

IMAGINED  
MALAYSIA



A HISTORY OF  
**Student  
Activism**  
IN MALAYSIA

CHAPTER 2:  
**Timeline of Student  
Activism and Key  
Findings**

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## 1 Pre-Independence Period

The history of student activism in Malaysia extends as far back as the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Due to the British colonial government’s policy of preserving the socioeconomic order of Malayan society, vernacular and vocational education was prioritised over tertiary education. Early public higher education institutions in Malaya had the objective of producing skilled professionals and capable bureaucrats for the colonial administration. The Malay College Kuala Kangsar, for example, was established in 1905 to train mostly aristocratic Malays – and few “exemplary” commoners – for the Malay Administrative Service (Weiss, 2011, p.28). The Technical School, the School of Agriculture, the Malay Women’s Training College and the Sultan Idris Training College would also be founded later. The two premier institutions, Raffles College and King Edward VII College of Medicine would merge to become the University of Malaya, based in Singapore, in 1949. Largely Chinese-medium Nanyang University (also known as Nantah) would be founded later in 1956.

Given the location of the University of Malaya, pre-Independence student movements were naturally concentrated on the island of Singapore. The university student body before Independence comprised mostly of non-Malay, Malayan Chinese students, due to the lack of incentive and facilitation for Malays to pursue English-medium education (Weiss, 2005, p. 292). Generally, Malays were apprehensive of English-medium schools and university fearing that neglect of vernacular schools would corrode their political and economic status. Furthermore, they were sceptical over English schools’ connection with missionary circles and that graduates of these universities would be too “un-Malay” in character (Weiss, 2011, p. 31). English education in Malaya was accessible only by the privileged few. As of 1953, only 14 per cent of students were educated in English compared to 33 per cent in Chinese and 47 per cent in Malay. In Singapore, 44 per cent of students were English-educated while most of the rest were Chinese-educated (Kaye, 1955, p.19). By World War II, there were only 20 Malay doctors produced out of approximately 240, and less than 10 per cent of undergraduates were Malays, notwithstanding those who received scholarships and other aid (Loh, 1975, pp. 116-17; Cheah Boon Kheng, 1983, p.9).

The early 20<sup>th</sup> century saw the rise of activism in each community in various forms. Chinese students in Malaya

were highly reactive to developments in Mainland China. Chinese school teachers spread an anti-imperialist sentiment throughout the 1920s and 1930s as they led anti-Japanese demonstrations as early as 1919 (Tan Liok Ee, 1997, pp. 15-6). By the 1930s, Chinese student activists formed part of a newly energised and forceful left-wing which included trade unions, nationalist associations and radical vernacular media (Weiss, 2011, pp. 36-7). Left-wing organisations such as the Malayan Communist Party (MCP) and the student Anti-British League (ABL), which was based almost entirely on Chinese schools, were also founded. By the 1950s, Chinese student activists had contributed to numerous “student riots, organised destruction and bloodshed” in Singapore and the peninsular (Spector, 1956, p. 65). Chinese schools were closed down by the authorities several times, and 60 students were arrested while 39 were expelled by November 1957 (Weiss, 2011, p. 39).

Activism among University of Malaya (UM) students in Singapore was delayed, and milder in comparison, exhibiting through extracurricular student associations, publications and, to a certain extent, political clubs. Students were particularly concerned about campus-related issues rather than political issues in the early years. For example, the first notable student strike, which was unsuccessful, happened in 1924 when Medical College students were unhappy over the poor quality of supervision in hostels (Weiss, 2011, p. 40). The largely European-staffed faculty preferred political neutrality and limited student’s political activism to no more than discussions. Students, however, were given the freedom to pursue extracurricular activities – such as sports, debate and literature – and publish non-political publications. The free press environment enabled various publications to appear except for some exceptions such as *Fajar* and Nantah’s *University Tribune* and *Suloh Nantah* which were banned in the Federation, but allowed in Singapore (Weiss, 2011, p. 43).

As left-wing sentiment grew stronger, UM students began to be increasingly political. A radical publication *Malayan Orchid* was founded by students affiliated with the Anti-British League (ABL) in 1949 but it did not last long. The first political club in UM, the University Socialist Club, would only be founded in 1952 which included the likes of James Puthuchery and University of Malaya Student Union (UMSU) president Wang Gungwu. The Socialist Club

aimed to create an independent and socialist Malaya, albeit with a more moderate stance than the radical ABL and published its journal *Fajar* in 1953 (Weiss, 2011, p. 45). The Club’s membership was dominated mostly by non-Malay men, reflecting the campus demography. A second political club, the Democratic Club, was founded in 1955 with Musa Hitam as its first president.

As Malays were underrepresented in university, activism amongst the community was found within journalism and teaching fraternity. Students from the Sultan Idris Training College – a teacher training institute – founded the anti-colonial, nationalist Kesatuan Melayu Muda (Young Malay Union, KMM) in the early 1930s. KMM envisioned a united Malay nation irrespective of class, states or ethnic groups and was the only pre-war organisation that was hostile to the British and the Malay ruling class (Weiss, 2011, p. 55). They managed to gain a strong following from students and journalists, among others. Journalists from the outspoken newspaper *Utusan Melayu* were also highly active in championing issues affecting the Malay peasantry (Weiss, 2005, p. 296).

The rise of activism saw the emergence of several notable student organisations. Some prominent Malaysian student organisations such as the Gabungan Pelajar-Pelajar Melayu Semenanjung (Peninsular Malay Students’ Union, GPMS), University of Malaya Students Union (UMSU) and National Union of Malaysian Students (PKPM) were institutionalised during the pre-Independence period. GPMS, the country’s oldest student organisation, was founded in 1948 to unite Malay students nationwide, to raise issues of underdevelopment among the Malays, and to achieve educational upliftment and broader progress for the community (Weiss, 2005, p. 297). Amongst demands made by GPMS were the introduction of Malay-medium secondary education and a Malay-language university. Personalities such as Kassim Ahmad, Ahmad Boestaman, Syed Husin Ali, Sanusi Osman and Abdullah Badawi were former GPMS members (Weiss, 2011, p. 46).

UMSU, founded in 1949, was considered as ‘the centre of student life on campus’ (Silverstein, 1970, p. 13). Following the University Act of 1961, every enrolled student was automatically a member of the Union and had to pay membership fees. UMSU thus had substantial financial resource and was given a building by the university. UMSU was self-governing, having a student-elected council which then appoints its executive committee. The Union provided instrumental services such as lodging assistance, emergency loan disbursement, providing political education and relaying information between students and administrators (Silverstein, 1970, pp. 13-14). UMSU would join PKPM in 1958, forming a network with student organisations of other educational institutions.

As Malayan Independence approached, topics such as Malay underdevelopment and national identity began

to take precedence. Envisioning the future of a Malayan nation, student leaders realised the urgency in identifying with the masses, especially the Malay peasantry. Thus, a range of social welfare and outreach programmes were organised that involved teaching, fundraising and blood donations (Weiss, 2011, pp. 78-9). Some left-wing Chinese students even suggested teaching Malay instead of English in their schools besides enlisting members of their community to champion the interests of the rural Malay populace.

As British exit from Malaya started becoming inevitable, Western-educated students were in an advantageous position to form the new cadre of the intellectual and political elite in the postcolonial nation (Weiss, 2011, pp. 81-3). These students were groomed in a ‘national’ or ‘Malayan’ environment on campus, unlike the more communal environment in vernacular schools, giving rise to future leaders such as Lee Kuan Yew, Tun Abdul Razak and Mahathir Mohamad. However, as raised by Lee Kuan Yew, many English-educated Chinese and Indians had “lost touch with the mass of their people” and were almost emasculated, as a result of “deculturalisation” (Weiss, 2011, p. 85).

The concept of nationalism would remain contested between the different groups of students. While some understood nationalism to mean a democratic ‘Malayan’ nation, Chinese students interpreted nationalism with the idea of an anti-imperialist Chinese nation. Malays, on the other hand, seemed to prioritise ethnic solidarity relative to a ‘Malayan’ nationalism (Weiss, 2011, p. 84). Furthermore, the cultural and psychological gap between English-educated students and their respective communities hurt their leadership credibility (Weiss, 2011, p. 86). These contestations would still be observed in student activism for the next few decades and would eventually become a prominent contention in the 1970s.

## 2 The 1960s – mid-1970s

After the 1957 Malayan Independence, University of Malaya was relocated to Kuala Lumpur while the original UM campus was converted to the University of Singapore in 1962, along with its union changing to University of Singapore Students’ Union (USSU) (Weiss, 2011, p. 94). Student activism in UM (now based in KL) initially centred on campus matters rather than national concerns (Hassan, 1984, p. 1). Students in UM, for example, publicly demanded a mosque on campus or protested the denial of police permit to organise campus programmes (Weiss, 2011, p. 112). However, students eventually would partake actively in external issues – ranging from solidarity with rural peasants to international events – making the 1960s to 1970s period the height of student activism in Malaysia’s history.

One early indication of students’ growing involvement in affairs beyond campus was the 1963 Malaysia-Indonesia



**“This research employs methodologies such as a literature review, focus group discussions, surveys and interviews.”**

conflict, *Konfrontasi*, which sparked protests among students in UM. A lively rally was held at UM in September 1963 to condemn Indonesia and pledge undying loyalty to the country. UMSU even requested the Malaysian government to allow military training and army presence on campus. The government relented and introduced coeducational military training besides forming a volunteer reserve force unit on campus. UMSU, in a show of national commitment, spent some of its funds to purchase national defence bonds (Weiss, 2011, p. 114).

