

CIVIL SOCIETY AND SOCIAL MOVEMENTS IN AN ETHNICALLY DIVIDED SOCIETY:

THE CASE OF MALAYSIA, 1981–2001

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THESIS SUBMITTED TO THE UNIVERSITY OF
NOTTINGHAM FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF
PHILOSOPHY, OCTOBER 2004



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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the relationship between civil society, social movements and the state in ethnically-divided countries, using the case study of Malaysia. The argument begins with the observation that the respective literatures on civil society and social movements occupy a broadly congruent paradigm, but the relationship between the two is poorly theorised. Through a critical discussion of existing approaches, a synthesis of civil society and social movements theory is produced, which argues for a dualistic interpretation that emphasises both institutional linkages and cultural and discursive relationships. It is further argued that this latter aspect is of particular importance in ethnically-divided countries, as cultural differences between groups may hamper the effective mobilisation of movements. Thus may exist a form of 'slippage' between civil society and movement mobilisation, unidentified in much of the literature that tends to view the two as dynamically homogenous.

The empirical section of the thesis utilises this model to examine the trajectories of civil society and social movements in Malaysia, focussing on the two decades from 1981 to 2001. It is argued that the first half of the 1980s saw the expansion of a broadly middle class-led, multiethnic civil society but that successful movement mobilisation nonetheless remained rooted in ethnic concerns. Nonetheless, the decade saw an increasing challenge to the regime's hegemonic position. As internal relations within the government coalition fractured during the middle years of the decade, parties and factions within the regime lurched to more ethnicist positions, contributing to an increasing spiral of ethnic 'outbidding' and social mobilisation. In October 1987, this was brought to an end by a widespread crackdown that brought social mobilisation to an abrupt halt. Combined with the continuing elite

fracture, this effectively re-channelled the increased protest of the period into the political sphere, where a broad opposition coalition was formed to contest the 1990 elections. With the democratic system long since undermined, however, the government won and even maintained its two-third majority.

In the late 1990s, the dynamics of state, civil society and social movement were again clearly visible following the dismissal of Anwar Ibrahim as deputy prime minister and the mass protest *reformasi* movement it unleashed. The *reformasi* movement attempted to cultivate new modes of mobilisation, such as the Internet, appropriate to its multiethnic aspirations, but also relied heavily on the existing mobilisational networks of the Islamic movement. This mobilisational bias was reflected in the degree of electoral support for the movement's political manifestation in the 1999 general elections and contributed to the quick demise of the electoral coalition it provoked. The slippage between a multiethnic civil society and the ethnic bases of movement mobilisation in Malaysia has thus hampered the emergence of effective opposition to the regime.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My first and greatest intellectual debt is owed to all those involved in the supervision of this project: Prof Richard Aldrich, Dr Eva-Lotta Hedman and Dr Caroline Hughes. The differing intellectual tradition bestowed me by these various mentors was a challenging but ultimately enriching experience.

In the field, many of my most effusive thanks are due to those who cannot be named, but amongst those who can, it is a pleasure to acknowledge the assistance, advice and criticisms of Francis Loh, Johan Saravanamuttu, Khoo Boo Teik and Cheah Boon Kheng at Universiti Sains Malaysia. First in Nottingham, then in Sabah and Penang, the brothers Marshall have variously offered insight, contacts, discussion and friendship. Their unceasing dedication to one of Malaysia's national causes has finally induced me to admit, in print, that Manchester United might possibly be the best football team in the world.

The protracted writing up of this thesis benefited enormously from its overlap with my employment at the Centre for Research on Inequality, Human Security and Ethnicity (CRISE) at Queen Elizabeth House, University of Oxford, which provided me with new intellectual challenges to hone my ideas. Thanks are therefore due to the entire CRISE team, and especially to its Director, Prof. Frances Stewart, for her tolerance of the unexpectedly long time it took me to finish up.

This thesis is dedicated to my wife Regina, without whom none of this would have happened, and my son Nick, who, by arriving half way through, did his best to ensure it didn't.

ABBREVIATIONS

ABIM	<i>Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia</i> , or Islamic Youth Movement of Malaysia
ACA	Anti-Corruption Agency
ADIL	<i>Pergerakan Keadilan Sosial</i> , or Social Justice Movement
ALIRAN	<i>Aliran Kesedaran Negara</i> , or Movement for National Consciousness
APCET	Asia-Pacific Conference on East Timor
APU	<i>Angkatan Perpaduan Ummah</i> , or Islamic Unity Movement
BA	<i>Barisan Alternatif</i> , or Alternative Front
BERJASA	<i>Barisan Jamaah Islamiah seMalaysia</i> , or Pan-Malaysian Islamic Reform Movement
BERJAYA	<i>Bersatu Rakyat Jelkuta Sabah</i> , or Sabah People's Union
BN	<i>Barisan Nasional</i> , or National Front
CAP	Consumers' Association of Penang
CUEPACS	Congress of Unions of Employees in the Public and Civil Services
DAP	Democratic Action Party
DTC	Deposit-Taking Cooperative
EPSM	Environmental Protection Society of Malaysia
FELDA	Federal Land Development Agency
GAGASAN	<i>Gagasan Rakyat Malaysia</i> , or Malaysian People's Coalition
GAGASAN	<i>Gagasan Demokrasi Rakyat</i> , or People's Coalition for Democracy
GERAK	<i>Gerakan Keadilan Rakyat Malaysia</i> , or Malaysian People's Justice Movement
GERAKAN	<i>Gerakan Rakyat Malaysia</i> , or People's Movement Party of Malaysia
ILO	International Labour Organisation
ISA	Internal Security Act
JIM	<i>Jamaah Islah Malaysia</i> , or Malaysian Islamic Reform Society
JUST	International Movement for a Just World
KEADILAN	<i>Parti Keadilan Nasional</i> , or National Justice Party
MCA	Malaysian Chinese Association
MEF	Malaysian Employers' Federation
MIC	Malaysian Indian Congress
MKTR	<i>Majlis Kakitangan Rendah</i> , or Subordinate Staff Union Council
MLO	Malaysian Labour Organisation

MPHB	Multi-Purpose Holdings Bhd.
MSC	Multi-Media Super Corridor
MTUC	Malaysian Trades Union Congress
NASMA	<i>Parti Nasionalis Malaysia</i> , or Nationalist Party of Malaysia
NEAC	National Economic Action Council
NEP	New Economic Policy
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
NLAC	National Labour Advisory Council
NUBE	National Union of Bank Employees
NUJ	National Union of Journalists
NUPW	National Union of Plantation Workers
OSA	Official Secrets Act
PARC	Perak Anti-Radioactivity Committee
PAS	<i>Parti Islam se-Malaysia</i> , or Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party
PBB	<i>Parti Pesaka Bumiputera</i> , or United Bumiputera Party
PBDS	<i>Parti Bansa Dayak Sarawak</i> , or Sarawak Dayak Party
PBS	<i>Parti Bersatu Sabah</i> , or Sabah United Party
PKK	<i>Pergerakan untuk Kebebasan dan Keadilan</i> , or Movement for Freedom and Justice
PPP	People's Progressive Party
PRM	<i>Parti Rakyat Malaysia</i> , or Malaysian People's Party
PSRM	<i>Parti Sosial Rakyat Malaysia</i> , or Malaysian People's Socialist Party
SAM	<i>Sahabat Alam Malaysia</i> , or Friends of the Earth, Malaysia
SCS	Secretariat of the Conference of Societies
SDP	Social Democratic Party
SGS	Selangor Graduates' Society
SNAP	Sarawak National Party
SUARAM	<i>Suara Rakyat Malaysia</i> , or Malaysian People's Voice
SUHAKAM	<i>Suruhanjaya Hak Asasi Manusia Malaysia</i> , or Malaysian Human Rights Commission
SUQIU	Malaysian Chinese Associations' Elections Appeals
TWU	Transport Workers' Union
UCSCAM	United Chinese School Committees' Association of Malaysia
UCSTAM	United Chinese School Teachers' Association of Malaysia
UMNO	United Malays National Organisation

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

This thesis is premised on two puzzles – one theoretical, the other empirical. The first puzzle relates to the theoretical relationship between civil society and social movements. The respective bodies of scholarship associated with these concepts often talk about each other, but, it seems, rarely to each other. Thus, in the conceptual literature there exists something of an analytical void on the exact nature of the relationship between these two social phenomena. How can we begin to understand the relationship between these them? The second, empirical puzzle revolves around the trajectory of social and political contestation in Malaysia over the past few decades. At one level, both in terms of political discourse and academic historiography, the focus of attention in Malaysia is often ‘nation-building’ and the concomitant declining role of ethnicity in the country’s political processes.¹ Despite this, however, ethnicity and ethnic relations remain the dominant paradigm for political activity, both in electoral and – as we shall see herein – societal mobilisation. Is ethnic salience in the political process in Malaysia declining, persisting, or, in some way, both declining and persisting?

This dissertation thus addresses both theoretical and empirical questions but, with an opening gambit such as that above, it should come as no surprise to learn that the central assertion of this thesis is that the answers to these two puzzles are related. More specifically, it will be argued that the divergent

¹ For the most explicit recent formulation of this approach, see Cheah Boon Kheng, *Malaysia: The making of a nation*, Singapore, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2002; see also Hari Singh, ‘Ethnic conflict in Malaysia revisited’, *Commonwealth and Comparative Studies*, 39:1 (2001), pp. 42-65.

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trajectory between ethnicised social and electoral mobilisation and the increasingly multiethnic or nonethnic political discourse of both civil society and the state in Malaysia is symptomatic of a broader theoretical space for 'slippage' between civil society and social movements. Whilst civil society can and does play an important role in organising and channelling social movements, movements are also shaped by the existing processes of mobilisation – both in terms of protest infrastructures and framing – which may be associated with political discourses and ideologies that differ radically from those advanced in civil society. This theoretical slippage, it is further suggested, may have particular importance in ethnically-divided countries, such as Malaysia, where differing cultural 'tool kits' affect the mobilisational potential of civil society. In the Malaysian context, it is argued that the emergence of a broadly multiethnic civil society over the past two decades has not yet overcome the existing, ethnically-delimited processes of mobilisation in the country. At times of regime crisis and heightened protest, such as occurred in 1987 and 1998, social mobilisation is thus drawn in contradictory directions, which ultimately hampers its efficacy in making claims on and against the state.

This thesis thus offers a theoretical critique of existing literature on civil society and social movement and a subsequent re-synthesis of the two frameworks to incorporate this realm of societal slippage. Empirically, it is a national-level study of the politics of opposition in Malaysia over the two decades from 1981 to 2001. In as much, it seeks to fill something of a void in studies of contemporary Malaysia, which have tended to focus either on the regime and its associated elites, or else on micro-level studies of resistance and opposition. The following chapter makes the theoretical argument which will underpin the

thesis. The remainder of this chapter briefly introduces the Malaysian case study and the format of the thesis.

THE MALAYSIAN CASE

Since gaining Independence from the British in 1957, Malaysia has been ruled continually by a coalition of a fluctuating number of ethnically based political parties, the *Barisan Nasional* (BN, or National Front). Initially called the Alliance, it comprised three parties representing the main ethnic communities – the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) and the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC). Parliament was suspended for almost two years after ethnic rioting following the 1969 general election, in which the Alliance performed relatively badly. Upon the restoration of Parliament, the coalition was expanded through the cooptation of a number of smaller parties and, for a while, the main Malay opposition party, *Parti Islam seMalaysia* (PAS – Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party). In the following years, the coalition became increasingly dominated by UMNO, and pursued a more stridently pro-Malay programme, epitomised by the 1971 promulgated New Economic Policy (NEP), which focussed on redistributing economic power towards the Malay community.

