



IMAGINED
MALAYSIA



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.

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“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” — *Defined by Garwe*

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 by Garwe 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 people’s lives following 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 heavy contestation against his questionable political, economic, and social policies which were perceived as doing very little to help alleviate the status of the Malays and their language (Weiss 2011, p. 148). Soon enough, student movements began to be viewed as a threat by the authorities, as more students participated in student-led bodies and demonstrations, leading to numerous altercations with the police. Consequently, the Universities and University Colleges Act 1971, or *Akta Universiti dan Kolej Universiti 1971* (commonly known as AUKU 1971) was introduced in 1971 as a tool to control student movements and participation in politics. The Act was met with great resistance from student bodies and opposition political parties as it was said to undermine the principles of democracy and freedom of speech and was a violation of students’ basic rights.

Drastic changes in student activism and its environment can be seen from 1975 onwards, following changes in the student demographic trend and the amendment of AUKU 1971 as well as the passing

of Educational Institutions (Discipline) Act 1976. In line with the government’s political sentiments, campus environments changed dramatically: security was tightened, University Malaya’s Speakers’ Corner was demolished, campus publications were curbed, and the names of UMSU’s leaders from 1972 to 1975 were removed from displays in the union building to erase their history (Weiss, 2011, p. 193). In 1975, Section 15 of AUKU, which prohibited a student or students’ organisation, body, or group from associating with political parties or trade unions (unless approved by the Federal Constitution or the university Vice-Chancellor) was introduced, despite protests from students and opposition parties, thus resulting in the dissolution of all student organisations (Karim, 1984). The 1975 parliamentary amendments 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 16 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 the campus (Weiss, 2011, p. 26). Intellectual containment was a significant part of the Mahathir regime’s programme to insulate itself from a disruptive critique from others, particularly within campus grounds. Therefore, 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 subdued 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, *Operasi Lalang* effectively interrupted many Catholic-based initiatives on campus in 1987. The major government crackdown on opposition parties and social activists also targeted active Catholics. The outcome was profound: around one hundred politicians, lawyers, social activists, artists, and academics were detained under the Internal Security Act (ISA), and the publishing permits of newspapers such as *The Star*, *Sin Chew Jit Poh*, *The Sunday Star*, and *Watan* were suspended. While students were not targeted, news of the arrests reverberated on campus, inciting shock and fear among student activists (Weiss, 2011, p. 215). The crackdown did more to dampen protest, particularly among Catholics than to engender new resistance. While much milder forms of activism took place predominantly through underground channels and Islamic activism thrived, student activism for the larger part of the 80s and 90s was restrained. However, the late 1990s became the period of the gradual revitalisation of student activism in the wake of the *Reformasi* movement, but due to the specific nature of repression and changed institutional context, it had taken on new forms and priorities. Despite a proliferation of student clubs and networks, most students had internalised an understanding of activism as transpiring within the realm of formal politics, namely elections on and off-campus.

From 2000 onwards, students became more vocal on issues concerning human rights oppression, as demonstrated by a rally of 200 students who represented student movements such as *Gerakan Mansuhkan ISA* (GMI), *Malaysian Youth and Student Democratic Movement* (DEMA), *Persatuan Kebangsaan Pelajar Islam Malaysia* (PKPIM) and *Universiti Bangsar Utama* (UBU) at the National Mosque to call for the repeal of Internal Security Act 1960 (ISA) and release of ISA detainees. GMI, led by *Barisan Bertindak Mahasiswa Negara* (BBMN), also submitted an official student report to the Human Rights Commission of Malaysia (SUHAKAM) regarding the AUKU’s breach of the human rights of students and academics. The struggle for the sovereignty of the Malay language, which first came about in the late 1960s, found itself resurfacing in 2009 as 8,000 people including students took part in the *anti-Pengajaran dan Pembelajaran Sains dan Matematik Dalam Bahasa Inggeris* (PPSMI), or the Teaching of Science and Mathematics in English, march

from Masjid Negara to Istana Negara in Kuala Lumpur. This was also the year that saw the amendment of AUKU 1971, whereby Section 16A, which was a provision on control 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. 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 a la the 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 interests, well-being or good name” of the university (Fortify Rights, 2018). In addition, the high number of political figures and activists, including student activists such as *Solidariti Mahasiswa Malaysia*’s former chairman *Safwan Anang*, that were arrested under the Sedition Act 1948 in 2014 was a testament to the continuous impingement of authorities on student activism.

AUKU was revised again, most recently in 2019, with the effect of Section 15(2)(c) removed, thus allowing university students 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 advancement, 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 heterogenous 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 probing 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 reasserting 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

TERM	OPERATIONAL DEFINITION
Student Activism	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 (Garwe, 2019).
University Autonomy	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).
Nation-building	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).
Student characteristics	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 Altbach’s theoretical framework on student activism.
Environment	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).



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