At the same time, the government became increasingly suspect of an upsurge of left-wing movements among students, especially after Malaya's merger with Singapore. A “Suitability Certificate”, to be obtained from a loyalty test, was required starting in 1964 for all university and college applicants. Student organisations, UMSU and PKPM, reacted angrily to this repressive measure sparking continuous demonstrations, public discussions and debates over the next two years (Weiss, 2011, p. 115). UMSU teamed up with USSU to denounce the regulation and demanded its withdrawal in the name of university autonomy. In 1966, as tensions intensified both within and outside campus, the government issued an order prohibiting politicians from appearing on campus.

#### RISE OF COMMUNALISM ON CAMPUS

As the young federation grappled with multiple imaginations of the nation's identity, issues of language and education policy became hotly contested as early as after Independence. Unhappy with Chinese demands and continuous neglect of Malay secondary education, the Federation of Malay School Teachers' Association (FMSTA) ordered its members to resign from UMNO, which contributed to the party's poor showing during the 1959 General Elections (Roff, 1967, pp. 319-21). At the same time, Chinese groups pressured their political representatives with similar demands. Nearly all non-Malay opposition parties demanded the recognition of four official languages and support for vernacular education.

On-campus, the issue of language demonstrated the contesting views on national identity and foreshadowed future conflicts between student organisations. One side of the spectrum supported Malay as the national language while keeping to the maintenance of all languages and cultures of Malaysia. This view was held by PKPM and UMSU. It should be noted that non-Malay students

generally associated with UMSU or the Chinese and Tamil Language Societies, which were both affiliates of UMSU and were more cultural and academic in orientation (Weiss, 2011, p. 116). Malay students on the other hand gravitated towards the more political Malay Language Society (PBMUM), who refused to be affiliated with UMSU.

PBMUM espoused a more Malay-centric vision of the national identity and language. The National Language Seminar, organised by PBMUM in 1966, reached a consensus for UM to undergo a five-year bilingual transition period from 1967 before transitioning completely to Malay (Weiss, 2011, p. 117). PBMUM's boldness reflected the social change within the campus. Affirmative action policies implemented by the government increased the proportion of Malay undergraduates, many of whom originated from poor, rural families, especially from the east coast. This demographic shift exacerbated ethnic cleavage between students, as well as conflicts between UMSU and PBMUM. PBMUM refused to support UMSU's campaign against the Suitability Certificate and disagreed with the latter over the National Language Act and Singapore reunification. In short, UMSU seemed more representative of non-Malay views while PBMUM represented Malay interests (Weiss, 2011, p. 119).

#### ACTIVISM BEYOND CAMPUS

The 1960s saw increasing engagement among students on national and international matters. In 1962, a UM Debating Club that featured politicians from the People's Action Party, Socialist Front and the People's Progressive Party were able to attract over two thousand people (Weiss, 2011, p. 119). As colonialism was no longer a practical target, student's criticism now zeroed in on state policies, to the point that the government forbade scholarship students from participating in oppositional politics and restricted off-campus protests (Muhammad Abu Bakar, 1973, p. 15). Gatherings were held at UM's Speaker's Corner which was established in May 1966 as a space to debate social, political and international issues (Weiss, 2011, p. 121).

Energetic student movements abroad and a sense of global student solidarity inspired Malaysian students to be vocal in expressing opinions regarding international events. The international events include the American invasion of Vietnam, the Russian invasion of Czechoslovakia, Britain's suppression of the Anguillan people and arms sale to South Africa, French nuclear tests in the Pacific and the Philippine

territorial claim over East Malaysia (Weiss, 2011, pp. 165-6). Exposure towards Islamist movements and ideas abroad, largely among Malay students, spurred a sense of solidarity within the Muslim *ummah* (community). Such solidarity motivated demonstration and public advocacy, mostly involving Malay students, for Muslims in Pattani and Palestine in the early 1970s (Weiss, 2011, p. 167).

Students were also actively engaged in the national political front. Many students were concurrent members of political parties from the government and the opposition bench. The opposition Parti Rakyat Malaysia (People's Party, PRM) included students in many of its leadership positions such as national treasurer, publications and information secretary, and branch chairman. About two-thirds of the editorial board of *Banting*, PRM's journal, was indeed undergraduates in 1968 (Panchacharam, 1969, p. 15). Parti Islam Se-Malaysia's (Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party, PAS) presence on campus was not substantial but was growing in influence (Muhammad Abu Bakar, 1973, p. 26).

Perhaps the most notable example is UMSU's decision to campaign during the 1969 General Election. UMSU conducted rallies nationwide in major towns alongside the west coast and distributed over 100,000 copies of the Students' Manifesto (Weiss, 2011, pp. 145-6). Their rallies surprisingly attracted thousands of people, most of whom were non-Malays. UMSU President, Khong Kim Hoong, even considered fielding an independent candidate but ultimately abandoned the plan.

Democracy was an important element in the manifesto as students wanted people to be more involved in the decision-making processes of the country and for national politics to truly carry the spirit of democracy. Other demands made by the students include the guarantee of freedom and justice, improvement of the people's economic status, land reform, a truly national education policy, the unconditional release of all political detainees, and the withdrawal of foreign military bases in Malaysia. The demands from the manifesto reflected the progressive character of the student movement. The rallies organised by UMSU were an important development in the history of the student struggle, as there was direct involvement by students in the Malaysian political process where they raised issues on democracy and social justice and denounced parties that capitalised on social issues.

#### SOLIDARITY WITH MARGINALISED COMMUNITIES

The late 1960s saw students' increasing engagement with the country's rural communities. Challenging the stereotypical view that university graduates were “snobs” disconnected from society, UM students took greater initiatives to empathize with issues faced by the peasantry. Various rural outreach programmes such as the Project Perkhidmatan Mahasiswa and the National Student Service Corps were launched. Similar initiatives

were undertaken by students from Universiti Sains Malaysia and Universiti Putra Malaysia. Students would travel to rural areas and provide services ranging from teaching to building latrines (Weiss, 2011, p. 153).

Protests concerning issues of rural poverty also began to appear beginning in 1967. The influx of Malay students, especially from rural communities, throughout the decade due to affirmative action policies, made rural poverty a closer issue in student activism. The 1967 protest was a criticism of Selangor State Government's handling of the Teluk Gong issue. A community of landless farmers led by Hamid Tuah was evicted from their illegal settlement by the state government. They were arrested and their crops destroyed (Hassan, 1984, pp. 2-3). University students, including some lecturers, condemned the authorities for their harsh crackdown.

The year 1974 witnessed greater intensity in protests on the issue of rural poverty. Squatters' homes in Tasik Utara, Johor were to be demolished, despite earlier assurance by the government of protection, instead of development. The confrontation resulted in a total of 48 individuals arrested, seven of whom were students from UM. Meanwhile, UMSU president Kamarazaman Yacob led 2,500 students, including some lecturers, to protest at the prime minister's department in Kuala Lumpur. Police responded by sealing off the UM campus. Kamarazaman responded by forming a Majlis Tertinggi Sementara (Temporary Executive Council) with support from almost all UM student groups and physically took over the university. Having secured the main university entrance, the Council suspended classes, occupied the Vice Chancellor's office and handled food, transport, medicine, security, communications and publicity (Weiss, 2011, p. 156). They demanded the unconditional release of five UM students held in detention.

Not all student groups agreed with Kamarazaman's actions. Malay groups – consisting of PBMUM, PMIUM (UM Muslim Students' Society), two Malay *silat* groups and the Science Faculty Malay Study Group – staged a pro-government countermovement called the Majlis Tindakan Nasional (Nationalist Action Council). Supporters of the Nationalist Council raided UMSU's Union House and kidnapped Kamarazaman, demanding restoration of campus administration. After only six hours of occupation, the Temporary Council ceded power. UMSU and the Socialist Club were suspended. Within a week, the Nationalist Council dissolved.

Only two months later, students returned to the streets to protest in solidarity with poor rubber tappers in Baling. Rising inflation and cost of living had impoverished these rubber tappers, who demanded government intervention to address their plight. Thousands of people gathered at Baling from mid-November to December 1974 (Weiss, 2011, p. 158). At its peak on 1 December, 1974 over



**“Instead of nurturing critical thinking and proactive leadership amongst students, universities were now programmed to produce the needed manpower to propel Malaysia’s economic advancement.”**

30,000 people protested at Baling. The Baling protest had great significance as it was located deep within the Malay heartland in Kedah and signalled an embarrassing critique of the government’s economic development strategies (Weiss, 2005, p. 309).

Soon after, students in Kuala Lumpur and USM rallied in support of the rubber tappers’, demanding curbs on inflation, an increase of rubber price, and punishment of corrupt government officials (Weiss, 2005, p. 309). The government reacted with force. As protesters retreated into Masjid Negara, police stormed the mosque and arrested 1,128 people. Police also entered the campuses of UM, USM, UKM, ITM as well as SU and Nantah in Singapore. At least two dozen lecturers and students were arrested under the Internal Security Act (ISA). While demonstrations still occurred after the crackdown, this incident marked the end of the most politically significant period of student activism in Malaysia (Hassan, 1984, p. 16).