Figure 1.1: Alliance/BN share of vote and share of seats won in federal elections, 1959–1999

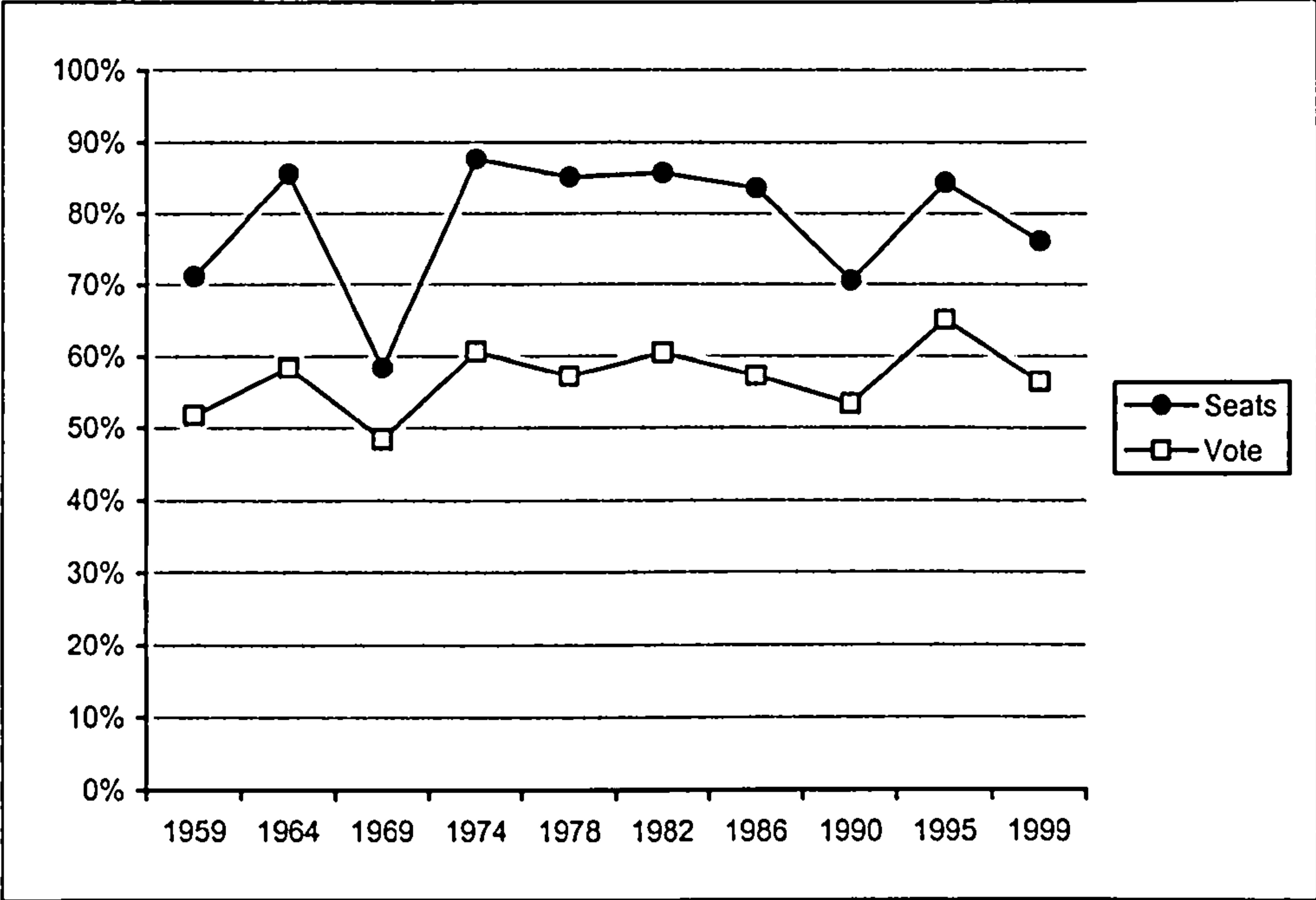


Table 1.1: Parliamentary election results, 1982 – 1999

	1982		1986		1990		1995		1999	
	Seats	%Vote	Seats	%Vote	Seats	%Vote	Seats	%Vote	Seats	%Vote
GOVERNMENT:										
BN	132	60.5	148	57.3	127	53.4	162	65.1	148	56.5
OPPOSITION:										
PAS	5	14.5	1	15.5	7	6.7	7	7.3	27	15.0
DAP	9	19.6	24	21.1	20	17.6	9	12.1	10	12.7
PBS	-	-	-	-	14	2.3	8	5.3	3	3.2
SEMANGAT '46	-	-	-	-	8	15.1	6	10.2	-	-
KEADILAN	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	5	11.5
OTHER OPPOSITION	8	5.4	4	6.1	4	4.9	0	2.0	3	1.8
TOTAL	154		177		180		192		193	

The period under examination in this thesis began with what was then the most ordered political transition in Malaysia’s history. In February 1981, Tun Hussein Onn, Malaysia’s third prime minister, announced that he would be stepping aside for his deputy, Dr Mahathir Mohamad, who formally took office in July the same year. Against virtually all expectations, Mahathir remained in power for over two decades, despite major heart surgery and advancing age, finally stepping down in October 2003 at the age of 76. Yet this apparent

continuity masks the wholesale transformation of Malaysian society during these years. As Mahathir neared the end of his term in office, the regime faced unprecedented levels of social opposition.

As Malaysian society has been transformed over the past two decades, so it is undeniable that the politics of opposition has likewise been transformed. This thesis seeks to explain that transformation, within the theoretical context of civil society and social movements. In as much, it employs a broad definition of opposition, including not only the 'formal' politics of elections and parties, but also socially-based opposition movements.² The focus of the thesis will be a comparative examination of two critical challenges to the *Barisan Nasional* regime: The UMNO split and the *Semangat '46*-led opposition in the years 1987-1990, and the *reformasi* movement, from 1998 until 2001. As we are not merely concerned with the state itself, but also society more broadly conceived, the thesis also examines social transformation during the preceding and intervening years.

The past two decades have seen two major economic recessions in Malaysia and, in their wake, two distinct episodes of political turmoil. A deep economic recession in 1985, caused mainly by a collapse in the price of Malaysia's major commodity exports, notably rubber and tin, preceded a schism in UMNO. This eventually resulted in the formation of a loose opposition coalition around the UMNO splinter group, *Semangat '46* (The Spirit of '46 – a reference to the year UMNO was founded). More recently, the sudden and dramatic expulsion in

² It should be noted that many of the principle actors in such opposition movements would strongly deny that they are in 'opposition' to the government at all. Interview: S.M. Mohamed Idris, President of CAP and SAM, George Town, June 2001.

September 1998 of the deputy prime minister Anwar Ibrahim from the government and from UMNO set into motion a series of tumultuous events which resulted in the formation of another new opposition party, *Parti Keadilan Nasional* (KEADILAN, or National Justice Party) and an even tighter opposition alliance.

In June 1987, Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad and his deputy, Ghafar Baba, were challenged for the leadership of UMNO. The challengers were Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah, the Trade and Industry Secretary, and Musa Hitam, the previous deputy prime minister, who had resigned abruptly in 1986 over 'irreconcilable differences' with Mahathir, to be replaced by Ghafar. At the time, Mahathir's leadership looked extremely vulnerable, after a series of financial scandals in which were implicated high profile businessmen and politicians close to Mahathir, and a deep recession which was largely blamed on economic mismanagement by Mahathir and his Finance Minister, Daim Zainuddin. Nonetheless, a credible challenge to an incumbent leader was unprecedented in a party that prides itself on a culture of loyalty and deference to leadership.³

Mahathir survived the challenge, but by the narrowest of margins, and Ghafar's winning margin over Musa Hitam was less than the number of spoilt ballots. In the aftermath of the UMNO election, a series of political and legal skirmishes between the winning camp and the losers led to the formation of a breakaway

³ A previous challenge had been mounted to Hussein Onn's leadership in 1978, but the candidate was weak and Hussein won easily. On the 'invention' of UMNO's traditions, see Hari Singh, 'Tradition, UMNO and political succession in Malaysia', *Third World Quarterly*, 19:2 (1998), pp. 241-54.

party, *Semangat '46*, led by Razaleigh. With a general election approaching, *Semangat '46* managed to secure a coalition with the other two main opposition parties, PAS and the Democratic Action Party (DAP), a secular, predominantly Chinese party with leftwing tendencies. The coalition was in the form of two bilateral agreements, as major differences between PAS and DAP made a multilateral pact untenable at the time.

In 1990, when the general election was eventually held, the *Barisan Nasional* thus faced, for the first time, a comparatively united opposition front. Its position was weakened even further when one of its smaller, locally-based components, the *Parti Bersatu Sabah* (PBS – Sabah United Party), pulled out of the coalition after nomination day, leaving the government unable to field new candidates. The government survived the renewed opposition challenge, albeit with a considerably reduced majority, although still retaining its habitual two-thirds majority. It also lost control of two state assemblies – Kelantan fell to the PAS-*Semangat* alliance, and Sabah to the PBS.⁴ Despite this relative success, however, the opposition alliances soon started showing signs of strain, and dissolved as members of *Semangat* slowly returned to UMNO and the DAP increasingly felt hampered by its connection to PAS. At the subsequent election in 1995, the BN was returned to power again, with its greatest ever majority.

More recently, there has been a similar heightening of opposition to the regime, centred on the expulsion from UMNO of its erstwhile Deputy President, and

⁴ Elections for the state assemblies are held concurrently with the general election in all states except the East Malaysian states of Sabah and Sarawak. The BN thus lost control of the Sabah state assembly when the PBS withdrew from the coalition and formed an administration on its own, rather than at the election itself.

Introduction

Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim. In the late 1960s and 1970s, Anwar had been at the forefront of an Islamic resurgence in Malaysia. He was the founding president of the influential *Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia* (ABIM – Islamic Youth Movement of Malaysia), and led several large student demonstrations, which ultimately ended in him being detained without trial under Malaysia's notorious Internal Security Act (ISA). In 1982, however, he confounded his supporters and opponent alike by joining UMNO, quickly rising through the ranks under Mahathir's own patronage, eventually becoming Deputy Prime Minister in 1994.

Anwar's fall, when it came, was even more meteoric than his rise. On 2 September 1998, Mahathir unceremoniously sacked Anwar from his government positions, and he was expelled from UMNO the next day. Amid allegations of sodomy and corruption – widely believed to be trumped up – he was arrested and eventually sentenced to fifteen years imprisonment in a series of dubiously judged trials. His downfall, however, immediately set off a series of street demonstrations, some of which Anwar fronted until his arrest, including a demonstration on 20 September of around fifty thousand people in front of the world's press, at the opening of the 1998 Commonwealth Games. The protests, which continued sporadically into 2001, gave birth to a *reformasi* (reform) movement, symbolically led by Anwar's wife, Wan Azizah, as the leader of the newly formed *Parti Keadilan Nasional*.

These two regime crises have been the focus of much academic attention.⁵ As yet, however, little work has been done to situate them comparatively, within

⁵ Major works discussing these events are discussed in chapter three.

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the broader perspective of social transformation in Malaysia; such a comparison provides the empirical crux of this thesis. The thesis is arranged in a broadly chronological manner. Chapters two and three provides the theoretical framework through, respectively, a critical discussion of theories of civil society and social movements and a review of the existing literature on Malaysian politics and society. Chapter four sets the empirical context through a survey of thematic concerns prior to the period under specific examination. Chapters five to eight examine the development of civil society and social movements during the 1980s and 1990s, falling relatively neatly into four time period: 1981-1987, 1987-1991, 1991-1997 and 1997-2001. Chapter nine offers the concluding remarks.

