A HISTORY OF
Student Activism
IN MALAYSIA

CHAPTER 1:
Research Introduction
Acknowledgements

A History of Student Activism in Malaysia is a research project run by Imagined Malaysia, supported by Malaysia Reform Initiative (MARI), U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), and U.S. Embassy Kuala Lumpur. The research project lasted for approximately four months, starting from late August until December 2020. This research project was conducted with two goals in mind: to probe the development of student activism in Malaysia from pre-Independence period, including the issues activists championed and how these changed or remained the same. We also aimed to probe and highlight the various narratives within student movements, and to propose a series of recommendations for various parties to further empower youth- and student-led initiatives in Malaysia. We conducted our research through literature reviews, surveys, and a series of focus group discussions and interviews. The research project is also Imagined Malaysia’s attempt to create opportunities for analytical historical research outside academia and institutions.

Imagined Malaysia would like to acknowledge and thank everyone who directly and indirectly played a role towards the success of this project, from our funders, survey respondents, to participants of our focus group discussions, our interviewees, and last, but not least, the project team that built this work.
The roots of student activism in Malaysia can be traced back to as early as the pre-Merdeka period in the 1930s, where it was used as an avenue to voice out anti-colonial sentiments and to protest against colonial powers that were prevalent in former Malaya (Karim, 1984). Defined as the involvement of individual students in group activities aimed at defending their interests and bringing about changes in systems, policies, attitudes, knowledge, and behaviours regarding issues affecting university life or society at large (2017, p. 191), activism is one way for students to voice out their concerns. In this regard, students are not merely recipients of education that serves to help them enter the workforce. Rather, they are also conscious consumers, producers, evaluators, partners, and critical higher education institute citizens, whose voice should be recognised, respected, and valued (Ibid).

The year 1967 marked a transition in student activism in Malaysia as students raised vital issues about apartheid and freedom, fearing the Teluk Gong Struggle. In addition to showing support to peasants and urban squatters, students also participated in general elections outside of their campuses and national policies. A campaign to topple Tunku Abdul Rahman turned out to be a success as the first Malaysian Prime Minister was forced to step down from his role, following a treason trial charge against his government. The Act was met with great resistance from student bodies and opposition political parties as it was said to be an attempt to AUKU were stringent, especially Section 15 which prohibited all students from participating in “anything which may be construed as expressing support, sympathy, or opposition” towards any party, union, society, or other body except with permission of the vice-chancellor. Additionally, Section 16A of the new amendments effectively shifted unprecedented powers to the vice-chancellor. AUKU quashed the possibility of aboveground student involvement in parties and elections, albeit some students engaged in politics covertly. Expressing critical perspectives remained risky as evidenced by several students who sought to challenge AUKU and were subsequently faced with harsh penalties.

From 1975 to 1998, Malaysia underwent a period of “normalised” higher education where “new universities and other institutions for higher education proliferated” and student politics were merely as active as campus politics that mimicked the partisan patterns outside of the campus (Weiss, 2011, p. 24). Intellectual climate was a significant part of the Mahathir regime’s programme to insulate itself from a disruptive critique from others, particularly among campus-goers. Hence, the “combination of a powerful and proactive state, rapid economic growth, and burgeoning civil society formed the backdrop for a new, substantially redirected, and politically subverted phase of student activism” (Weiss, 2011, p. 188).

However, there was an increasingly political slant to campus elections, and partisanship became much more pronounced on campus. Moreover, there was religious revivalism on campus as seen with the prominence of Catholic and Islamic activism from the early 1980s onwards. While Islamic activism and the promotion of dakwah flourished, Gereja Laskar effectively tightened many Catholic organizations over academics, staff, and employees of the university, was removed.

In 2011, greater student participation in politics came into the picture with the Occupy Dataran Merdeka movement in which students demanded free education and protested the repayment of National Higher Education Fund Corporation (PTPTN) loan. The Occupy Dataran Merdeka movement was inspired by the Spanish 15-M movement, which was the harbinger of the Occupy Wall Street movement in the US in the months to come. In the same year, student activists took part in the Coalition for Clean and Fair Elections (BERSIH) demonstrations to demand the government to reform the general election system from 2011 onwards, social media was widely and heavily used to mobilise student movements, as seen in the cases of the Arab Spring, Occupy Wall Street, and BERSIH 2.0. Although AUKU 1971 saw another amendment in 2012, in which the limits concerning control over students’ participation in politics on campus were finally relaxed. However, the amendment did not necessarily revive the golden age of student activism as a lot of pre-AUKU period as students were still prohibited from participating in political party activities on the campus and other activities deemed “detrimental or prejudicial to the well-being or good name” of the university (Fortify, 2018). In addition, the high number of political figures and activists, including student activists such as Salmah Mahasias’s, were detained under the Sedition Act 1948 in 2014 was a testament to the continuous imprisonment of authorities on student activism.