The government immediately produced a White Paper entitled *Communist Party of Malaya Activities with the University of Malaya Chinese Language Society* in the same month and blamed communist infiltration of the CLS in provoking the student protest (Weiss, 2005, p. 309). However, the official explanation was not convincing given the substantial involvement of Malay students and the close connection the issues raised had with the Malay community. Many protesters were from UKM, which mostly hailed Malay students from peasant families (Weiss, 2005, 310). Furthermore, the protest instigators involved leaders of Malay organisations such as Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia (Malaysian Islamic Youth Front, ABIM) and Persatuan Kebangsaan Pelajar-Pelajar Islam Malaysia (National Union of Muslim Students, PKPIM). Regardless of the real motivation behind it, this protest eventually led to the harsh restrictions from the 1975 amendment of the Universities and University Colleges Act 1971.

#### CONTAINMENT OF STUDENTS

Following the May 13 riots in 1969, the state consolidated its control over society and universities and expanded affirmative action policies to address socio-economic imbalances within communities. Part of this initiative included rapid expansion of higher education through the establishment of several universities. The Universities and University Colleges Act (AUKU) which was introduced in 1971, acted as a legal framework for the establishment of

these institutions namely Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM), Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM), Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM) and Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM).

While AUKU was crucial in providing structural uniformity in higher education expansion, it was hugely criticised for its curbing of the university and student autonomy. AUKU shifted the manner of appointments of university leaderships and increased governmental control over the university council, which would appoint the vice-chancellor. The vice chancellor’s powers were expanded to include supervision of student affairs and campus activities. University student unions would be replaced with a more docile Students’ Representative Council (SRC) and all student organisation activities were subject to the vice chancellor’s approval (Weiss, 2011, pp. 135-6). Political participation among student organisations was explicitly prohibited.

The passing of AUKU in Parliament incited outcries from students, academics and politicians over its undermining of the principles of democracy and freedom of speech. PKPM demanded in mid-1971 for the repeal of the controversial clauses of the Act – Clauses 15 and 16 and Sections 48 through 51. Demonstrations were held by student organisations from UM, USM, UKM, UTM, UPM and Institut Teknologi Mara (ITM) throughout the early 1970s (Hassan, 1984, pp. 8-9). The government eventually permitted UMSU to retain its name, but student unions of other universities failed to achieve the same outcome.

After the 1974 Tasik Utara and Baling-inspired riots, the government introduced harsher amendments to AUKU. Section 15 was amended to prohibit all students – not only organisations – from any activity that is “construed” to be political participation. Students and student organisations were not allowed to appeal for donations. Officers of student organisations were criminally liable for the organisation’s wrongdoings. Students charged with a criminal offence would be automatically suspended. Amendments to Section 16 enabled the vice-chancellor to suspend or dissolve any student organisation. A deputy vice chancellor’s office was created specifically to control student activities. All student societies were dissolved and allowed to be reinstated only if they abide by the Act. UMSU was eventually dissolved and replaced by the UM SRC (Weiss, 2011, p. 195). UM students also had to accept a new code of conduct called the *Ikrar UM* (UM Pledge).

While AUKU repressed student activism and curbed university autonomy, it was undeniably effective in expanding access to tertiary education for students, especially from the Malay community. Together with the redistributive New Economic Policy (NEP), the introduction of AUKU has contributed to remarkable growth in university enrolment, from around 8,500 in 1970 to nearly 38,000 in 1985 (Weiss, 2011, pp. 187-8). The most explicit beneficiaries were non-elite Malays. A survey in 1977 found that majority of undergraduates were from working-class backgrounds; almost a third were offspring of farmers, fishermen and unskilled labourers.

However, one negative repercussion of this demographic change was the exacerbation of ethnic cleavage on campus, as Malay students dominated student leadership positions. AUKU also contributed strongly to passivity amongst students, which could be observed from the dying down of student protests after 1975. Furthermore, apart from legal restrictions, the public discourse that delegitimised student activism by painting them as gullible subjects thwarted their confidence and discouraged them from future collective mobilisation, and what Weiss described as “intellectual containment”. (Weiss, 2011, p. 189).

### 3 The late 1970s – 1980s

Changes to the legislation stemming from events in 1969 and 1974 quelled protests under the newly formed Barisan Nasional (National Front, BN) political coalition, which was far more dominant than its predecessor the Alliance). The state prioritised economic growth and redistribution under a more authoritarian environment. Intellectual containment was instrumental for the government as it worked to isolate itself from disruptive critiques (Weiss, 2011, p. 187). Instead of nurturing critical thinking and proactive leadership amongst students, universities were now programmed to produce the needed manpower to propel Malaysia’s economic advancement. Universities rapidly increase in quantity with greater emphasis on scientific and technical fields and were oriented towards industry-linked research (Weiss, 2011, 189).

The post-1974 campus environment would be much more restricted compared to the preceding years. Constitutional amendments removed “sensitive” issues – such as religion, Malay special rights and status of the monarchy – from public discourse. The Speaker’s Corner at UM was razed, security gates were put up or reinforced and the names of UMSU’s leaders from 1972 to 1975 were removed from display in an attempt to delegitimise their roles. Degree programmes were shortened from four to three years to discourage students from acclimatising and engaging in non-academic commitments. Campus publications were curbed and journals such as the *Mahasiswa Negara* was changed to a tamer *Budiman*. The Socialist Club was banned, leaving the student-Left decimated and allowing

campus activism to be dominated by pro-government “Malay nationalists” and anti-establishment Islamic activists. Both, however, focused largely on campus-level issues (Weiss, 2011, 196).

#### RELIGIOUS RESURGENCE

Under limited space for mobilisation and political engagement, students found an outlet through religious organisations throughout the 1980s and early 1990s, observed most prominently amongst Muslim and Catholic students (Weiss, 2011, p. 212). Religious revivalism coincided with themes of social reform, national unity and interethnic harmony, all of which were discussed using Islamic concepts and principles (Nagata, 1980, p. 410).

There was a rise of *dakwah* on campus, and within the Malay community in Malaysia at large, especially in terms of questions of malaise in the face of Western values brought up during this period. Malaysia’s Islamic resurgence took strong root in the early 1970s, within the global context of the Arab-Israeli War in 1967 and Iran’s Islamic Revolution in 1979. By 1974, Malay-Muslim students became suspicious of material, Western elements. They saw *dakwah* as a means to overcome problems of communism, moral decay, indiscipline, and drugs on campus. The second wave of the Islamic revival began later in the 1970s when overseas students returned was heavily influenced by various Islamic groups and organisations such as Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood and Pakistan’s Jamaat-I-Islami. This exacerbated trends toward racial polarisation, with Islam becoming increasingly used to define the Malay community (Weiss, 2011, p.216).

*Dakwah* permeated on campus and within the broader policy, as reflected in Mahathir’s administration in embracing Islamic value with policies such as “Look East” and “Buy British Last” policies. The Malay-Muslim popular classes found an ‘authentic’ voice in which to express their profound disillusionment with the capitalist-driven developmentalism and at the same time, negotiating with the complex process of Islamisation brand that was driven by the state. Jan Stark argues that the Mahathir administration attempted to weaken the Islamic opposition while at the same time, strengthen the government’s Islamic credentials. While previous scholars have categorised the Islamic resurgence of *dakwah* as a monolithic movement, Stark suggests that fragmented visions of Malaysian Islamic debates are most apparent in the political frictions throughout the Mahathir government, thus suggesting the inconsistency of a uniform Islamic doctrine and for a broader call for ‘everybody’s Islam’ (Stark, 2003, p. 177). Having said that, the campus-based *dakwah*-related programs and activities were able to thrive during the 1980s as it was in line with the government’s encouragement of broad Islamisation. While many student groups associated with the *dakwah* movement itself, they differed over issues



**“The 1980s and 1990s marked perhaps the most repressive period on student movements.”**

of the relationship between Islam and the state, despite their common aim to establish a holistic Islamic society through a gradual process of social adaptation, missionary work and Islamic education. For instance, where ABIM favoured the creation of an Islamic society according to Maududi’s principle of a dynamic *shariah* (*shariah haraki*) as a religious system internalized and lived by the people, the IRC (the London-based Islamic Representative Council) insisted on the implementation of a rigid system of the state that put the priority on *shariah* law and its application by the state above all considerations of a possible reconciliation with society (Stark, 2003, p. 179). ABIM also clashed with PAS, with PAS associating more closely with the IRC and there were conflicts over interpretations of the *shariah*. Simultaneously, non-Malays became increasingly marginalised from campus-level student leadership in the 1980s (Weiss, 2011, p.216).

Tertiary education swelled during this period. Although it was less homogenous, it still had complicated class and ethnic cleavages. The continuation of NEP saw significant changes in university admissions starting from the early 1970s. During the 1960s, 90% of higher education students comprised of Non-Malays. Supplemented by the NEP and other ethnic quotas put in place, the proportion of Malays in universities exceeded the percentage of Malays in society. This demographic shift compounded aggressive moves toward Malayisation and Islamisation on campus, with around 2/3 of Malay university students stating they were “committed at some level or other to *dakwah*” by the mid-1980s (Weiss, 2011, p. 222).