CHAPTER TWO

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK:

TOWARDS A SYNTHESIS OF CIVIL SOCIETY AND SOCIAL MOVEMENTS IN ETHNICALLY DIVIDED SOCIETIES

This chapter sets the theoretical framework for the thesis, drawing on an analytical discussion of the literature on civil society and social movements. Although these two bodies of theory operate within the same broad paradigm and concern themselves with similar sets of institutions and processes, there is little theoretical interaction between the two concepts. Scholars of one concept tend to draw uncritically upon the other, without explicitly theorising the relationship between the two. As we shall later see, this assumption of dynamic homogeneity is particularly problematic in the Malaysian case, where the mobilisation of popular protest under the aegis of social movements has diverged substantially from the strategies and objectives of civil society organisations.

This chapter thus formulates a synthetic model of state, civil society and social movements which anticipates the empirical difficulties of cases such as Malaysia. It argues for a dualistic interpretation of state and civil society, each with a discursive and an institutional element, in which the cultural mediation of discursive practices – in part mediated by social movement organisation and popular mobilisation – is critical to the form and outcome of contentious politics.

CIVIL SOCIETY

Civil society is perhaps one of the most pedigreed concepts in modern political theory, with antecedents stretching back as far as Plato and, in the modern

period, Thomas Hobbes, although its use and meaning have undergone many revisions during that period.¹ Plato's conceptualisation of civil society as 'a politically organized commonwealth', which guarded against the 'dangers of private interest' and state power finds many echoes in modern writings on the subject.² His emphasis on the power of 'reason' in the realm of civil society to arrive at a unitary 'Good', however, would strike many modern theorists, particularly those of a Gramscian bent, as in itself overly oppressive and of as much danger as the state itself.

Contemporary conceptualisations of civil society find their common roots in Alex de Tocqueville's work on democracy. Tocqueville's main concern was to explain why democracy in America appeared so much more successful than in his native France. He concluded that in the United States, a 'weak' state complemented by robust civic associations was far more conducive to democracy than the 'strong' state and weak social groupings in France.³ Civil society – the intermediary level of association between the state and the individual – was the key to resisting state oppression. Tocqueville's formulation of civil society was thus almost diametrically opposed to that of the

¹ This chapter does not attempt to provide a detailed historical analysis of the development of the concept. A number of existing works provide such analyses. See, for instance Jean L. Cohen and Andrew Arato, *Civil Society and Political Theory*, London, MIT Press, 1994; John Ehrenberg, *Civil Society: The critical history of an idea*, New York, New York University Press, 1999; and, for a more critical perspective, Krishnan Kumar, 'Civil society: An inquiry into the usefulness of an historical term', *British Journal of Sociology*, 44:3 (1993), pp. 375-95. Another useful source on the historical usage of civil society, as well as non-Western perspectives, is offered by the essays collected in Sudipta Kaviraj and Sunil Khilnani (eds.), *Civil Society: History and possibilities*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2001.

² Ehrenberg, *Civil Society*, pp. 3-4.

³ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, vol. 1, New York, Vintage, 1954 and *The Old Regime and the French Revolution*, New York, Doubleday Anchor, 1955.

first modern theorist of civil society, Thomas Hobbes. For Hobbes, an all-powerful 'leviathan' state was necessary to regulate civil society, which would otherwise descend into his famous war of all against all.⁴

If Tocqueville remains the anchor for modern conceptualisations of civil society, Foley and Edwards have noted that the term now encompasses 'a complex set of arguments, not all of which are congruent'.⁵ Broadly speaking, however, two distinct approaches to civil society can be identified in the contemporary period. The first, and probably dominant, approach is the liberal perspective, which is primarily concerned with civil society as a constituent of democratisation and the democratic process. Is democracy viable without a robust civil society? Does such a mature civil society engender democratisation? These are the types of question that concern liberal theorists. On the other hand, the Marxist approach is more concerned with civil society as the legitimising extension of a hegemonic state.⁶ Clearly, a full picture of civil society would address both these concerns. Chandhoke neatly sums up the shortcomings of exclusive focus on one or other approach thus:

⁴ Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. Richard Tuck, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996.

⁵ Michael W. Foley and Bob Edwards, 'The paradox of civil society', *Journal of Democracy*, 7:6 (1996), pp. 37.

⁶ Joseph Femia, 'Civil society and the Marxist tradition', in Kaviraj and Khilnani, *Civil Society*, pp. 131-46.

Liberals concentrate on the oppressions of the state, but they do not inquire into the oppressions of civil society. And the Marxist concentration upon the oppressions of this sphere has led them to neglect any analysis of the institutions and values of civil society.⁷

Liberal Perspectives

In the liberal tradition, civil society is employed in a Tocquevillean sense to signify

an intermediate associational realm between state and family populated by organisations which are separate from the state, enjoy autonomy in relation to the state and are formed voluntarily by members of society to protect or extend their interests or values.⁸

The liberal interpretation of civil society ascribes it a strongly democratic dimension, in some cases viewing it almost functionally as part of a 'transition' process that leads from authoritarianism to democracy. Socially, this process is linked to the emergence and growth of a strong middle class, itself predicated upon strong economic growth. In a widely cited essay, Larry Diamond thus identifies ten 'democratic functions' of civil society, ranging from its limiting

⁷ Neera Chandhoke, *State and Civil Society: Explorations in political theory*, New Delhi, Sage, 1995, p. 162.

⁸ Gordon White, 'Civil Society, Democratization and Development: Clearing the analytical ground', *Democratization*, 1 (1994), pp. 375-90.

effect on state power to its role in the selection and training of future political leaders.⁹

Enthusiastic studies of post-Communist Eastern Europe and redemocratisation in Latin America and Asia have emphasised the role of civil society in such democratic transitions.¹⁰ In Africa also, 'nascent civil societies' have been considered as the 'forefront' of democratic transitions.¹¹ After the waning of this initial euphoria of this 'third wave' of democratisation, however, the same scholars are now arguing that it is the poor quality of civil society in some of these new democracies that has hampered the 'consolidation' of democratic practices. Thus, for instance, forty years after he proposed civil society as one of 'the conditions that favour democracy', Seymour Martin Lipset noted that the newly democratised Eastern Bloc countries 'are faced with the consequences of the absence of modern civil society, a lack that makes it difficult to institutionalize democratic politics'.¹² Other liberal scholars, however, maintain the view that civil society is only 'crucial primarily in the moments leading to, and perhaps immediately following' democratic transition; in democratic

⁹ Larry Diamond, 'Towards democratic consolidation', in Larry Diamond and Marc F. Plattner (eds.) *The Global Resurgence of Democracy* [Second edition], Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996, pp. 111-23.

¹⁰ One of the earliest, and in many ways paradigmatic, exposition of the 'democratic transition' thesis is Guillermo O'Donnell and Philippe C. Schmitter's *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule: Tentative conclusions about uncertain democracies*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986. Other important works in this genre include Ernest Gellner, *Conditions of Liberty: Civil society and its rivals*, London, Allen Lane, 1994; Samuel P. Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the late twentieth century*, Norman, University of Oklahoma Press, 1991(a).

¹¹ E. Gyimah-Boadi, 'Civil society in Africa', *Journal of Democracy*, 7:2 (1996).

¹² Seymour Martin Lipset, 'The social requisites of democracy revisited: 1993 presidential address', *American Sociological Review*, 59:1 (1994), pp. 12 and 13. For the original thesis, see his *Political Man: The social bases of politics*, Garden City NY, Doubleday, 1960, ch. 2.

consolidation, civil society plays only a 'supporting role'.¹³ Moreover, statistical analyses of economic time series and subjective measures of democracy such as those provided by Freedom House have suggested that the correlation between economic growth and democratisation is not as strong as was previously thought.¹⁴

The confusion over the exact role of civil society in this paradigm is mirrored by a proliferation of democratic typographies; one review has identified more than five hundred 'subtypes' of democracy described in the literature – more than two for every country in the world.¹⁵ This terminological confusion is more than just irascible social scientists failing to agree on terms of reference but is, as Thomas Carothers points out, symptomatic of the failure of the transitions paradigm to account for the wide range of regime trajectories in the 'third wave'

¹³ M. Steven Fish, 'Russia's fourth transition', in Diamond and Plattner, *The Global Resurgence of Democracy*, p. 267.

¹⁴ See, for instance, Robert J. Barro, 'Determinants of democracy', *The Journal of Political Economy*, 107:6 (1999), pp. S158-S183 and Adam Przeworski, Michael Alvarez, José Antonio Cheibub and Fernando Limongi, 'What makes democracies endure?', *Journal of Democracy*, 7:1 (1996), pp. 39-55.

¹⁵ David Collier and Steven Levitsky, 'Democracy with adjectives: Conceptual innovation in comparative research', *World Politics*, 49 (1997), pp. 430-51. In this vein, the Malaysian regime has variously been characterised as 'quasi-democratic', 'semi-democratic' and 'competitive authoritarian', to give but a few examples. The last of these terms is the most misleading. Given that Malaysia has maintained democratic institutions for more than four decades (with the exception of the 1969-71 Emergency) and that what is lacking from these institutions is meaningful competition, 'competitive authoritarian' seems a remarkably inapt description with, if anything, 'uncompetitive democracy' more appropriate. For the various terms listed here see, respectively, Zakaria Haji Ahmad, 'Malaysia: Quasi-democracy in a divided society', in Larry Diamond, Juan Linz and Seymour Lipset (eds.), *Democracy in Developing Countries Vol. 3: Asia*, Boulder, Lynne Rienner, 1989, pp. 347-81; William Case, 'Semi-democracy in Malaysia: Withstanding the pressure for regime change', *Pacific Affairs*, 6:2 (1993), pp. 183-205; and Larry Diamond, 'Elections without democracy: Thinking about hybrid regimes', *Journal of Democracy*, 13:2 (2002), pp. 21-35.

countries.¹⁶ Moreover, the desire to classify and characterise regime types and their democratising trajectories in 'large-N' style comparative studies has arguably resulted in analyses and analysts which are so thin on empirical detail that they have virtually no correspondence to reality. To give one circumstantial example, in an article on the relationship between culture and civil society in Asia, Francis Fukuyama consistently misspells former Singaporean prime minister Lee Kuan Yew's name and erroneously uses Malaysian prime minister Mahathir's honorific 'Datuk Seri' as his first name.¹⁷ Such gross basic mistakes reinforce the perception that some of these scholars are less concerned with the actual experience of individual countries, and more concerned with fitting data to their grand theories.

An alternative liberal account of civil society, which is necessarily more grounded in empirical detail, is offered by the concept of social capital. Often couched in economistic terms as a public good, social capital accounts for the less tangible qualities of civil society. In the words of Robert Putnam, one of the foremost proponents of the theory, social capital 'refers to features of social organization such as networks, norms, and social trust that facilitate

¹⁶ Thomas Carothers, 'The end of the transition paradigm', *Journal of Democracy*, 13:1 (2002), pp. 5-21.

¹⁷ Francis Fukuyama, 'The primacy of culture', in Diamond and Plattner, *The Global Resurgence of Democracy*, pp. 320-7. Fukuyama's misspelling is 'Lee Kwan Yew' and he refers to Mahathir as Datuk Seri Mahathir, which is correct for subsequent references (though hardly necessary in academic writing) but insufficient for a first reference, akin to making a first reference to a knighted person as, for instance, Sir Colin. The suspicion that he has mistaken 'Datuk Seri' as some form of 'first name' is confirmed by the book's index, which lists him as 'Mahathir, Datuk Seri', with no reference to his actual 'full' name of Mahathir Mohamad.

coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit'.¹⁸ The general thesis put forward by proponents of social capital is that democratic civil society functions best – or only – where social capital is strong. In his acclaimed empirical study of local government in Italy, Putnam thus argued that local government was far more successful in the north of the country because of dense networks of civil engagement, which were lacking in the south.¹⁹ By contrast, however, he saw a steady erosion of social capital in the United States, epitomised by his now famous phrase that America goes 'bowling alone'.

