups, was never clearly drawn. Seen in such a context, claims made today that the opposition is hijacking Malaysia's civil society appear uninformed.

It is also important to note that public space in Malaysia's racially polarized atmosphere tend also to be an arena for proxy conflicts, especially in recent years when in the wake of weakening central power, many nominal non-government organizations were formed which were clearly run by key members of the ruling parties.

Schematically then, one may understand public space in Malaysia as an alternative area into which the government often intrudes, and in which the opposition, given its weak position before 2008, had always worked closely with social activists.

With the expansion of that space since 1998, issues such as welfare, justice and good governance have come to the fore. What is ground breaking in the resistance to power we see in Malaysia today is the mass show of support for issues that are impossible to re-define as racial. Not only are street demonstrators clearly from all walks of life and of all ages; their goals are largely about governance, starting with free and fair elections.

Sociological factors behind this sea change include the youthfulness of Malaysian society today; the continuing urbanization of the population, largely involving Malays; the better educational level of the young, again affecting the Malays most; and the huge impact that the Internet and the social media have had on public discussions, along with the sudden availability of information about the world and about Malaysia's own past.

Over the last decade, not only have numerous influential online news portals and blogs come into being, many active think tanks and research institutes have been founded throughout the country to publish alternative media or to organize public events often involving foreign intellectuals, such as the Muslim philosopher, Professor Tariq Ramadan from Oxford University.

What is often overlooked in this new scenario is how dependent this revival of social activism has been dependent on the sharp increase in anti-government sentiments among the Malays. Given how public discourse since 1969 had often included threats of ethnic violence, non-Malays had tended to stay low and had expressed their discontent by means that were not clearly politically challenging, such as through creating alternative educational channels, and through emigration.

But with the raising of Malay voices against the BN government, many non-Malays have been encouraged to participate in public displays of discontent and in discussions about

alternative political agendas. In this atmosphere, the role of Anwar Ibrahim is crucial to the unity of opposition forces.

THE RISE OF BERSIH

The sudden explosion of activism has made the relationship between opposition parties and NGO members somewhat complicated, however. This is reflected especially clearly in the evolution of *Bersih*, the highly effective movement seeking electoral reform.

As an argument, the call for electoral reform has been able to capture the imagination of the young largely because such an issue could not be easily turned into a racial issue that could pit one ethnic group against another the way education, religion, language and most other issues that have excited Malaysians so far had done.

After then-Premier Abdullah Badawi, the successor to Mahathir, won a landslide victory in the general election of 2004, the country's opposition parties were despondent and at a loss. It was only in July 2005 that the Democratic Action Party (DAP), Parti Islam SeMalaysia (PAS) and Parti KeAdilan Rakyat, managed to put aside their deep differences in order to meet clandestinely in Port Klang, outside Kuala Lumpur, and to work out strategies for the future.

The strategy they agreed could make them work as a united front was the issue of electoral reform. And so, the Coalition for Clean and Fair Elections (*Bersih*, meaning Clean in Malay) was formed by these parties and a group of NGOs supportive of the issue. Interestingly, this accord was reached at a time when the BN, still flushed with their great victory a year earlier, was clearly turning right, with their rhetoric taking on a rather arrogant and strongly Malay-centric tone.

In this, the opposition parties managed to connect with a groundswell of discontent; and electoral reforms became the lightning rod for social activism.

Two years down the road, in mid-2007, just before the 50th anniversary of Malaysia's independence, a series of demonstrations began taking place. Relatively small union rallies calling for minimum wage legislation took place, and were followed on 26 September that year by the Walk for Justice by 2,000 lawyers and their supporters, to express their deep worry about the compromised state of the judiciary.

Six weeks later, on November 10, as many as 50,000 people, mostly dressed in the royal yellow colour, took to the streets of Kuala Lumpur, formally calling on the king—whose role is otherwise ceremonial—to champion electoral reforms. This first *Bersih* march suffered police brutality, as all later ones would also do. What was obvious to the casual observer on that occasion was the tight organization of the march, and the central role played by the opposition parties, especially PAS.