Students’ critical analyses of social issues became increasingly informed by faith. The basis of religious identity, not student identity, therefore rejects a sense of students as a privileged class from a specific social or economic background. University students during this period were no longer an English-educated elite, markedly isolated and insulated from the mass of society (Weiss, 2011, p.225).

**GOVERNMENT CRACKDOWN:  
OPERASI LALANG**

*Operasi Lalang* was launched in October 1987 to interrupt many of these religious, progressive initiatives. It was a major government crackdown on opposition parties and social activists, specifically targeting publicly active Catholics. The government issued a White Paper defining liberation theology (which was deeply ingrained in

Catholic activism) as a strategy to foment class struggle rather than a Vatican-endorsed idea of liberation from personal and social sin. The government, therefore, alleged a Marxist infiltration of Christian organisations (Weiss, 2011, p. 201).

Multiple government crackdowns crystallised opposition to the Internal Security Act (ISA) and support for interracial cooperation on campus. The regulation of academic staff through AUKU demonstrates the extension of the government’s crackdown to university lecturers. The oppressive and suffocating influence of the Public Service Department (PSD) over university affairs resulted in a large increase in staff resignations. Mounting restrictions propelled academic staff to campaign for university autonomy which resulted in a University Charter in 1974, which was unsuccessful. Protests persisted throughout the 1980s, with five academic staff associations issuing a joint statement urging the democratisation of decision-making and administration, better channels for communication, and abrogation of overbearing controls in 1984.

Academic freedom and autonomy were severely stripped away under AUKU. While there were criticisms from student bodies and academic staff initially, a different relationship between academics and state emerged -- instead of feeling obliged to confront the state as it was before, academics now “felt beholden to it.” (Interview with Chandra Muzaffar, 2006). This shift was not confined to campuses as intellectual containment was part of a broad program of depoliticisation.

**4 The 1990s**

Within the context of the early 1990s, the corporatization and privatization of higher education became a global trend. Along with amendments to AUKU, the Private Higher Educational Institutions Act, Education Act, AUKU Amendment, the National Accreditation Board Act, National Council on Higher Education were all introduced in the 1990s. Although the educational sector was more liberalised due to a variety of legislation passed in 1996, there were concerns about the quality of education. While the recognition of private institutions allowed a high proportion of non-Malays to enter higher education institutes (and increased overall admission), the government’s reign on on-campus activities and student activism were still strong.

By the late 1990s, student activism had revived significantly, but due to the specific nature of repression and shifts in the 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: elections on and off-campus. From the early 2000s onwards, activism accentuated this trend toward containment. The emphasis of all political campaigns was on memoranda to authorities, elections, and comparatively low-risk efforts through coalitions of support off-campus.

**CHINESE STUDENT ACTIVISM**

Chinese activism in the ‘80s and early ‘90s focused on student welfare and politics in campus elections. The sacking of Anwar Ibrahim as Deputy Prime Minister in 1998 and the subsequent Reformasi period reinvigorated Chinese student activism. For instance, despite AUKU, Chinese student activists from Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM) such as Sim Tze Tzin, Yong Kai Ping, and Ong Chin Wen have participated in street demonstrations in the early stages of the reform movement and they are willing to campaign for opposition candidates for the 1999 General Election.

Chinese students at local universities and colleges were also influenced by the reform movement. Their direct involvement highlighted the political strife and turmoil in local communities. While Chinese students in the 1980s focused their idealism on matters of self-interest, this shifted to emphasise overarching reform in society to defend the interests of the people.

The reform movement’s influence was not limited to student activism. More importantly, the movement saw the birth of a new group of students — the “reform generation.” These students responded to the calls for reform and demanded changes in a society based on justice. The political influence of the students of the reform generation persisted as most of them became successors of political opposition leaders. This is evident in the emergence of several former Chinese student activists as state assemblymen and MPs in the GE12.

The participation of former Chinese student activists in opposition parties has influenced the development of Chinese and Malaysian politics. Chinese student activists from the reform generation observe the practice of communal politics, malfeasance, and self-interest in BN’s Chinese component parties (especially MCA) and deem them unable to respond to the demands of change within Malaysian society. In their view, the non-communal path of Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR) and Democratic Action Party (DAP) party struggle and defending the interests of the people of various races can meet the needs of the people, especially after the political tsunami in the 2008 general election. Therefore, the phenomenon of Chinese youth participation in these two opposition parties is noticeable.

**THE RISE OF NGOS**

The rise of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) offered new avenues for collective action and alliances. The organisation of off-campus NGOs in particular, which were openly involved with the same sorts of issues that generally engaged students, offered students a new channel for activism and reinvigorated their efforts toward social justice and community engagement. While most advocacy NGOs developed a comparatively secular, action-oriented approach, they shared characteristics with key student organisations, not least in being largely urban and non-Malay, and in developing alongside cognate, but specifically Islamist, organisations. With some exceptions [Weiss, p. 210: e.g. Suara Rakyat Malaysia (SUARAM)], few NGOs involved themselves proactively in campus life.

Registered Student NGOs (under Registrar of Youth Societies) offered paths for student activism. The idea-sharing platform provided for them was beneficial as a part of the solution, instead of associating them with campus issues (Ahmad Effendy, p. 3). However, these registered student NGOs did not enjoy absolute freedom of association and freedom of speech. There were multiple restrictions imposed through several federal Acts, such as the Youth Societies and Youth Development Act (2007), AUKU (1971 onwards), and the Educational Institutions (Discipline) Act (1976). Additionally, these student NGOs faced various contemporary challenges, including the struggle to stay relevant, social stigma, commitment problems among activists, reception of political pressure, and the culture of fear.

**AUKU AND NEP**

AUKU reframed the position of tertiary institutions and students in society; it did not preclude specific forms of engagement and discipline unruly students, but fundamentally bureaucratized and depoliticised campus and the category of “student” in Malaysia, providing the infrastructure for intellectual containment.

The redistributive goals of NEP lagged through to the early 1990s, in which policies tended to maintain upper-class advantages rather than boost social mobility. Elite *Bumiputera* was more likely to be awarded scholarships and students educated locally found new job prospects upon graduation and public sector hiring gave preference to Malays, which further exacerbated disparities.

The 1980s and 1990s marked perhaps the most repressive period on student movements. The combination of legal strictures and intellectual containment delegitimised student activism and thwarted students’ confidence and deterred them from mobilising for collective action. Leading figures of prominent groups, such as UMSU from the previous decades, lost relevance and influence due to the harsh legislations implemented and persistent crackdowns at universities.



**“As highlighted in the development during the 1990s, student activism in the 2000s also continued to see the impact of student participation in the ongoing reformation movement which largely involved participation in politics – to provide a line-up of back-up leaders for opposition parties.”**

Anwar Ibrahim's dismissal and arrest became a binding force that succeeded in uniting the student movement by bringing together students from various ideological paths. This triggered cross-ethnic and cross-racial activism during the Reformasi movement. A new generation of students dubbed “Gen M” became preoccupied with economic accumulation or with the issues of democracy and rule of law (Weiss, 2011, p.230).

#### THE PRIVATIZATION AND CORPORATIZATION OF HIGHER EDUCATION

Pre-1970s, the demand for higher education was limited as Malaysia was dominated by labour-intensive activities. The ascendancy of Reagan-Thatcher doctrine in the early 1980s and the rise of globalism deeply influenced Malaysia's policies, including educational policies. The “Washington Consensus” established in the Reagan-Thatcher doctrine was reflected in Malaysia's Privatisation and Malaysian Incorporated, which demonstrated a shift away from Keynesian Welfarism to a reduction of public spending, smaller government, and lower taxes (Sivalingam, 2007p. 12-13).

The Private Higher Educational Institutions Act was introduced in 1996 as a response to globalisation and liberalisation as a necessity to satisfy the demands for higher education, in line with the New Vision 2020 Policy, which was for Malaysia to become a high-income or developed country by 2020, as envisioned by former Prime Minister Tun Mahathir. The government inherently legalised the existence of private Higher Educational Institutes (HEIs) and branches of foreign universities to increase educational access to the masses. The privatisation of higher education came after the 1985-86 economic crisis, which placed limits on the expansion of the public provision of higher education. This improved corporate governance and saw new programs introduced and more autonomy in finance within the higher education sector.

The 1996 Amendment was particularly significant as it provided a framework for the corporatisation of public universities. This amendment replaced the terms from the academe with those from corporate governance. The most impactful change came from the downsizing of the University Senate, which effectively gagged academic voice in universities. Professors who were more vocal and critical of the administration of the university of Government

would not be appointed, and the restructuring of the Senate therefore seriously undermined the authority and independence of academics in universities. Most significantly, the restructuring consolidated authority in the hands of a single individual, the Vice-Chancellor, who not only chairs the Senate and appoints institutional leaders, but also appoints all other representatives in the Senate (Wan, p. 6).

Cheong et al. demonstrated that annual examination results conducted by the education authorities are at variance from those from international benchmark assessments. Little effort was made to investigate and remedy the gap to bring Malaysian standards on par with international students (both in terms of academic excellence as well as freedom).

Pathways from school to higher education were also ethnically segregated (Cheong et al, p. 76-77). Government efforts to integrate Chinese-medium schools into the national system proved to be unsuccessful in the past.

The rise of private higher education produced a tertiary education system with private and public sectors running on parallel tracks, with no links between them. The strengths and weaknesses of each system are locked in, with no cross-fertilisation of ideas or human capital (Cheong, p.77).