Putnam's formulation of social capital is persuasive, not least because it provides an at least partial solution to the nagging problem of collective action, which lurks at the edges of much writing on civil society. Social capital provides the glue that binds people together in what political economists like Mancur Olson viewed as fundamentally 'irrational' behaviour. In addition, it has the added advantage of some degree of measurability. Although, as has already been noted, social capital represents the intangible qualities of civil society, it is relative easy to measure its epiphenomena – Putnam employs associated empirical data ranging from political participation to Parent-Teacher Association membership. Thus, one is able to produce a chronologically or geographically comparative analysis.²⁰ Indeed, the concept of social capital has

¹⁸ Robert D. Putnam, 'Bowling alone: America's declining social capital', *Journal of Democracy*, 6:1 (1995), p. 67.

¹⁹ Robert D. Putnam, *Making Democracy Work: Civic traditions in modern Italy*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993.

²⁰ Although he does not explicitly use the terminology of social capital, Ashutosh Varshney's examination of the link between levels of 'associational engagement' and ethnic violence in major Indian cities is a superb exposition of such a geographic comparison. See his *Ethnic*

proved especially attractive to those social scientists that employ mathematical and statistical techniques to model political behaviour, precisely because of its measurability.²¹ This facet of social capital has also been the source of a criticism that it represents a theoretical ‘Trojan horse’ through which the overly abstracted and fundamentally asocial theories of economics may come to ‘colonize’ more of the social sciences.²²

Where Putnam’s conceptualisation of social capital has also been criticised is in his assumption that social capital is, in all its forms and at all times, of net social benefit.²³ Critics have pointed to the ‘negative externalities’ of social capital, noting that ‘group solidarity... is often purchased at the price of hostility towards out-group members’.²⁴ This problematic dimension of social capital is reflected in wider concerns in liberal conceptualisations of civil society. Alexander, for instance, has noted a ‘bifurcating discourse’ in civil society, in

Conflict and Civic Life: Hindus and Muslims in India, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2002.

²¹ See, for instance, Pippa Norris, *Democratic Phoenix: Reinventing political activism*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2002, esp. ch. 8 and, for a more critical use of the concept, John A. Booth and Patricia Bayer Richard, ‘Civil society, political capital and democratization in Central America’, *The Journal of Politics*, 60:3 (1998), pp. 780-800.

²² Ben Fine and Francis Green, ‘Economics, social capital and the colonization of the social sciences’, in Stephen Baron, John Field and Tom Schuller (eds.), *Social Capital: Critical perspectives*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2000, pp. 78-93. Ironically, however, in their introduction to the same volume (‘Social capital: A review and critique’, pp. 1-38), Schuller, Baron and Field note that two Nobel Laureates in economics – Kenneth Arrow and Robert Solow – have rejected the concept of social capital as imprecise and lacking the key features of ‘capital’.

²³ In fact, Putnam’s later writings accept this darker side to social capital. See his *Bowling Alone: The collapse and revival of American community*, New York, Simon and Schuster, 2000.

²⁴ Francis Fukuyama, ‘Social capital, civil society and development’, *Third World Quarterly*, 22:1 (2001), p. 8.

which the 'citizen' is postulated against the 'enemy'.²⁵ Civil society, for Alexander, is both liberal and repressive: liberal towards its citizens, but repressive towards its enemies. Alexander's primary concern is in international relations; others, such as Whitehead, have identified a similar contradiction on a national level. All conceptualisations of civil society, Whitehead argues, 'admit a third category of "uncivil citizens", or persons enjoying political rights, but not submitting themselves to the constraints imposed by "civil society"'.²⁶ As Whitehead notes, this leaves an arena of 'uncivil interstices', into which he puts such groups as religious fundamentalists and mafia organisations – generators, one might suggest, of 'antisocial capital'.

In another similarity with the democratic transitions paradigm, Putnam's critics have also questioned the direction of causality in his argument. Just as Huntington, Diamond and their colleagues are finding it hard to explain whether civil society is a prerequisite of democracy or dependent thereupon for its vitality, so other theorists have questioned whether high levels of social capital are, in fact, a consequence of good governance rather than its cause.²⁷ Thus, in

²⁵ Jeffrey C. Alexander, 'Citizen and enemy as symbolic classification: On the polarizing discourse of civil society', in Jeffrey C. Alexander (ed.), *Real Civil Societies: Dilemmas of institutionalization*, London, Sage, 1998, pp. 96-114.

²⁶ Laurence Whitehead, 'Bowling in the Bronx: The Uncivil Interstices between Civil and Political Society', in Robert Fine and Shirin Rai (eds.), *Civil Society: Democratic perspectives*, London: Frank Cass, 1997, p. 95.

²⁷ See, for instance, Bo Rothstein, 'Social capital, economic growth and quality of government: The causal mechanism', *New Political Economy*, 8:1 (2003), pp. 49-71.

the words of one critic, social capital 'is both cause and effect... It leads to positive outcomes... and its existence is inferred from the same outcomes'.²⁸

Liberal theories of civil society, then, face two major challenges in their accounts of democracy and democratisation. Firstly, their broad failure to consider 'uncivil' tendencies in voluntary spheres of social activity (the realm of 'civil' society) has resulted in often over-optimistic evaluations of civil society's democratising 'function'. Secondly, they have been unable to counter convincingly charges that the direction of causality in their argument is the wrong way round. Implicit in both these problems is an unresolved 'End of History' teleology.²⁹ Whilst few analysts would still openly support Fukuyama's thesis that liberal democracy has 'won' the future, liberal accounts nonetheless continue to assume that it has an at least privileged relationship with civil society.

For liberal theorists, then, civil society and its infrastructural constituent social capital enjoy a privileged and mutually reinforcing relationship with democracy. Civil society is seen as a rein on the excesses of state power; a vibrant civil society leads to an accountable state. For many Marxist analysts, particularly those influenced by Gramsci, almost the direct opposite is true. In this paradigm, civil society is understood as the arena in which the state perpetuates its power through hegemonic rather than coercive means.

²⁸ A. Portes, 'Social capital: Its origins and applications in modern sociology', *Annual Review of Sociology*, 24 (1998), pp. 1-24.

²⁹ Francis Fukuyama, 'The end of history?' *The National Interest*, 16 (1989), pp. 3-18.

Marxist and Gramscian Perspectives

Modern Marxist theorisations of civil society have been dominated by the legacies of Antonio Gramsci. Within Gramsci's own writings, however, there is some confusion as to the exact role of civil society. In one note, Gramsci writes 'State = political society + civil society, in other words hegemony protected by the armour of coercion'.³⁰ Elsewhere, in a formulation more akin to those of liberal theorists, he suggests that civil society stands 'between the economic structure and the State'.³¹ Inconsistencies aside, however, it is clear that Gramsci viewed civil society as the primary vehicle for the state's hegemonic project. Civil society fulfils this role for Gramsci in two ways. Firstly, it is the arena of the 'intellectuals', who themselves have a vital role in giving a sense of consensual legitimacy to the state. Secondly, civil society exerts the state's hegemonic influence through 'so-called private organisations, like the Church, the trade unions, the schools'.³²

It is this second, institutional aspect of civil society that Althusser later developed into the concept of Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs), which reproduce the State's hegemony in the greater public and which hold back the tide of (proletarian) revolution with almost as great a degree of inevitability as that with which the revolution would presumably otherwise happen:

³⁰ Antonio Gramsci, *Selections From The Prison Notebooks*, London, Lawrence and Wishart, 1971, p. 263.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 208.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 56.

The ideology that a class in power makes the ruling ideology is indeed ‘realized’ in those ISAs, but it goes beyond them, for it comes from elsewhere... the ISAs represent the form in which the ideology of the ruling class must *necessarily* be realized.³³

Althusser undoubtedly takes the structural elements of Gramsci’s writings to a functional and deterministic extreme, whereby civil society – as manifested by his ISAs – acts solely as a legitimising medium for the state.³⁴ But his reminder of the relationships between institutions and ideology is an important one.

If Althusser represents his deterministic extreme, Gramsci himself was also reticent on the counterhegemonic potential of civil society. Broadly speaking, he identified two potential counterhegemonic approaches: the ‘war of position’, in which class alliances are forged and broken, and the revolutionary ‘war of movement’. He further suggested that the relative strength of civil society in the West compared to the East made the war of position the most appropriate socialist strategy in the European context.³⁵ Like Marx, however, Gramsci’s work focused overwhelming on an analysis and critique of the existing structures of power, with the process of counterhegemonic manoeuvre given scant attention.

³³ Louis Althusser, ‘Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses: Notes towards an investigation’, in Slavoj Žižek (ed.), *Mapping Ideology*, London: Verso, 1994, p. 138; emphasis original.

³⁴ For a clear critique of Althusser and other Gramscian theorists, see Neil Abercrombie, S. Hill and B.S. Turner, *The Dominant Ideology Thesis*, London, Verso, 1980.

³⁵ Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*, pp. 229-38.

An important critique of Gramscian civil society is provided by Laclau and Mouffe.³⁶ They reject the essentialist ‘confluence of struggles into a unified political space’, and argue instead for civil society as a site of considerably more contention than it is for Althusser and even Gramsci himself.³⁷ Indeed, such is their refusal to tie certain roles uniquely to either state or civil society, that they concede that the state may at times be more progressive than civil society, as, for instance, when states have passed anti-sexism legislation to which civil society was broadly opposed. Civil society, for Laclau and Mouffe, is not just an intermediary between the state and the individual, but is itself a site of contestation and oppression unto itself. Thus, civil society is not only the domain of hegemony, but also of counterhegemony. This sentiment was reflected by Stuart Hall in his celebrated Gramscian critique of Thatcherism, when he noted that Thatcherism ‘must “win” in civil society as well as in the state’.³⁸

Gramscian readings of civil society, then, accept that civil society has at least the potential to provide opposition to the state – a role which the liberal tradition conversely privileges. In one Gramscian formulation, for instance, Chandhoke identifies a process of:

³⁶ Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, London, Verso, 1985.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 112.

³⁸ Stuart Hall, 'Authoritarian populism: A reply', *New Left Review*, 151 (1985), p. 119.

the neutralization of the emancipatory potential of civil society
and of its appropriation by the dominant classes and the state...

The appropriation of this space by dominant practices does not,
however, invalidate it.³⁹

For Chandhoke, as for Laclau and Mouffe, civil society is primarily an arena of discursive contestation. In particular, Chandhoke identifies the concept of rights as historically critical to the civil society discourse. States, she argues, have legitimised themselves through civil society by the extension of (discursive) rights to their citizens. Civil society, in turn, has grasped these rights and 'progressively widened' them. Thus, Chandhoke accepts that civil society may engender democracy, but argues that the often non-inclusive nature of civil society – an objection mirroring those of Alexander and Whitehead – gives rise to a 'crippled form of democracy'.