AUKU was revised again, most recently in 2019, with the effect of Section 15(1)(c) removed, thus allowing universities to participate in political activities within the campus. During the same year, there were also talks within the Ministry of Higher Education of repealing the Act altogether, which to this day, it has yet to come to fruition. Despite the amendments to AUKU, the continuity of student activism in Malaysia amidst existing regulations that limit student participation in decision-making processes, as well as the effectiveness of these measures, remains in discussion, which thus becomes the central point of exploration in this research.
"This research employs methodologies such as a literature review, focus group discussions, surveys and interviews."

GAPS IN THE LITERATURE
While there are numerous studies on student activism in Malaysia that have been carried out in terms of its historical context and politicising effects, little research has been dedicated to exploring the following:

1. How the diversity found within student movements in Malaysia can lead to positive effects of nation-building and,
2. How student activism can continue to flourish constructively amidst the changes in trending issues, technological advancements, and national legislations and by-laws.

Therefore, the purpose of this research is to investigate the ways that various student activist groups of diverse racial, cultural, religious, and political stance in Malaysia can unite and serve as a conduit in nation-building and the promotion of good citizenship within a heterogeneous country such as Malaysia; and how student activism can be fostered constructively amidst the balancing need for freedom of expression, national security, and the nation’s progress.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS
The main question of this research is whether student activism can be fostered constructively amidst emerging national and international issues, technological development, as well as the existing and newly-introduced national legislations and by-laws while balancing the need for freedom of expression, national security, and the nation’s progress. The research project would attempt an answer to this question by raising the following problems:

a) What were the characteristics of student movements and the people behind its activities in Malaysia from the pre-Merdeka period to the present time? Has these characteristics changed over time and what were the changes and/or development in trends, if any?

b) How effective are student activist groups, which are diverse in racial, religious, and socio-political backgrounds, as a conduit in the nation-building of Malaysia while also promoting good citizenship through unity, upholding minority rights, and addressing current issues?

c) Considering that many present-day leaders were once student activists in their respective university years, what improvements can be proposed in current regulations concerning student movements to ensure that students of today can be moulded into well-informed leaders of tomorrow?

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES
Adopting Albatch’s theory of student activism framework from which the research objectives were drawn, this research aims to investigate the history of student activism from the pre-Merdeka period until the present, with a focus on the events that led to the changes in regulations concerning their activities. The objectives of this research are as follows:

a) To examine the characteristics and development of student activism in Malaysia since the pre-Merdeka period, from the 1930s to the present time; and,

b) To investigate the role and effectiveness of student activism in nation-building and addressing current national or international issues; and,

c) To re-evaluate the effects of the University and University College Act (AUKU 1971) as well as other existing national regulations and their relevance in today’s context concerning student movement and politics, and ways to foster student activism constructively as a tool for nation-building and reassessing the concept of good citizenship.

RESEARCH SIGNIFICANCE
This research explores the development and forms of student activism from the pre-Merdeka period, beginning from the 1930s to the present time, leading to the diversity of student activist groups, and examining how this diversity contributes towards nation-building. This research employs methodologies such as a literature review, focus group discussions, surveys and interviews. This research also aims to provide recommendations on fostering student activism constructively, balancing the need for freedom of expression, national security, and the nation’s progress.

WORKING DEFINITIONS
Throughout this research, the terms ‘student activism’ and ‘student movement’ are used interchangeably due to similarity nature, where both student activism and student movement more often than not involve collective actions among individuals and/or groups, specifically students (in this context) in organising, strategising, mobilising, and educating the public.

OPERATIONAL DEFINITIONS OF TERMS COMMONLY USED IN THIS PROJECT

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>TERM</th>
<th>OPERATIONAL DEFINITION</th>
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<tr>
<td>Student Activism</td>
<td>The involvement of individual students in group activities aimed at defending their interests and bringing about changes in systems, policies, attitudes, knowledge, and behaviours regarding issues affecting university life or society at large (Ganwe, 2019).</td>
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<tr>
<td>University Autonomy</td>
<td>Alongside the interrelated concept of academic freedom, university autonomy refers to the right, without constriction by prescribed doctrine, to freedom of teaching and discussion, freedom in carrying out research and disseminating and publishing the results thereof, freedom to express freely their opinion about the institution or system in which they work, freedom from institutional censorship and freedom to participate in professional or representative academic bodies (UNESCO, 1997).</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nation-building</td>
<td>A form of nationalism that aims to assimilate or incorporate culturally distinctive territories in a given state (Hechter, 2000). Further, the legitimisation of the standardisation of administration and law, and in particular, state education is used in nation-building to transform people into citizens of a specific country (Mine Islar, 2007).</td>
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<td>Student characteristics</td>
<td>Based on Astin’s I-E-O model (Astin, 1970), student characteristics will include student background and knowledge related to student activism, towards their participation, intention/attitude, and behaviours that parallel the development of nation-building based on Albatch’s theoretical framework on student activism.</td>
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<td>Environment</td>
<td>Also known as a mediator in a simple mediator model, it refers to the student’s actual experiences during the education program, which includes campus life and external values and attributes (Astin, 1993).</td>
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