#### 5 The 2000s

After 1998, the student movement changed and improved their approaches to mobilising vis-a-vis demonstrations, forums, and strived to win campus elections. This development was mainly caused by the development of the *Reformation* idea during Anwar Ibrahim's time. Anwar Ibrahim's call to demand justice became an attraction for students from every corner of the country to join the reformation movement. The courage of young people to take part in street demonstrations every Saturday in the capital was so prominent and received attention from many parties. For example, Asiaweek magazine reported that students – especially Malay students, were the main forces driving the reforms in Malaysia (Riduan, 2007, p 88). Although student associations in this era were still moving based on ethnic and religious backgrounds, the tendency to work together beyond ethnic considerations was significant (Weiss, 2006 p. 165). For example, USM students Lee Yen Ting, Loke Chee Hoe, and Nurul Fatean were the figures who fought

together and was suspended for their involvement in an ‘illegal gathering’ in November 2000 to protest against the Vision School (*Sekolah Wawasan*) concept (Malaysiakini, 2002). This also highlights the continuation of Chinese students' involvement in student activism.

Considering the restrictions on press freedom, Malaysian students had restricted exposure to independent media (Weiss, 2011). However, communication was still multifaceted among students. With the assistance of the internet, the longstanding traditions of creative communications and alternative or underground publications persisted and kept expanding. Ranging from a study group, established channel for publications as well as more bold efforts like ‘*surat layang*’ and parodies of official publications have been used as a platform to spread and develop sentiments of the student movement (Weiss, 2011). Besides that, the establishment of a different form of off-campus student engagement such as Universiti Bangsar Utama (UBU) also emerged in the early 2000s. UBU started as a place for student activists from various campuses in Kuala Lumpur to meet and discuss progressive ideas, current affairs and issues that eventually evolved into an organisation where they actively contributed their energy, creativity, ideas and ideals in community-based activities and programmes with underprivileged and marginalised communities (Mohd, 2013).

#### BIRTH OF PROXIES AND ALLIES FOR CORE ISSUES: ANTI-ISA AND ANTI-AUKU

As highlighted in the development during the 1990s, student activism in the 2000s also continued to see the impact of student participation in the ongoing reformation movement which largely involved participation in politics – to provide a line-up of back-up leaders for opposition parties. From here onwards, we see the birth of ‘proxies’ - campus parties that served to support the opposition parties (Weiss, 2006, pp. 165-166). Although most members of the generation that were born and raised under Mahathir's premiership (sometimes referred to as Gen M) avoided direct political engagement due to the deterrence from many factors including deference to elder, peer pressure as well as legal constraints and economic limitation (UPP-IKD, 2003, pp. 31-33, 36-39), some still maintained the activist agendas. These students campaigned with the opposition parties and NGOs for many causes ranging from social justice, civil liberties, and good governance to international concerns such as American attacks on Iraq and Afghanistan, alongside students welfare issues like the rate of education loan (Weiss, 2015).

One of the prominent demands made during that time was the Anti-ISA Movement (GMI). Student bodies

including Gabungan Mahasiswa Islam Se-Malaysia (GAMIS), Persatuan Kebangsaan Pelajar Islam Malaysia (PKPIM), and Malaysian Youth and Student Democratic Movement (DEMA) had collaborated with Malaysian NGOs to fight for the abolition of the ISA. Many students from various student movements were conducting and participating in memorandum submission, rallies, and demonstrations in their support to repeal the ISA and to release ISA detainees (Weiss, 2015; Malaysiakini, 2004). GMI was one of the main contributors to the fight for justice and human rights for Anwar Ibrahim. GMI through GAMIS and PKPIM in collaboration with Universiti Bangsar Utama (UBU, under Khairul Anuar Ahmad Zainuddin or better known as Jonah<sup>1</sup>) played an important role in mobilising the Black 14 rally on 14 April 2001 and the handing over of Anwar's treatment memorandum on 25 May 2001 (Weiss, 2015).

In 1999, GAMIS, PKPIM, DEMA, and 68 Malaysian NGOs sent a memorandum calling for MPs to repeal the ISA (Lemière, 2014). On 1 May 2001, the ISA Abolition Movement was launched, and it was led by Ustaz Fadzil Mohd Noor, Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS) President who collaborated with Parti Rakyat Malaysia (PRM), DAP, Jamaah Islah Malaysia (JIM), SUARAM, Parti Ulama Malaysia (PUM), Parti Sosialis Malaysia (PSM), and Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia (ABIM) (Mohd Fuad, 2015). On 11 May 2001, Mohd. Fuad Ikhwan [Deputy President of Barisan Bertindak Mahasiswa Negara (BBMN)] sent a memorandum to the Inspector-General of Police, urging the government to repeal the ISA and to release ten ISA detainees (Lemière, 2014). Following that on May 12, 2001, a total of 200 students attended the launch of the Gabungan Mahasiswa Mansuhkan ISA (GMMI) at the lecture hall in Academy of Islamic Studies, UM. Kamarulzaman Abdullah (President of GAMIS) and Muid Faisal Abdul Rahman (President of PMUUM) gave a speech at the rally, which was attended by representatives of the student movement such as DEMA, Kelab Rakan Siswa Islah Malaysia (KARISMA), PKPIM, and PMUUM. While on June 8, 2001, GMMI, PKPIM, DEMA, UBU, and Sekretariat Pelajar Persatuan Ulama Malaysia (SPPUM) staged a demonstration to repeal the ISA at the Masjid Negara which saw the attendance of 200 students (Malaysiakini, 2009). GMI led by BBMN also submitted an official student report to the Human Rights Commission of Malaysia (SUHAKAM) regarding the AUKU's oppression of the human rights of students and academics (Malaysia Today, 2009).

The Malaysian Chinese members in DEMA, inspired by the reformation movement and fight for the abolishment of ISA, later on, reflected DAP's aspirations. The participation of DEMA leaders on various events against AUKU saw the participation of Soh Sook Hwa (DEMA USM) in the AUKU Abolition Workshop organised by DAP Youth at the

<sup>1</sup> His real name is Khairul Anuar Ahmad Zainuddin. He graduated from Universiti Teknologi MARA and was a Reform activist who co-founded UBU. In 2001, he was detained under the Internal Security Act or ISA for 23 days for held a demonstration against the ISA.



**“The effectiveness of slacktivism and clicktivism in bringing about social changes and the inclusion of the two as being regarded as a form of real activism...”**

Selangor Chinese Assembly Hall on 11th February 2006. Before that event, Sook Hwa was fined RM200 by USM on December 2, 2004, for campaigning on behalf of Chua Tian Chang, or more commonly known as Tian Chua, in the 11th General Election. She subsequently applied to challenge AUKU in the High Court, Wisma Denmark, Kuala Lumpur on 19 October 2005, on the grounds that AUKU conflicted with human rights (Malaysiakini, 2005). Other organisations such as Student Progressive Front (SPF), a proxy for Solidariti Mahasiswa Malaysia (SMM) at USM joined the cause for the abolishment of AUKU. They distributed flyers in the lecture hall on 11 and 12 July 2006, inviting students to gather in large numbers in Tasik Harapan, USM for their support in demanding the abolition of AUKU. Among the leaders of SPF and DEMA USM were Wong Weng Hoo (SPF Coordinator), Sek Choon Shiou, Lee Huat Sheng, Low Chia Meng, Lee Yen Ting, Choo Chon Kai (Chinese Language Association USM), Sook Sook Hwa (former founder of USM Chinese Language Association) and Ginie Lim (former USM Majlis Perwakilan Pelajar (MPP) Exco for the 2002/03 session).

On 11 July 2006, SMM together with Dato’ Seri Wan Azizah, President of PKR, Tian Chua (PKR Information Chief), Hishamuddin Rais (Universiti Bangsar Utama), and several NGOs such as the Asians Student Association (ASA), SUARAM, KL & Selangor Chinese Assembly Hall and National Human Rights Society (HAKAM) discussed the “PROPOSAL OF REPEAL OF UNIVERSITY AND UNIVERSITY COLLEGE ACT 1971 (AMENDMENT 1975)”. In this ceremony, Mohd Rifauddin Abdul Wahab submitted the proposal to Dato’ Seri Wan Azizah. The AUKU abolition movement was established.

**LARGE SCALE PROTESTS ON LOCAL AND INTERNATIONAL ISSUES**

On 19 January 2001, 10 BBMN and 15 GAMIS affiliated bodies memorandum led by Faisal Abd. Rahman (President of PMIUM and Secretary of GAMIS) submitted a memorandum for the government to abolish the 4% National Higher Education Fund Corporation (PTPTN) charge, arguing that it was a form of *riba* – a term that roughly translated into usury and usually refers to unjust practices in trade and business according to Islamic laws and standards – and oppresses students from low-income families. This rally was attended by more than 500 students. Students led by GAMIS also met with the National Fatwa Council as well as several Islamic scholars,

whilst campus MPPs held discussions with PTPTN officers (Malaysiakini, 2001). However, the status quo prevailed as PTPTN continued with the 4% charge even as some muftis agreed that such charges were considered *riba*.