Whilst Gramscian analysis provides a Marxist perspective on the relationship between the state and civil society, it has been criticised for its virtual silence on the relationship between civil society and the market – a relationship that is central to the liberal account of civil society through its focus on economic growth and the middle classes. In seeking to overcome this lacuna, Michael Burawoy has recently attempted to provide a synthesis of the works of Gramsci and Karl Polanyi, producing what he calls a 'sociological Marxism'.⁴⁰ Burawoy argues that both Gramsci and Polanyi, through a rejection of the deterministic, classical Marxism of the early twentieth century, converge on the centrality of

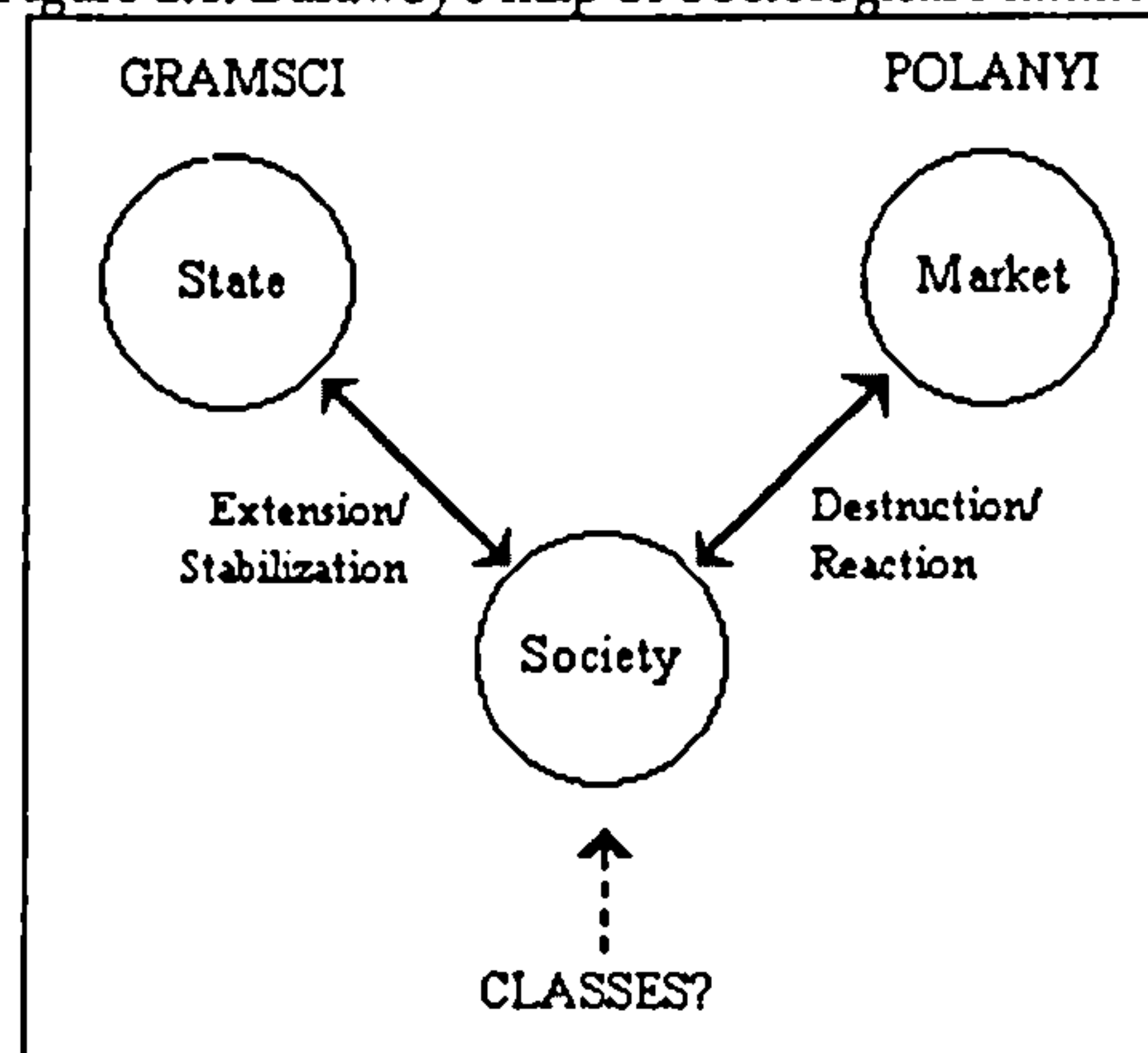
³⁹ Chandhoke, *State and Civil Society*, p. 203.

⁴⁰ Michael Burawoy, 'For a sociological Marxism: The complementary convergence of Antonio Gramsci and Karl Polanyi', *Politics and Society*, 31:2 (2003), pp. 193-261.

society – ‘civil society’ in Gramsci, ‘active society’ in Polanyi – as both the source of the durability of capitalism, and the arena in which it may be overcome. Polanyi, Burawoy argues, provides the link between (civil) society and the market that is missing in Gramsci.

In addition, Burawoy argues that the voluntarism of Polanyi’s work counteracts the ‘thin’ exposition of counterhegemony in Gramsci. Polanyi argues that society is the product of the markets but the source of their potential decline through the commodification of land, labour and money, which, he argues, threatens the stability of capitalism. ‘Active society’ is thus a contested sphere in which the state attempts to resist the commodification of these factors and in which classes are ‘impelled to organise... against their degradation’.⁴¹ This contestation of active society is, according to Burawoy convergent with the Gramscian civil society as an arena of hegemonic contestation, as illustrated in Figure 2.1.

Figure 2.1: Burawoy’s map of Sociological Marxism⁴²



⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 212.

⁴² Reproduced from *Ibid.*, p. 221.

Thus far, then, two broad strands of civil society theory have been identified and discussed – the liberal and the Gramscian. An informative example of the differences between these traditions, and perhaps the respective political agenda underlying their perspectives, is in their treatment of Israel. In the democratic transitions paradigm, Israel is a ‘consolidated and liberal democracy’, one of only twenty-four such countries in the world, and along with Japan, one of only two outside the Western bloc of Europe, North America and Australia/New Zealand.⁴³ In as much, it attracts little attention. In a broader liberal approach, discussions of Israel have focussed on its conceptualisation of citizenship and the effectiveness of its constitutional arrangements – ‘extreme’ proportional representation with a directly elected prime minister. Such studies have argued that Israel has witnessed a ‘gradual transformation, since 1967, into a civil society in the liberal sense of the term’.⁴⁴ In contrast, Gramscian readings of civil society in Israel draw a picture of ingrained hegemony and an almost unrivalled system of domination, which ‘repels all social change’.⁴⁵

The example of Israel demonstrates the extent to which differing perspective on civil society can produce widely differing conclusions. In fact, at their deterministic extremes, the liberal and Gramscian traditions of civil society are almost diametrically opposed, the former viewing it as an emancipatory process, the latter viewing it as a hegemonic tool. As we have seen, however, both schools are increasingly addressing their own shortcomings, with the liberal

⁴³ Larry Diamond, ‘Is Pakistan the (reverse) wave of the future’, *Journal of Democracy*, 11:3 (2000), p. 95.

⁴⁴ Gershon Shafir and Yoav Peled, *Being Israel: The dynamics of multiple citizenship*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2002, p. 336.

⁴⁵ Uri Ben-Eliezer, ‘State versus civil society? A non-binary model of domination through the example of Israel’, *Journal of Historical Sociology*, 11:3 (1998), pp. 370-96.

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school introducing concepts of ‘uncivility’ and the Gramscians attempting to expand the counterhegemonic potentialities of civil society. From the perspective of this thesis, however, the Gramscian perspective provides a number of advantages over the liberal. Firstly and most importantly, the Gramscian account of civil society as an arena of contestation is simply more sophisticated and convincing than the liberal account. Secondly, the Gramscian perspective on civil society tends to be more historically grounded and less concerned with classification and typologies than the liberal account. Deriving from these two points, the Gramscian reading of civil society is in many ways *less* teleological than the liberal account. Moreover, the Gramscian reading of civil society, as we shall see presently, provides the most appropriate avenue for the synthesis of civil society and social movements theory. Before moving on to consider social movements theories, however, we must briefly examine some more region-specific treatments of civil society. As we shall see throughout this thesis, normative notions of what civil society *should* be or, at least, how it should behave, have formed an increasingly important part of the state’s discursive output in Malaysia, and Southeast Asia more generally.

Regional Perspectives

Over the past decade, two issues have dominated popular and academic debate about civil society in Southeast Asia: ‘Asian Values’ and Islam. The concept of ‘Asian Values’ was propagated during the late 1980s and 1990s by a number of Asian political leaders – notably Mahathir and Singapore’s Lee Kuan Yew – who sought to explain and justify the phenomenal economic growth but limited democratic practices of their respective countries. Like most popular political discourse, the precise nature of these Asian Values was never clear, and this

fuzziness was reflected in the academic debate on the issue. A good summary of the core of these values is provided by Khoo Boo Teik:

A supposedly and distinctively ‘Asian’

- predisposition towards strong and stable leadership rather than political pluralism;
- respect for social harmony and an inclination towards consensus as opposed to a tendency towards dissent or confrontation;
- acceptance of broad and penetrating state and bureaucratic intervention in social and economic affairs;
- concern with socio-economic well-being instead of civil liberties and human rights; and
- preference for the welfare and collective good of the community over individual rights.⁴⁶

Clive Kessler has criticised the academic community for not taking the ‘Great Asian Values Debate’ seriously enough.⁴⁷ Yet the issue surrounding the debate – the applicability of culturally relativistic definitions of democracy and civil society – is, in fact, an old problem. Indeed, the implications of culturally presumed social characteristics (i.e. Asian Values) have long since been a subject of academic debate: compare Max Weber’s famous characterisation of

⁴⁶ Khoo Boo Teik, ‘Nationalism, capitalism and “Asian Values”’, in Francis Loh Kok Wah and Khoo Boo Teik (eds.), *Democracy in Malaysia: Discourses and practices*, Richmond, Curzon, 2002, pp. 52.

⁴⁷ Clive Kessler, ‘The Abdication of the intellectuals: Sociology, anthropology and the Asian Values debate - or, what everybody needed to know about “Asian Values” that social scientists failed to point out’, *Sojourn*, 14:2 (1999), pp. 289-312.

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Chinese Confucianism as an impediment to capitalism with Lucien Pye's argument that precisely these Confucian traditions were central to the economic success of the Chinese diaspora.⁴⁸ Such culturally essentialist arguments have lost much credibility in recent years, however, which may have contributed towards the reluctance to confront Asian Values that Kessler perceives.

From the perspective of this thesis, the importance of the Asian Values debate lies not so much in the content of the debate itself, which was never more than political rhetoric to justify authoritarian policies and controls; as Anthony Langlois points out, when 'culture' is invoked by the state, it becomes a 'means of exerting power'.⁴⁹ For our purposes here, the Asian Values debate points to the important distinction that must be made between civil society as a heuristic tool of scholarly analysis and civil society as a political discourse; as Thompson remarks, Asian Values may be 'thoroughly discredited internationally... [but they] face a more complex fate at the domestic level'.⁵⁰ Put another way, we must differentiate between a positive idea of civil society and a normative idea of how groups and individuals should behave in civil society. The Asian Values argument was clearly the latter, and echoes of it can be found in much of the *Barisan Nasional* discourse, particularly in the writings of Mahathir himself.⁵¹

⁴⁸ Max Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*, Berkeley CA, University of California Press, 1978; Lucien W. Pye, *Asian Power and Politics: The cultural dimensions of authority*, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1985.

⁴⁹ Anthony J. Langlois, *The Politics of Justice and Human Rights: Southeast Asia and universalist theory*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2001, p. 26.

⁵⁰ Mark R. Thompson, 'Whatever happened to "Asian Values"?', *Journal of Democracy*, 12:4 (October 2001), p. 155.