Somewhat unrelated to this was the rise of Hindraf, the Hindu Rights Action Force. This movement was fronted by a group of Indian lawyers to protest against historical ill treatment of Malaysians of Hindu origins. Two weeks after the *Bersih* rally, it held an equally

huge demonstration in Kuala Lumpur despite police attempts throughout the preceding week to stop Indian Malaysians from coming into the city, and despite the arrest of three of its leaders the day before.

The political engagement generated by these demonstrations led to the government suffering huge setbacks in the general elections held just five months later, on March 8, 2008. The federal government lost its 2/3 majority in parliament, as well as control over five state governments. A new era dawned in Malaysia, and a two-party system effectively came into being.

Although it quickly managed to regain one state through defections from the opposition, the federal government under Abdullah Badawi could not last, and he was replaced on April 1, 2009 by his deputy, Najib Abdul Razak.

Since 2008, national policy-making has had to seriously consider competition from the opposition that was now ruling key states and to listen to criticism from the general public. The administration of Najib Abdul Razak has thus been coming up with a steady flow of reforms to appease critics and to reverse the outward flow of capital investments.

Some of his moves were dramatic, such as the repeal of the hated Internal Security Act, while others were smaller though significant. For example, for the first time ever, the Household Income and Basic Amenities Survey Report 2009, the latest of the government's five-year survey, was made public in June 2012. The general demand for more information about government matters, fueled by the two-party system that has developed so suddenly in the country – has had an undeniable impact.

However, the Najib government continued to be dogged by scandals and by a deep and persistent crisis of credibility. The government had to formulate reforms and yet remain Malay-centric and conservative at the same time. In trying to please both sides, the government under Najib does not seem to have won back much ground despite announcing reform programme after reform programme.

On July 9, 2011, the second *Bersih* demonstration was held to press for electoral reforms, and timed to force the government to carry out such reforms before calling for elections. What made this rally essentially different from the first one was that the opposition parties agreed to give up its central role and to hand over the movement to NGO leaders. Ambiga Sreenevasan, the former chairman of the Malaysian Bar Council that organized the much-noted Walk for Justice in September 2007, agreed to head the *Bersih* 2.0 steering committee consisting of civil society activists, on condition that the parties kept their distance.

This essential difference encouraged a much larger crowd to take part in *Bersih* 2.0 than in *Bersih* 1. Most importantly, the participants were now clearly of all races, and cut across all class, gender and age divides. This was even more the case when *Bersih* 3.0 was held on April 28, 2012, in which 100,000 people reportedly participated.

THE NEED TO PARTICIPATE

The Malaysian reluctance to attend political rallies, once so common and widespread, had been replaced by an eagerness to take part in public expressions of unity across racial and other lines. Street rallies were like public picnics. To a surprisingly large extent, issues of race and religion are being overshadowed by concerns about governance, and about the weak national economy.

A lot of this has to do with the public space opened up by the new media and by how these have been so enthusiastically used by young educated Malaysians of all ethnic denominations.

To be fair, the Najib administration's reform initiatives reflect these shifts clearly, showing that it does know what needs doing. Its major projects, apart from the attempt at projecting Malaysian social unity through its overused 1Malaysia slogan, are titled Government Transformation Programme (GTP) and his Economic Transformation Programme.

But try as he may, in the final analysis, Najib's inability to rein in Malay-centric elements within his own party, together with stark inconsistencies in action and word on his part, are what undermine his reputation as a reformist prime minister.

Over the last five years, much has indeed changed in Malaysia, and the issue of electoral reform will continue to be the central theme for uniting progressive elements. By all accounts, there is no turning back, since the factors causing changes include powerful external ones such as the regionalization of the economy, of jobs, of schooling and of capital.

The question boils down in many ways to one of leadership. How the government formed after the next election balances the hopes of the new against the fears of the old will decide Malaysia's ability to compete with its neighbours. The vision for a freer and fairer system of government is already clearly projected through recent social movements.

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