Apart from that, 8,000 people participated in the 2009 anti-PPSMI march from Masjid Negara to Istana Negara in Kuala Lumpur (Malaysiakini, 2009). The march was organised by the coalition against the teaching of science and mathematics in English, or known by its Malay name, Gerakan Mansuhkan PPSMI (GMP). GMP is a coalition of 14 NGOs including student bodies such as PKPIM. Here, the development of student movement continued with a focus on education issues, specifically questions of the national language, similar to their predecessors.

With regards to international issues, student involvement in the cause of human rights can be seen prominently in the protest against the American invasion in Iraq and Afghanistan. On 14 July 2000, Mohd Fuad Ikhwan, a representative of GAMIS and PAS sent a memorandum protesting American atrocities in Iraq at the US Embassy. Besides that, BBMN, GAMIS, PKPIM, and DEMA held a demonstration on 23 February 2001 at the Masjid Negara for human rights violations in Iraq. In this demonstration, Muhd Faisal Abdul Rahman (President of PMIUM), Mohd Fuad Mohd Ikhwan (President of PMUM), Ahmad Saparuddin Yusof (Secretary of PKPIM), Ahmad Fadly Yusof (President of BBMN), and Abdullah Karim (Secretary of PMUKM) gave a speech in front of 1,500 students. Seven students were subsequently detained from this rally and the group was “dubbed” the “ISA 7”. Other organisations to protest the American invasion were DEMA and SPF USM who formed the “Stop The War Coalition” which was launched in 2003 at a forum organised by the Penang Office for Human Development (POHD) in association with the Penang Justice and Peace Commission, JIM, Kumpulan Kemajuan Masyarakat (KKM), Women’s Centre for Change (WCC), Aliran Kesedaran Negara (ALIRAN), SUARAM, and Penang Diocese Youth Network (PDYN) (Aliran, 2003).

**THIRD AMENDMENT OF AUKU IN 2009**

In 2009, amendments were made to AUKU, following the launch of the National Higher Education Strategic Plan 2007-2020 (PSPTN) by the Ministry of Higher Education (Wan, 2019). Significant amendments were found in Section 15 of the Act, which includes the abolishment of criminal penalties and decriminalising student discipline, the

abolishment of disciplining university academics, staff, and employees, and the shifting of authority from the Ministry to the university in regards to student administration.

**6 The 2010s THE REVIVAL OF STUDENT ACTIVISM AND THE BIRTH OF ‘CLICKTIVISM’**

Over the last decade, the rise of the internet and other forms of digital technologies has redefined activism, paving way for new forms of socio-political engagement (Christensen, 2012; Butler, 2011). The simple mode of expressing support for a cause through the act of ‘clicking’ or ‘sharing’ any noteworthy links has quickly made ‘slacktivism’<sup>2</sup>, or ‘clicktivism’<sup>3</sup> (which is a more precise term for activism that is specifically done online) a more convenient way for public engagement. The pervasive yet effective use of social media first became noticeable during the Arab Spring movement in 2011 that spread across Arab nations such as Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, and Syria; followed by the 15-M movement in Spain that spread across Europe and other continents, as well as the Occupy Wall Street movement in the United States all within the same year (Alkhouja, 2014; Casero-Ripolles & Feenstra, 2012; Kavada, 2015).

The effectiveness of slacktivism and clicktivism in bringing about social changes and the inclusion of the two as being regarded as a form of real activism, however, remains a debate due to their passive nature that does not require the physical presence of persons supporting any chosen causes, and the perceived ‘laziness’ of participation (Christensen, 2012). For one, internet activists are viewed as being detached from actual politics since solidarity is shown over the click of a button, rather than attending demonstrations. Such passive participation has been suggested as more of an act of manifesting good intentions than embodying a genuine commitment to a particular cause. Despite such contentions, social media has demonstrated its influential role in the diffusion of the Occupy Wall Street Movement and in mobilising its participants, which was also apparent in the Arab Spring movement and the likes (Kavada, 2015). Facebook pages were created to persuade the public into taking part and building solidarity, leading to increased awareness and interest in various social and political causes.

The pervasive use of social media to spark mobilisation across the USA, Europe and the Middle East eventually found its way into Malaysia, as movements such as Occupy Dataran, Coalition for Free and Fair Elections 2.0 (BERSIH 2.0), and Himpunan Hijau 2.0 saw high turnout

and tremendous support largely from the younger group of people (Ku Hasnita Ku Samsu, 2011; Lim 2013). Students grew more vocal about their rights as students and citizens as they expressed their demands for the cancellation of PTPTN loan under the name of free education at the Occupy Dataran movement, and governmental reform in the general election system at BERSIH 2.0. Within the same year, Himpunan Hijau 2.0 was held in several cities across Malaysia including Kuantan, Kuala Lumpur, Penang, Ipoh, and Kamunting. The turnout was high – attended by approximately 20,000 Malaysians – thus making it one of the biggest street demonstrations in Malaysia. Student-led organisations like Persatuan Mahasiswa Islam (PMI), Malaysia Youth and Students Democratic Movement (DEMA), Solidariti Mahasiswa Malaysia (SMM), Gerakan Mahasiswa Selamatkan Rakyat (GMSR), Aksi Mahasiswa Peduli (AKSI), and Kongres Gerakan Mahasiswa Pantai Timur (GEMPUR) took part, as they protested the government’s decision to build a rare earth processing plant in Malaysia.

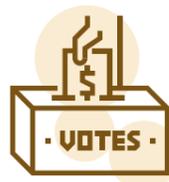
**RECENT AMENDMENTS TO AUKU**

In addition to the widespread use of social media, the heightened student participation in activism in Malaysia can be linked to the amendment of AUKU in 2009, which allowed university students to participate in activities outside of campus, including joining NGOs. The increased engagement also owed in large part to the landmark decision of the Court of Appeal to repeal Section 15(5) (a) of AUKU in 2011, regarding the arrest of four student activists from UKM at a by-election (Fortify Rights, 2018; Wan, 2019). The Court’s decision that Section 15(5)(a) of AUKU – which prohibited students from expressing support for parties and participating in politics – was found to be in contradiction of Article 119 of the Federal Constitution (every citizen over the age of 21 is qualified to vote, thus implying freedom of expression and participation in politics). As a result, the decision became the basis for the amendment of AUKU in 2012, which was mainly to relax the limit concerning control over students’ participation in politics (Wan, 2019, p. 12).

However, these amendments did not necessarily grant students more right to partake in activism as the amendment made in AUKU in 2012 still prohibited students from “being involved in political party activities within the campus” and other activities deemed “detrimental or prejudicial to the interests, well-being or good name of the University, any of the students, staff, officers, or employees of the University”. In addition, universities in Malaysia still wielded extraordinary powers

<sup>2</sup> The term ‘slacktivism’ is often used to denote “political activities that serve to increase the feel-good factor of the participants but have no impact on real-life outcomes”, which include activities that are considered effortless such as wearing a band or even sharing a page on the internet. (Christensen, 2012)

<sup>3</sup> Meanwhile, ‘clicktivism’ is a term that is more specifically used for the expression of support for causes solely via the use of internet or any means of social media (ibid).



**“Such adversity has unsurprisingly influenced the majority of the voters in the following years, as seen in the 14th General Election (GE14) on 9 May 2018, which provided a historic turn in the landscape of Malaysian politics.”**

to control students’ activities everywhere – on- and off-campus – under the Disciplinary Rules (Fortify Rights, 2018). Whether or not movements such as BERSIH 2.0 yielded positive results remains a question because despite having witnessed a turnout of at least 20,000 attendees, the demands were largely ignored and only four months later, the government introduced the Peaceful Assembly Act 2012 which sought to regulate public protests.

Interestingly, this was also the same year where the amendments, Universities and University Colleges Act (Amendment) Bill 2012, Private Higher Educational Institutions (Amendment) Bill 2012, and the Educational Institutions (Discipline) Bill 2012 were passed, allowing students some leeway to be involved in politics. Even though students of public and private institutes of higher education can participate and hold positions in political parties, the amendments prohibited them to stand for any campus elections or hold any position in any organisation or group within the campus, if they hold positions in political parties.

The limitations posed by these amendments did not appear to hinder subsequent political engagement, especially among the younger generation. In 2013, the Movement to Reduce the Cost of Living [Gerakan Turun Kos Sara Hidup (Turun)] called upon all Malaysians to protest the government’s decision on the matter, not unlike the 60s and 70s when the student movement became the voice of rural people because the government had failed to control the increase of food prices and the decrease of rubber prices, badly affecting the living conditions of rural communities. More students also actively participated in Malaysian politics during the 13th General Election in 2013. During this election, student movement played two major roles, firstly as a pressure group, and second to disseminate information.

In the lead-up to the 13th General Election, several issues were addressed by the student movement in their manifesto including threats to national integration, an increase in the cost of living, and haphazard national education policies. This largely reflected the struggle of the student movement in the first wave of student activism during the 1970s. Thus, it needs to be highlighted that the core struggle of the student movement was to enable it to play effective and meaningful roles in the prevailing civil society movement in Malaysia, and not merely to gain more powers as student groups by seeking removal of restrictions to its activities.