⁵¹ See for instance, Mahathir Mohamad and Shintara Ishihara, *The Voice of Asia: Two leaders discuss the coming century*, Tokyo, Kodansha International, 1995. Mahathir's cultural

Yet, as James Scott would remind us, the public prevalence of such as discourse is no proof that it has been privately accepted or ‘internalised’ by the wider population.⁵² In as much, it is worth noting that in a survey of political attitudes in Malaysia, Bridget Welsh found that attitudes towards leadership are at best mixed, with less than one in twenty of her respondents favouring a strongly authoritarian leadership.⁵³ Nonetheless, as a political discourse that sought both to defend its propagators’ practices and to condemn Western excesses – what Inoue Tatsuo refers to as ‘Asian Orientalism’ – the concept of Asian Values remains important.⁵⁴

Similar concerns are raised in attempting to reconcile Islamic traditions with civil society. The compatibility of Islam with civil society, and democracy in particular, was a question of increasing importance in the eyes of many Western scholars, even before the 11 September 2001 attacks in the United States. The debate is most closely associated with Samuel Huntington. As one of the foremost proponents of the Third Wave of democratisation, Huntington had once claimed that it was ‘unclear’ whether Islamic democracy was a ‘contradiction in terms’ or not.⁵⁵ Barely a few years later, with the publication

essentialism dates back to his earliest works, including the controversial *Malay Dilemma* (Petaling Jaya, Federal Publications, 1981).

⁵² James C. Scott, *Dominance and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden transcripts*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1990.

⁵³ Bridget Welsh, 'Attitudes towards democracy in Malaysia: Challenges to the regime?', *Asian Survey*, 36:9 (1996), pp. 882-903.

⁵⁴ Inoue Tatsuo, 'Liberal democracy and Asian Orientalism', in Joanne R. Bauer and Daniel A. Bell (eds.) *The East Asian Challenge for Human Rights*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1999, pp. 27-59.

⁵⁵ Huntington, *The Third Wave*, p. 27.

of his clash of civilisations thesis, however, Huntington had clearly made his mind up:

Western ideas of individualism, liberalism, constitutionalism, human rights, equality, liberty, the rule of law, democracy, free markets, the separation of church and state, often have little resonance in Islam, Confucian, Hindu, Buddhist or Orthodox culture.⁵⁶

Huntington's views here sound remarkably similar to the kind of Orientalist generalisations famously castigated by Edward Said. Compare, for instance, the above quote from Huntington with Said's sarcastic paraphrasing of Orientalist discourse two decades previously:

On the one hand there are Westerners, and on the other there are the Arab-Orientals; the former are (in no particular order) rational, peaceful, liberal, logical, capable of holding real values, without natural suspicion; the latter are none of these things.⁵⁷

Perhaps unsurprisingly, given their closer interaction with the societies involved, scholars of Southeast Asia tend to take a more moderated view of Islam's civil potential. Thus, for instance, Clive Kessler argues that it is not modern, but classical Islamic political discourse which allows 'no notion of a

⁵⁶ Samuel P. Huntington, 'The clash of civilizations?', *Foreign Affairs*, 72:3 (1993), p. 40.

⁵⁷ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism: Western conceptions of the Orient*, London, Penguin, 1978, p. 49.

public domain... of civil society itself'.⁵⁸ He argues that the fundamental relationship in classical Islam was between the individual and the *umma* (the community of the faithful), governed by a didactic and exclusive state – as epitomised by *shari'a* law and the rule of *ulama'*. Şerif Mardin broadly concurs with this analysis, arguing that Islamic societies have historically had a different 'dream' from the Western one, often looking back to a past 'Golden Age' of Islam, and which often had little room for concepts of civil society.⁵⁹ This historically nuanced reading of Islam is more moderated than that of Huntington, in that Kessler and Mardin accept that whilst this classical discourse continues to resonate today, it is by no means the only political interpretation of Islam available. Moreover, even in the classical context, Kessler concedes that Islamic *waqf* (charitable trusts and public welfare groups) 'provided scope and space for independent initiative' and were 'the NGOs of classical Islamic society'.

Empirical studies of modern Muslim politics have concluded that Islam is not only compatible with democracy, but can provide a vital force in fostering civil society. Mastura, for instance, concurs with Kessler that *waqf* institutions have played an important role in fostering civil society, in this case in the Southern Philippines.⁶⁰ More broadly, Robert Hefner argues that the social base and tolerant traditions of Indonesian 'civil Islam' made it a vital force in the

⁵⁸ Clive Kessler, 'State and civil society: Global context, Southeast Asian prospect', *Sojourn*, 13:1 (1998), pp. 38-61.

⁵⁹ Şerif Mardin, 'Civil society and Islam', in John A. Hall (ed.), *Civil Society: Theory, history, comparison*, Cambridge, Polity, 1995, pp. 278-300.

⁶⁰ Michael O. Mastura, 'The making of a civil society through waqf institution in Mindanao', in Omar Farouk Bajunid, Nakamura Mitsuo and Sharon Siddique (eds.), *Islam and Civil Society in Southeast Asia*, Singapore, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2001, pp. 117-34.

democratic movement to topple Suharto's New Order regime.⁶¹ Much of the Islamic mobilisation in the early years of the Iranian revolution was likewise democratically inclined, although the ultimate victory of the Khomeini faction clearly warns of equally undemocratic potentialities within Islam.⁶² In the Malaysian context, it has been suggested that Islamic organisations, especially PAS and ABIM, were central to the enlargement of civil society in the 1980s.⁶³

The events of 11 September 2001 in the United States notwithstanding, a broad consensus thus exists among Islamic intellectuals and activists that Islam and democracy are indeed compatible, and that Islam can contribute to, or even provide the foundations of, a mature civil society.⁶⁴ Increasingly, mainstream Islamic political discourse has become dominated by the Qu'ranic concept of *ijtihad* (reasoned understanding) instead of *taqlid* (unquestioning acceptance). Indeed, many of those perceived in the West as fundamentalists have also espoused the virtues of democracy. The founder of Pakistan's *Jamaat-e-Islami*, Sayyid Adul Al'a Maududi, for instance, claimed at the height of the Cold War

⁶¹ Robert W. Hefner, *Civil Islam: Muslims and democratization in Indonesia*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2000. See also Robin Madrid, 'Islamic students in the Indonesian student movement, 1998–1999: Forces for moderation', *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars*, 31:3 (1999), pp. 17-32.

⁶² Misagh Parsa, *States, Ideologies and Revolutions: A comparative analysis of Iran, Nicaragua and the Philippines*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2000.

⁶³ Mohamad Abu Bakar, 'Islam, civil society and ethnic relations in Malaysia', in Nakamura, Siddique and Banujid, *Islam and Civil Society in Southeast Asia*, pp. 57-75. For an interesting early appraisal of Islamic revivalism in Malaysia, see also his 'Kebangkitan Islam dan proses politik di Malaysia' [Islamic resurgence and the political process in Malaysia], *Malaysia dari Segi Sejarah*, 9, pp. 10-25.

⁶⁴ Syed Ahmad Hussein, 'Muslim politics and the discourse on democracy', in Loh and Khoo, *Democracy in Malaysia*, pp. 75-107.

that Islam forms the basis of a 'superlative' democracy, which avoids the excesses of both Communism and Western democracy.⁶⁵

One of the foremost regional proponents of an Islamic civil society in the 1990s was Anwar Ibrahim, then Malaysia's Deputy Prime Minister, along with the prominent social activist and intellectual, Chandra Muzaffar.⁶⁶ Anwar proposed a normative concept of Islamic civil society, *al-mutjama' al-madani* or, in Malay, *masyarakat madani*, with, as its 'basic proposition', the 'idea of the dignity of man'. Yet, whilst Anwar's vision of civil society was remarkably Western in many respects – calling for 'the spirit of liberty, individualism, humanism and tolerance', he nonetheless demands a relativistic view, in which Islamic civil society must be allowed to differ from Western perceptions. In particular, he notes that the 'inalienable rights' of Western democratic society are complemented, in his picture of *masyarakat madani*, with 'unshirkable responsibilities', especially to God.⁶⁷

In many respects, these modern formulations of Islamic civil society are similar to the 'Asian values' discourse discussed previously, and this is hardly surprising. Both seek to invoke a fundamentally Western model of civil society – both Anwar and Chandra make direct references to Tocqueville – but with culturally justified limitations. They should be understood in discursive terms as an attempt to define the normative content of civil society, rather than a

⁶⁵ Sayyid Adul 'Ala Maududi, *Political Theory of Islam*, Lahore, Islamic Publications, 1960, p. 42.

⁶⁶ Anwar Ibrahim, *The Asian Renaissance*, Singapore, Times Books International, 1996; Chandra Muzaffar, 'The emergence of civil society in Malaysia: Role of the state and society', *MSRC Current Affairs Forum*, Series 5 (1997), pp. 31-40.

⁶⁷ Anwar, *The Asian Renaissance*, pp. 49-51.

positivistic model of its operations. This is not to suggest that debates over Islam and Asian Values are unimportant – as we shall see in later chapters, both discourses have had significant repercussions on the state-civil society dynamic in Malaysia.

We have seen, then, that the concept of civil society provides a good structural account of the relationship between state and society. Where it has proved inadequate is in explaining social and political transformations, particularly where conflicting trajectories are evident, as we shall find in the Malaysian case. Social movement theory provides the promise of addressing these dynamics.

SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

If civil society is one of the oldest concepts of political theory, social movements theory is a relative infant. Recent interest in collective action and social movements was largely sparked by the protest movements of the 1960s across Europe and the United States. Since then, a substantial and sophisticated body of literature has built up concerned with social movements and collective action. Yet, as with the concept of civil society, a straightforward definition of social movements has proved elusive. According to Tarrow, sustained and coordinated ‘contentious politics’ is the defining feature of social movements.⁶⁸ For Touraine, however, they are ‘not exceptional and dramatic events’, they are ‘the expression of the collective will’.⁶⁹ In many respects, this definitional problematic is exacerbated by the vast empirical subject area it covers. The terminology and theoretical innovations of social movements have been

⁶⁸ Sidney Tarrow, *Power in Movement: Social Movements and Contentious Politics*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1998, p. 2.

⁶⁹ Alain Touraine, *The Voice and the Eye: An analysis of social movements*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1981, p. 29.

employed in settings as diverse as national revolutions in Iran and Nicaragua to micro-level studies of Alcoholics Anonymous in New York.⁷⁰

In seeking to provide an integrated understanding of social movements, della Porta and Diani identify four 'characteristic aspects' of social movements, which are accepted by most scholars:

1. Informal interaction networks
2. Shared beliefs and solidarity
3. Collective action focusing on conflicts
4. Use of protest.⁷¹

This useful schema draws attentions to the multi-faceted nature of social movements. As with civil society, social movements are understood to have both institutional and discursive dimensions. They operate both on the organisational and structural level, and on the more intangible plane of culture, ideology and beliefs.

Historical Specificity or Teleology?: 'New' social movements

For many years, one of the most hotly contested topics in social movements literature was the distinctiveness – or lack thereof – of the 'new' social movements. Originally a product of the response by predominantly European scholars to the failure of Marxist interpretations of social conflict to explain

⁷⁰ Parsa, *States, Ideologies and Revolutions*; Leonard Blumberg, 'The ideology of a therapeutic social movement: Alcoholics Anonymous', in Russell L. Curtis and Benigno E. Aguirre (eds.), *Collective Behavior and Social Movements*, Boston, Allyn and Bacon, 1993, pp. 282-91.