Despite the amendments made to AUKU in 2012, the reality of the situation continued seemingly unchanged, as 2014 marked the year of what is called the Seditious Dragnet<sup>4</sup>. In September 2014, a protest was organised by UM Academic Staff Union (PKAUM) and the UM students union, which saw the participation of close to 500 students and lecturers from across faculties at UM as a result of the sedition charge brought against their lecturer Azmi Sharom. It was a rare sight for students to hold protests on sensitive topics in Malaysia’s tightly-controlled public universities where student politics were highly-regulated and academic freedom is curtailed by legislation such as the Universities and University Colleges Act 1971. Safwan Anang, former chairperson of SMM was convicted under Section 4(1)(b) of the Seditious Act 1948 and sentenced to 10 months of imprisonment for allegedly having uttered words of seditious tendency and encouraged the public to topple a legitimate government through illegal means on 13 May 2013. Students continued to be targeted as eight students from UM – Fahmi Zainol, Safwan Shamsuddin, Adam Fisticil Wilfrid, Haw Yu Hong, Khairul Najib Hashim, Khairul Anwar, Abraham Au and Nur Syamini (also known as the “UM8 Students”) – were fined by the university with Fahmi and

<sup>4</sup> The year 2014 was also known as the year of ‘Seditious Dragnet’ due to the term being popularly used in numerous press headlines including *The Malay Mail*, *The Malaysian Insider*, and *Aliran*, among others; in referring to the high number of opposition and activists who were charged under the Malaysian Seditious Act 1948. More information can be referred to the following:

<https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2014/09/05/bersih-claims-sedition-dragnet-a-red-herring-from-gst-redelineation/740475>

<https://web.archive.org/web/20140908090645/http://www.themalaysianinsider.com/malaysia/article/with-sedition-dragnet-malaysia-takes-step-back-to-mahathir-era1>

<https://aliran.com/newsletters/2014-newsletters/sedition-dragnet-politics-climate-fear/>

Safwan being suspended for two semesters for their role in organising the event *40 Years: From UM to Prison*. The event featured a talk by Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim, the founder of PKR. At the event, at least 1,000 students reportedly marched into UM by forcing their way through the locked main gates of the campus. While none of the UM8 students was involved in breaking the main gates, disciplinary actions were still taken against them by the university for organising the event, in violation of the Disciplinary Rules (Fortify Rights, 2018, p.42-3).

When former Prime Minister Najib Razak was publicly accused of embezzling fund from 1 Malaysia Development Berhad (1MDB) for personal use in 2016, an event called “1MDB Townhall” was organised at UM in 2016 by the Special Affairs Department of the Prime Minister’s Office (Fortify Rights, 2018, p. 30). University officials cracked down on students for expressing concern about the notorious 1MDB scandal, in which members of the former ruling government and their associates and families allegedly embezzled several billion dollars from a state-owned fund (Fortify Rights, 2018, p. 13). Four students affiliated with UM Association of New Youth (UMANY, now known as UMANY4) held placards that read “Mahasiswa mahu jawapan” [“Students want answers”], “1MDB jangan spin” [“Do not spin the facts of 1MDB”], “1MDB We Want Answers,” and “1MDB pulangkan duit rakyat” [“1MDB, return the people’s money”], only to have them confiscated by personnel from the Special Affairs Department (p. 31). Charges were pressed against UMANY4 for disruption of peace and disobedience.

Students from Universiti Malaya, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Universiti Malaysia Sabah, International Islamic University Malaysia, and Universiti Teknologi Mara Seri Iskandar established a coalition called the Gabungan Tangkap Malaysian Official 1 (the Arrest Malaysian Official 1 Coalition) after the 1MDB scandal. A rally was organised involving nearly 1,000 participants to call for the Malaysian government to identify and arrest the person coded as MO1 in the United States Department of Justice lawsuit against 1MDB, who had allegedly embezzled US\$680 million of state funds. Five students were arrested. Students were said to breach Section 10(c) of the Peaceful Assembly Act for failing to obtain advanced approval from the Municipal Council to hold the rally, as well as Sections 124B and 505(b) of the Penal Code for activities that are detrimental to parliamentary democracy, and causing fear

and alarm to the public (pp. 38-39). Within this same year, the National Security Council Act 2016 was created by the government as a way to strengthen its ability to counter rising threats and critics, which stirred controversy among human rights defenders and student groups. As activists, including student activists, continued to be targeted by the authorities for expressing dissent, the nation’s dissatisfaction with the then ruling government grew.

Such adversity has unsurprisingly influenced the majority of the voters in the following years, as seen in the 14th General Election (GE14) on 9 May 2018, which provided a historic turn in the landscape of Malaysian politics. For the first time in history, the country witnessed the coalition of opposition parties, Pakatan Harapan (PH), attaining a landmark victory, which ended six decades of rule by Barisan Nasional that had been in power since Malaysia’s independence in 1957. In its campaign materials, the new government vowed to “rebuild the nation” (Fortify Rights, 2018, p. 13). Following GE14, which PH won, the Senate passed the Universities and University Colleges (Amendment) Bill 2018 which aims to abolish provisions preventing university students from participating in political activities on campus.

The historic moment of the PH’s winning in GE14 and the passing of the Bill, however, did not necessarily guarantee the improvement of the education system or the rights of the students. Months after the general election, the appointment of then Education Minister Dr Maszlee Malik as the President of International University of Malaysia (IIUM) sparked controversy for contradicting the PH’s Manifesto<sup>5</sup> in restoring university autonomy, especially among many university students who came forward to protest political interference in higher education institutions and urged for him to step down from the post with IIUM to prevent conflict of interest<sup>6</sup>. The event further shed light on the loss of autonomy previously enjoyed by higher education institutions in Malaysia after the introduction of AUKU in 1971.

#### SHIFTS IN STUDENT ACTIVIST LANDSCAPE AND DEMANDS

Student activism in Malaysia has gone through several waves throughout the many decades (Weiss 2012, p. 206). Initially, a tool to challenge colonial powers in the 1930s, followed by a left-wing wave centred on

<sup>5</sup> Further information on the Pakatan Harapan’s Manifesto can be referred here: [http://kempen.s3.amazonaws.com/pdf/Buku\\_Harapan.pdf](http://kempen.s3.amazonaws.com/pdf/Buku_Harapan.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.nst.com.my/news/nation/2018/09/410753/maszlee-rejects-demand-step-down-iiium-president>



**“Student activism in Malaysia appears to remain racially divided, as in January 2020, some 300 Muslim students gathered to protest Chinese educationist group Dong Zong for opposing a Malaysian government’s plan to introduce the teaching of Jawi writing in vernacular schools.”**

social justice and distribution in the 1960s to the early 1970s, then to the Islamic resurgence in the late 1970s throughout the early 1990s and finally a liberalising wave focused on issues relating to democracy and civil liberties. It has been suggested that the changes in these waves had been closely linked to the maturing of the higher education system (*ibid*). Such shifts can be exemplified through the issues raised by students over the last 20 years or so, such as a fee hike in Student Activity Fees (SAF) at Multimedia University (MMU) that was made without the approval of student council, clubs and societies, which resulted in some 1,000 students gathering on campus ground in 2019 for a peaceful protest<sup>7</sup>. Within the same year, the University of Malaya Students’ Union (KMUM) held a peaceful demonstration to demand improvement in student welfare, which involved submitting a memorandum consisting of 13 demands to the university Vice-Chancellor<sup>8</sup>. While these events demonstrate that participation in activism is no longer solely confined to public universities and colleges in Malaysia, but also private higher learning institutions, there were also examples of how the involvement of student activism in Malaysia is factored by the following: changes in education policies, repeated yet short-lived political opportunities, and increasing diversification

of civil society (Weiss 2012, pp. 222-223). Despite the amendments made to AUKU over the last forty plus years that were meant to grant student rights to political participation and freedom of expression, the reality of the situation for student activists does not appear to reflect on the changes made in AUKU. This was because in 2019, a student from the University of Malaya, Wong Yan Ke was charged under the Penal Code for causing a breach of peace at a convocation ceremony by protesting the university’s Vice Chancellor’s participation in the Malay Dignity Congress, an event which was reported to promote racial division and Malay supremacy. Student activism in Malaysia appears to remain racially divided, as in January 2020, some 300 Muslim students gathered to protest Chinese educationist group Dong Zong for opposing a Malaysian government’s plan to introduce the teaching of Jawi writing in vernacular schools. The peaceful gathering organised by GAMIS was held despite a warning by the police that the organiser had failed to obtain a permit from Kuala Lumpur City Hall and the police for the march. From protesting the New Economic Policy in the 1970s to the quality of the university and higher education, the demands raised by student activists are ever-changing, depending on the trending issues.

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.nst.com.my/news/nation/2019/07/506590/mmu-students-protest-activity-fee-hike>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.bharian.com.my/berita/kes/2019/12/638396/kmum-adakan-demonstrasi-aman-serah-memorandum-13-tuntutan>

**“As anxiety over national identity and direction dissipated due to pro-Malay policies introduced by the Tun Abdul Razak administration, religious activism began to supplant ethno-nationalist as the major strand in student activism.”**

### Student Demography and Activism Strand

A key factor in influencing the direction or major trend of activism on campus is student demography. Up to the mid-1960s, when university demography was heavily non-Malay, student activism focused on non-communal issues such as campus autonomy, student democratic rights, and Third World solidarity. While the rural poverty issue appeared, it did not seem to be the dominant theme behind student activism and was more motivated by class-based left-wing sentiment rather than ethnic-nationalism. As more Malay students enrolled in the university, considerably due to affirmative action policies, student demography changed which affected the dominant strand of student activism thereafter. Communal sentiment became stronger on campus which widened ethnic cleavage and prioritised different concerns.

The newer batch of Malay students, who originated largely from rural areas of Malaya, had a more emotional connection with the issue of rural poverty, which contributed to the large-scale protests over Baling and Tasik Utara in 1974. Before that, various rural outreach programmes were organised amongst student groups. Apart from that, the question of national identity and orientation became increasingly contested. They viewed the prominent and privileged position of English education as not beneficial to the Malay masses. Furthermore, it further hampered their intellectual growth and professional prospects and socioeconomic mobility. This explains the frequent tense conflicts that arose between Malay groups, represented mostly by PBMUM, and the more multi-racial groups, represented by UMSU and the Socialist Club.

From the 1970s onward, student activism discourse was primarily defined by the Malay student groups, who formed the majority of undergraduates in public universities. As anxiety over national identity and direction dissipated due to pro-Malay policies introduced by the Tun Abdul Razak administration, religious activism began to supplant ethno-nationalist as the major strand in student activism. Notwithstanding the reduced influence of ethno-nationalist themes, the rise in religious activism similarly exacerbated ethnic cleavage amongst the student population.

When student protests died down from the mid-1970s to the 1990s, campus activism found new outlets in the form

of religion. Restricted by the Universities and University Colleges Act introduced in 1971, students developed creative methods to organise collective movements and promote social change. Ethnonationalist pressure was replaced by *dakwah* movements, which took Islamic political and philosophical thought as guidance for social improvement. The Islamic movements themselves were not homogenous, with various organisations promoting different ideas emerging under the umbrella of Islam. Similarly, non-Malay students underwent religious revivalism during this period.

The advent of Reformasi in the late 1990s managed to facilitate cross-ethnic alliances based on civil rights issues amongst student bodies of diverse ideologies. However, existing cultural and linguistic cleavages, as well as a certain degree of mistrust, still function as inhibitors to broad-based cross-racial mobilisation. Furthermore, there seems to be a clear demarcation of ethnic groups between public and private institutions which complicates student solidarity. Yet, recent demonstrations such as Bersih have displayed the possibility of multiracial student solidarity on certain national issues.

### NATIONAL POLITICAL CONTEXT

The national political context played an important role. Before the 1970s, the national institutions were dominated by the English-educated intelligentsia, and the vision of “multiracial” Malaysia predominated over other alternative visions. This context was reflected in the university, where student organisations, such as UMSU, were not defined by a certain ethnic group or by communal issues. University graduates during this period played a leadership role in providing a critical voice to the current ruling order. This is observed as Malaya approached independence, combined with anticolonial tendencies and the rise of leftist sentiments, student activists from English and Chinese education system began to articulate a passionate voice of critique towards the colonial regime. While visions of national identity may differ, the aspiration to build a new nation out of a former colony overcame the multifarious imaginations, directed towards a simple singular target: colonial order.

During the post-Independence period whereby the national identity was tensely negotiated, visible through debates over the National Language Act, for example, the campus atmosphere similarly reflected intense



**“The prohibition of involvement in national party politics reflected the state’s diminished view of students. Students were told to only confine themselves to activities within campus including campus elections.”**

contestation of imagination over the identity and future of the nation. The dominant non-communal discourse of student activism began to be directly challenged. Disagreements between different groups emerged over the possible reunification of Singapore, over the status of Malay relative to other languages, or the role of universities within a developing country.

When Malaysia’s political order decisively became more authoritarian and communal in outlook beginning in 1970, the campus atmosphere similarly followed suit. The new political context emboldened communal student groups, who passionately defended the government’s new orientation from criticism by other student groups. Outspoken voices from left-wing or other non-communal groups were perceived as a direct challenge to the new political order. One clear example was the battle between the UMSU-led Temporary Executive Council and the pro-government Nationalist Executive Council to occupy the UM campus in 1974. In other words, student activists became more divided on partisan lines. Left-wing radicalism was shunned and lost its place under the new regime, as witnessed through the demise of the Socialist Club in UM.

The rise of Islamic *dakwah* movements on campus was also a reflection of national contexts. As societies and institutions appeared to be more Islamic in outlook, activism on campus similarly saw an emergence of Islamic movements. However, when Reformasi in the late 1990s focused on issues of governance and civil rights, student organisations of various ideologies were able to form cross-racial alliances and champion non-communal issues.

**POSITIONING STUDENTS IN SOCIETY**

The narrative of student activism in Malaysia reveals the conflicting position of students in a post-colonial country. At one point, it seemed that students were encouraged to voice out, to mobilise, and to be connected with social and political issues both local and abroad. Before the 1970s, students had a stake in determining the identity and orientation of the country, realising that they will have to step up as future leaders of the post-colonial nation. Campus environment played a prominent part in enabling close solidarity amongst students. Dormitories, residential colleges, Union House, Speaker’s Corner are examples of spaces that allowed students to assemble

and discuss, debate, rally and demonstrate over any issues. Relative proximity between institutions such as UM, UKM and ITM, for example, further encouraged student solidarity in public demonstrations.

After the government crackdown in 1974, however, these spaces became restricted if not eliminated. For example, the government demolished the Speaker’s Corner at UM and closed the Union House down to silence students (Weiss, 2011, p. 287). The prohibition of involvement in national party politics reflected the state’s diminished view of students. Students were told to only confine themselves to activities within campus including campus elections. Universities shifted from nurturing critical, intellectual thought amongst students to highly-bureaucratized institutions. Priority was directed at disciplining students and curtailing their political activities, rather than preparing them to be proactive citizens and future leaders. Activism was to be conducted under methods approved by the state.

Decades of intellectual containment succeeded in taming students. Relative to the heydays of protest in the 1960s and early 1970s, the subsequent period was relatively quiet. Virtually no student demonstrations were staged within five years after the AUKU amendment, and only sporadic protests were organised in subsequent years (Weiss, 2005, 315). The introduction, and following amendment, of AUKU had a strong impact but that alone was not sufficient in explaining the loss of interest and energy in student activism. It is the repeated public diminution of students’ role in society that eventually fractured the motivation out of student activism. As students became convinced of their “rightful” place in universities, the obligation to be engaged with society was no longer felt. Students were told to focus on their studies and not create a ruckus.

**MOVING FORWARD**

While there is often differentiation made between student activism and youth activism by key scholars such as Bayat and Weiss, it should be noted that there tends to be an overlap between the two within the Malaysian context. This is because looking into the history of the student movement in Malaysia, the struggles have always been beyond what is considered as issues experienced exclusively by students, such as tuition fees or university administration, and often

encompass society at large such as poverty as well as national policies. Additionally, it should be noted that the uniqueness of student activism in Malaysia comes from three factors, namely the noticeable social division among students; the availability of more tame channels for participation; and the relative lack of elitism attached to student status (Weiss 2005, p. 323).

Mandel said it best on how students are also proletariats, not because of their “unsatisfactory living conditions or that they are treated like nineteenth-century workers”, but because socially, the system embedded in higher learning institutions have created proletariats who have no right to participate in the determination of the curriculum, or at least co-determine their own life during the years spent at such institutions (Mandel, 1968). While students may be viewed as consumers (Woodall et al, 2012; Danvers and Gagnon, 2014) for pursuing a product, namely education out of their own interest for self-fulfilment and development, their role should not be constricted to merely being equipped with knowledge and skills to meet job market demands upon graduation. They are also active agents of society who can think and decide for themselves, and capable of making positive contributions beyond campus gates.

While there have been many instances where demands made by student activists were ignored by universities and the government, there were also cases where student groups have influenced positive social and political changes. Examples can be drawn from the resignation of Malaysia’s first Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman, following the ongoing student protests that resulted from the 13 May incident in 1969, and the first amendment of AUKU in 1975 after the Baling protest. Some interesting findings from the literature review include how students have played a key organisational-support role in recent national electoral campaigns, especially for opposition parties, which not only assist the parties they are involved in but also lead to a stream of potential future leaders (Weiss 2005, p. 318). It is, therefore, crucial to explore in this research on the role of student activism as a tool for nation-building and promoting good citizenship, which appears to be lacking in most studies on student activism within the Malaysian context, as they are mainly centred on the effects of AUKU and other relevant laws as well as the politicisation of student activism.

Another key finding to take note of from the literature review includes the dissonance in student activism in Malaysia due to the diversity of the student activist landscape in Malaysia, where student groups are often bound by their own social, political, religious, and racial ideologies. Interestingly, although it was mostly the Malay students who were heavily involved in activism since the pre-Merdeka period, there was also a significant involvement from the non-Malay students, particularly the Chinese in activism. Students were united on issues such as Malayan nationalism, jobs for graduates, educational policy, and to some extent the struggles of the Malay peasants (Weiss 2005, p. 294-296). However, student activism in Malaysia has been divided, especially along racial lines since the implementation of AUKU and repression of the non-communal campus left (*ibid*, p. 323). This leads to the next purpose of this research, which is to investigate the ways that the various student activist groups of diverse racial, cultural, religious, and political stances 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, which is prone to changes factored by trending national and international issues, technological development, as well as the existing and newly-introduced national legislations and by-laws can be fostered constructively amidst the balancing need for freedom of expression, national security, and the nation’s progress.



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**IMAGINED  
MALAYSIA**