⁷¹ Donatella della Porta and Mario Diani, *Social Movements: An Introduction*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1999, pp. 14-15.

such phenomena as the women's movement, the ecological movement and the peace movement, they sought to postulate 'new' social movements against the 'old' economically determined class conflicts of industrial society.⁷² The emergence of the 'new' movements is thus seen as coinciding with the rise of post-industrial society, and the realignment of new classes and states.⁷³ Concomitant with this is the emergence of 'new' ideologies and *forms* of protest, as well as a declining relevance of the 'old' industrial and class conflicts. In a recent formulation, for instance, Rucht and Neidhardt, argue that current 'macro-structural' alignments in Western societies predispose towards the emergence of non-class movements.⁷⁴ The concept of new social movements has also been applied in post-colonial settings, where new movements are contrasted against the 'old' liberation and independence movements of the colonial period.⁷⁵

The new social movements school has been roundly criticised for its claim of novelty, when much of what they analyse empirically has been apparent in 'old' movements, and for amalgamating together a series of diverse and different

⁷² Claus Offe, 'New social movements: Challenging the boundaries of institutional politics', *Social Research*, 52 (1985), pp. 817-68.

⁷³ Touraine, *The Voice and the Eye*.

⁷⁴ Dieter Rucht and Friedhelm Neidhardt, 'Towards a "Movement Society"? On the possibilities of institutionalizing social movements', *Social Movement Studies*, 1:1 (2002), pp. 7-30.

⁷⁵ See, for instance: Samir Amin, 'Social movements at the periphery', in Ponna Wignaraja (ed.), *New Social Movements in the South*, London, Zed Books, 1993, pp. 76-100; Harsh Sethi, 'Survival and democracy: Ecological struggles in India', in Wignaraja, *New Social Movements in the South*, pp. 122-48. Compare, with respect to civil society, Partha Chatterjee, 'On civil and political society in post-colonial democracies', in Kaviraj and Khilnani, *Civil Society*, pp. 165-78.

movements.⁷⁶ More epistemologically, they have been criticised for a teleological perspective which privileges the modern transition from 'old' to 'new' against other transformations in society. Yet, as one of the foremost proponents of new social movements, Albert Melucci, has pointed out, this critique is itself based on an 'ingenuous historicism that assumes the substantial continuity of the historical flow'.⁷⁷ Since the 1990s, however, the debate has more-or-less evaporated. Whilst most analysts add a qualifying caveat to their use of the term, 'new social movements' have widely become accepted as an empirically discernable group of movements that can be uniquely identified with the modern period. Within this thesis, the concept and terminology of new social movements will be utilised to understand a historically specific transformation in social mobilisation from ethnic- and labour-based discourses to environmentalist-, gender- and human rights-based discourses.

Political Opportunity Structure and Resource Mobilisation

As we have seen, theories of civil society are unable to account for dynamic change in a political system. In addition, the concept of new social movements, whilst defining an empirically identifiable set of social transformations, is by itself unable to account for the dynamics of these changes. One of the most influential concepts in modern social movements theory that has sought to overcome these limitations is the 'political opportunity structure' thesis. Tarrow provides the most succinct summation of this view thus:

⁷⁶ Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*.

⁷⁷ Alberto Melucci, 'Getting involved: Identity and mobilization in social movements', in Bert Klandermans, Hanspeter Kriesi and Sidney Tarrow (eds.), *From Structure to Action: Comparing social movement research across cultures*, Greenwich, CT: JAI Press, 1988, p. 336.

People engage in contentious politics when patterns of political opportunities and constraints change and then, by strategically employing a repertoire of collective action, create new opportunities.⁷⁸

In Soviet Russia, for instance, theorists suggest that the political openings created by Mikhael Gorbachev's policies of *perestroika* and *glasnost* was seized upon as an opportunity by a democratic movement which eventually brought about the downfall of the regime.⁷⁹ Similarly, in the United States, it has been argued that the broadening of political space for social movements after the 1960s was, in itself, a result of the movements of the 1960s.⁸⁰

The political opportunity structure thesis provides a persuasive account of when social movements arise, as well as the relative susceptibility of the regime to their demands. Its appeal lies in its ability to offer a dynamic understanding of the relationship between state and social movements (rather than privileging one or the other), and a strong comparative framework. As Gamson and Meyer note, it also 'balances elements of structure and agency'.⁸¹ Perhaps the greatest drawback of the concept, however, is its lack of specificity. Different commentators have identified a bewildering number of dimensions to the opportunity structure, running the risk of it becoming a "dustbin" for any and

⁷⁸ Tarrow, *Power in Movement*, p. 19.

⁷⁹ Elena Zdravomyslova, 'Opportunities and framing in the transition to democracy: The case of Russia', in Doug McAdam, John D. McCarthy and Mayer N. Zald (eds.), *Comparative Perspectives on Social Movements: Political opportunities, mobilizing structures and cultural framings*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996, pp. 122-40.

⁸⁰ Tarrow, *Power in Movement*.

⁸¹ William A. Gamson and David S. Meyer, 'Framing political opportunity', in McAdam, McCarthy and Zald, *Comparative Perspectives on Social Movements*, p. 276.

every variable relevant to the development of social movements'.⁸² Recent works have sought to rationalise the concept, and Doug McAdam has produced what he claims is a 'highly consensual' list of four principle dimensions:

1. The relative openness or closure of the institutionalized political system;
2. The stability or instability of that broad set of elite alignments that typically undergird a polity;
3. The presence or absence of elite allies; and
4. The state's capacity and propensity for repression.⁸³

Of these four factors, the first three are relatively straightforward and self-explanatory. It is important to bear in mind, however, that it is *changes* in these dimensions that primarily interest political opportunity structure theorists. The question of state repression is somewhat more problematic, as there is considerable disagreement between scholars as to whether the exercise of repression acts as a halter on social movements or whether, through a process of radicalisation, it actually encourages the movement. Empirical studies have concluded that both effects are possible, but that radicalisation is more likely in movements with closely integrated networks.⁸⁴ An alternative argument is provided by McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly, who suggest that:

⁸² della Porta and Diani, *Social Movements*, p. 27.

⁸³ Doug McAdam, 'Conceptual origins, current problems, future directions', in McAdam, McCarthy and Zald, *Comparative Perspectives on Social Movements*, p. 26.

⁸⁴ Karl-Dieter Opp and Wolfgang Roehl, 'Repression, micromobilization and political protest', in Doug McAdam and David A. Snow (eds.), *Social Movements: Readings on their emergence, mobilization and dynamics*, Los Angeles, Roxbury, 1997, pp. 190-206.

Repression may be selective, in which case it isolates more militant groups and closes off to them prescribed or tolerated means of contention. Or it can be generalized, in which case it throws moderates into the arms of the extremists.⁸⁵

If the political opportunity structure approach provides a useful framework for understanding *when* social movements arise, it is virtually silent on the question of *why* they do so. Indeed, one of its most problematic assumptions is that social movements will arise almost automatically when the opportunity structure allows them to do so. Some critics have in fact seen this as tantamount to the 'normalization' of political protest.⁸⁶ Increasingly, therefore, social movements theorists have been returning to the question of why social movements arise, and why people take part.

Culture and Framing

In the mid-1990s, Johnston and Klandermans identified an emerging paradigm of social movements theorisation that focussed more attention on the concept of culture.⁸⁷ The cultural analysis of social movements provides an important way to overcome the shortcomings of structural explanations of social movements. Theorists of social movements have realised that not only are culture and cultural practices key to understanding the emergence and trajectory of social

⁸⁵ Doug McAdam, Sidney Tarrow and Charles Tilly, *Dynamics of Contention*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2001, p. 69.

⁸⁶ Richard A. Cloward and Frances Fox Piven, 'Collective Protest: A critique of resource mobilization theory', in Stanford M. Lyman (ed.), *Social Movements: Critiques, concepts, case-studies*, London, MacMillan, 1995, pp. 137-67.

⁸⁷ Hank Johnston and Bert Klandermans, 'The cultural analysis of social movements', in Hank Johnston and Bert Klandermans (eds.), *Social Movements and Culture*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1995, pp. 3-24.

movements, but that these social movements are, in turn, a central force in the dynamics of culture, in the creation of new identities and ideologies.⁸⁸

One of the key concepts that have been developed to apply the study of culture to the study of social movements is the idea of cultural 'frames'. Frames have been defined as 'schemata of interpretation' – a generalised and standardised cognitive view of the world.⁸⁹ The degree to which social movements activists are able to frame their protests in a way that resonates broadly thus affects the extent to which the movement is able to attract participation and influence. It has further been argued that, within a given context (e.g. national, regional, etc.), a small number of 'master' or 'dominant' frames may emerge, which most social movements will attempt to employ.⁹⁰ In the United States, for instance, groups as diverse as gay activists and gun lobbyists have invoked the master frame of 'civil rights'.⁹¹

As with the concept of the political opportunity structure, the idea of 'framing' is clearly somewhat loose. Its analytical appeal lies rather in its ability to bring together a number of diverse concepts, all of which have been identified as important to social movements. The concept of framing thus incorporates

⁸⁸ Ann Swidler, 'Cultural power and social movements', in Johnston and Klandermans, *Social Movements and Culture*, pp. 25-40.

⁸⁹ David A. Snow, Louis A. Zurcher and Sheldon Ekland-Olson, 'Frame alignment processes, micromobilization, and movement participation', *American Sociological Review*, 51 (1986), p. 464.

⁹⁰ David A. Snow and Robert D. Benford, 'Ideology, frame resonance and participant mobilization', in Klandermans, Kriesi and Tarrow, *From Structure to Action*, pp. 197-219; David A. Snow and Robert D. Benford, 'Master frames and cycles of protest', in A. Morris and Carol Mueller (eds.), *Frontiers in Social Movements Theory*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1992, pp. 133-55.

⁹¹ Tarrow, *Power in Movement*.

aspects of collective identity, political discourse and ideology, as well as cultural practices, myths and beliefs. It provides a route for understanding the role of symbols and symbolic figures – the Liberty Bell in the US civil rights movement, or Nelson Mandela in anti-apartheid and anti-racism movements worldwide – which structural explanations miss.

The concept of framing also provides an important avenue for analysing not only why people participate in social movement, but also why movement activists behave the way they do. Inasmuch, it draws attention to the performative aspects of social movements, and collective action in particular. Thus, for instance, Esherick and Wasserstrom have re-interpreted the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests as political ‘theatre’, illustrating the ways in which the students made use of potent symbols of China’s imperial past, as well as other symbols that would resonate in the West, such as the Statue of Liberty. This serves as an important reminder that an understanding of collective action as performance must also include an appreciation of its ‘audience’. The use of English language banners in Tiananmen Square, for example, demonstrated clearly that the protestors were ‘acting out democracy’ for the international audience, as well as the domestic.⁹² In a similar vein, Laurence Whitehead has claimed more broadly that ‘every [democratic] transition obeys the logic of a public dramatic performance’.⁹³

⁹² Joseph W. Esherick and Jeffrey N. Wasserstrom, ‘Acting out democracy’, *Journal of Asian Studies*, 49 (1990), pp. 835-65.

⁹³ Laurence Whitehead, ‘The drama of democratization’, *The Journal of Democracy*, 10:4 (1999).

CIVIL SOCIETY AND SOCIAL MOVEMENTS: TOWARDS A SYNTHESIS

It was claimed earlier that theories of civil society and social movements rarely interact with each other, despite occupying a broadly compatible or even complementary paradigm. To give a concrete example, a recent empirically and theoretically rich book by three leading American scholars of social movements – Doug McAdam, Sidney Tarrow and Charles Tilly – contains only one reference to civil society, which is worth quoting in full:

Voting and civil rights [in Mexico] expanded as groups outside of the government's corporatist family produced a vital and remarkably contentious civil society – symbolized on the one hand by the *Asambleas de barrio* formed after the Mexico earthquake and, on the other by protracted semi-insurgency in the Chiapas in the 1990s.⁹⁴

The assumptions here about civil society and its positive correlation with social movements are clear. Implied is a dialectic relationship between civil society and social movements: a vibrant civil society, itself the product of social movements, provides the launch pad for further social movements. Nowhere, however, is such a relationship explicitly stated or theorised. Interestingly, Mabel Berezin makes a similar observation about civil society and political culture, which, as we have seen, is increasingly being placed at the centre of

⁹⁴ McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly, *Dynamics of Contention*, p. 295.

social movements analysis: 'Civil society and democratization discussions assume a political culture but do not explicitly theorize it'.⁹⁵

One of the few works which directly addresses this relationship is Cohen and Arato's *Civil Society and Political Theory*. Employing a revision of Habermas' system/lifeworld theory of the public sphere (*Öffentlichkeit*), they argue that social movements constitute the 'dynamic element' in the formation and realisation of civil society.⁹⁶ Social movements, they argue, provide the opportunity for new groups to gain power and influence, but are unlikely to succeed without a parallel strategy aimed at both civil society ('a politics of identity') and at political society ('a politics of influence').⁹⁷ In doing so, they reject the 'stage' theory of social movements, which posits a linear trajectory from collective action expressing non-negotiable demands to institutionalisation and compromise.⁹⁸ Instead, they argue that social movements are dualistic, confronting both civil society and the state.⁹⁹

Cohen and Arato's account is persuasive in that its dualistic interpretation of social movements allows the integration of the cultural and the structural explanations of social movements and incorporates the trend towards a discursive understanding of civil society identified above. For instance, if a

⁹⁵ Mabel Berezin, 'Politics and culture: A less fissured terrain', *Annual Review of Sociology*, 23 (1997), p. 368.

⁹⁶ Cohen and Arato, *Civil Society and Political Theory*, p. 498.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 552-3.

⁹⁸ For the classic exposition of this theory, see Robert Michel, *Political Parties: A sociological study of the oligarchical tendencies of modern democracy*, New York, The Free Press, 1962.

⁹⁹ This 'movement career' model is also rejected by McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly on essentially empirical grounds that the predicted deradicalisation of movements has not been universally experienced. See McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly, *Dynamics of Contention*, p. 65.

social movement achieves the institutionalisation of certain rights in the political sphere, it also creates new collective identities founded on these rights that reorient and strengthen civil society. For our purposes here, however, it has two shortcomings. Firstly, by employing Habermas' theory of the public sphere as the foundation of their analysis, they also appropriate the limitations thereof. As Nancy Fraser reminds us, Habermas' inquiry was concerned with 'the rise and decline of a historically specific and limited form of the public sphere', which, she argues, is no longer an applicable framework in late-capitalist democracies.¹⁰⁰ Whether or not Habermas' Eurocentric theory is applicable in postcolonial, non-European settings is thus surely questionable.

The second area where Cohen and Arato's formulation falls short of the requirements here is in their normative content. With their emphasis on democratising civil society, they appear more concerned to describe how social movements should behave than to explain how they do behave. Thus, for instance, their contention that 'the traceless transformation of movements into bureaucratic political parties or lobbies remains both a negative and an avoidable model' seems overstated at least; one can point to many social movements, such as the environmentalist movement in Germany, that have arguably achieved more through institutionalisation than through perpetuated social protest.¹⁰¹ Building on this normative approach, however, Cohen and Arato reject precisely such evaluations of the success of social movements,

¹⁰⁰ Nancy Fraser, 'Rethinking the public sphere: A contribution to the critique of actually existing democracy', in Craig Calhoun (ed.), *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, Cambridge, MIT Press, 1992, p. 111.

¹⁰¹ Cohen and Arato, *Civil Society and Political Theory*, p. 561.

suggesting that success should not be reckoned in terms of ‘substantive goals’, but in the ‘democratization of values, norms, and institutions’.¹⁰²

From the perspective of this thesis, then, their Eurocentric, normative approach renders Cohen and Arato’s theorisation less useful. Firstly, the underlying assumption that all social movements are democratising would, in any sense of the word, prove highly problematic in the Malaysian context. Secondly, such a theorisation thus overlooks any ‘slippage’ or mismatch between the goals, beliefs and identities of a social movement and those dominant in civil society. As we shall see later, this was precisely the problem faced by civil society activists in Malaysia in attempting to harness, direct and ultimately democratise the popular force of the *reformasi* movement.

How, then, can we understand this divergence? It will be argued here that, judiciously redeployed, the conceptual tools of the existing literature allow us a means of understanding this social ‘slippage’. In particular, it will be argued that the concept of culture is key to reconciling these traditions.

As was noted earlier, the cultural analysis of social movements is a relatively new development, but one that has important implications for the problem at hand. Johnston and Klandermans make a convincing case for the systematic cultural analysis of social movements, noting that culture ‘functions as the broadest and most fundamental context for social action’ although, as we shall see, their view of (each) society as having a ‘stable’ dominant culture is problematic.¹⁰³ Culture, in this context, is understood as a broad set of semiotic

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, p. 562.

¹⁰³ Johnston and Klandermans, ‘The cultural analysis of social movements’, p. 4.

ideas (a 'tool kit', in Anne Swidler's oft-quoted formulation), such as metaphors and historical examples, through which people understand and interpret the world.¹⁰⁴ The problems inherent to this approach are obvious, and scholars who employ it are often careful to make as few assumptions as possible about the extent to which culture is uniformly interpreted as a homogenous, organised body of ideas,¹⁰⁵ although it has also been argued that even when cultural practices are not widely internalised (i.e. they are 'disbelieved'), they still have behavioural repercussions on society at large.¹⁰⁶ Despite its problems, however, it is argued here that the cultural analysis of social movements provides the necessary bridge between theories of social movements and civil society. Indeed, in the Malaysian case at least, it is precisely these cultural ambiguities which can help explain the divergent trajectories.

The essential problem with culture analysis is ascertaining who 'subscribes' to a given set of cultural values, how far they are internalised, and how far they genuinely affect (collective) behaviour. The cultural essentialism of the Weberian 'Protestant Ethic' and other such formulations – which social movements scholars stand accused of employing in the place of newer, more interpretative systems of analysis such as those developed by Clifford Geertz

¹⁰⁴ Ann Swidler, 'Culture in action: Symbols and strategies', *American Sociological Review*, 51(2) (1986), pp. 273-86.

¹⁰⁵ See, for example, William A. Gamson, 'Political discourse and collective action', in Klandermans, Kriesi and Tarrow, *From Structure to Action*, pp. 219-44, especially p. 220.

¹⁰⁶ Swidler, 'Cultural power and social movements'. Swidler cites an examination of Christmas gift-giving behaviour in the United States which found that the majority of respondents did not 'believe' in giving presents and rejected the commercialisation of Christmas, but none the less indulged in the practice and, moreover, attached great importance to the value of presents given and received.

and Michelle Foucault – are particularly susceptible to such problems.¹⁰⁷ The ubiquity of ‘subcultures’ and ‘countercultures’ is a further complication for those who would invoke culture to explain the trajectory of social forces.¹⁰⁸

For cultural analysts of social movements, the key role of culture in determining the success or failure of popular mobilisation is in the framing of protest. Social movements that are successful in framing their protest in such a way that has broad cultural resonance will, it is argued, generally be able to mobilise more support. The process is, however, dialectical – movements which are successful in mobilising support are able to influence cultural attitudes through the creation of new frames of action. In some cases, this can even be the result of deliberate manipulation by the organisations involved. In the 1970s and 80s, for instance, the head of Greenpeace International David McTaggart consciously promoted the ‘Save the Whale’ campaign as a means of inducing a ‘green’ frame of protest, despite his personal belief that it was a ‘soft’ issue. Said McTaggart:

[Greenpeace] must have at least one soft issue to draw the public’s awareness [and] win people into the fold, leading them into other heavy issues. Hundreds of thousands of people who may have been ambivalent about nuclear power joined Greenpeace to save the whales. Who knows how many of them heard the message about nukes?¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁸ Greg Martin, ‘Conceptualizing cultural politics in subcultural and social movement studies’, *Social Movement Studies*, 1:1 (2002), pp. 73-88.

¹⁰⁹ David McTaggart, from an internal Greenpeace memo quoted in Fred Pearce, ‘Greenpeace: Storm-tossed on the high seas’, in Helge Ole Bergesen and Georg Parmann (eds.), *Green*

How do we relate this back to theories of civil society? An initial problem to overcome here is that theorists of civil society have generally not addressed questions of culture directly. Nonetheless, the kind of processes and structures that we have broadly lumped together as 'culture' can be found within civil society theory, particularly among Gramscian theorists who emphasise the discursive nature of civil society. It is this discursive arena which allows us to integrate civil society theory with the (cultural) analysis of social movements, whilst simultaneously providing a theoretical explanation for possibly divergent trajectories. Given such a discursive interpretation of civil society, it is important to distinguish between civil society on the one hand and culture on the other. Clearly the two concepts have a lot in common here – which is in fact to our advantage, as it allows us to mesh the two together theoretically. As a cognitive phenomenon, however, culture is a private, internal process, albeit one that is widely shared. In contrast, civil society can be understood as the *public* realm of cultural and socio-political contestation. Thus, it embodies not just the discursive elements which interact directly with cultural processes, but also institutions and individuals – the 'intellectuals' of the Gramscian reading.

In this interpretation, civil society is thus a dualistic phenomenon with both an institutional and a discursive aspect. Institutionally, it is characterised by NGOs, trade unions and other such voluntary organisations, independent media publications as well as casual and informal networks of association. This institutional aspect gives concrete organisational form to civil society, providing leadership, meeting places and the broad fora for discursive and cultural

interaction. It is also this aspect which is directly susceptible to state regulation and repression through, in the Malaysian case, such mechanisms as the Internal Security Act as well as more insidious institutions like the Registrar of Societies. Clearly, this institutional framework overlaps considerably with the institutions of social movements themselves. It is, however, possible to make a broad typological distinction between social movement organisations, which mirror the historical specificity of social movements along with their goal-oriented strategies, and the more enduring and often more wide-ranging institutions of civil society. To give examples from the Malaysian case, despite its deep involvement in the *reformasi* cause, ALIRAN would be classifiable as a civil society organisation as opposed to, say, the GAGASAN coalition, which evolved specifically within the context of the *reformasi* movement (see chapter eight). It is pertinent to note that many social movement organisations, like GAGASAN, are initially formed from coalitions of previously existing civil society organisation. Indeed, it is frequently argued that such coalitions are vital to the success of social movements.¹¹⁰ Such a typology, however, cannot be too strict, and it is interesting to note that many enduring and successful civil society organisations have themselves grown out of such movement coalitions, the formation of SUARAM out of an ISA detainees support group being one such example.

Organisational overlap notwithstanding, it is the second aspect of civil society, its discursive output, which provides a link to the cultural analysis that we have

¹¹⁰ See, for example, Parsa, *States, Ideologies and Revolutions* and Meredith L. Weiss, 'The Politics of Protest: Civil society, coalition building and social movements in Malaysia', PhD Thesis, Yale University, 2001.

placed at the heart of social movements. Discourse and culture are concepts closely interlinked; both are concerned with the processes through which individuals interpret and understand the world. In this context, however, discourse can be understood as the *public* contestation of meaning and ideology, whilst culture refers to the cognitive processes through which these contestations are interpreted. Thus, whilst discursive contestation provides the grounding of counterhegemony (by, for instance, promoting concepts of ‘human rights’ or ‘sustainable development’), it is through cultural interpretations that these ideas are transformed into mobilisation. As Fine notes, a key process here is the individual narrative, which translates the often grandiose or abstracted concepts of civil society discourse into appreciable and (important for mobilisational potential) *emotive* cultural markers.¹¹¹ Fine is concerned primarily with private, small-scale narrations, such as those in groups like Alcoholics Anonymous or Victims of Child Abuse Laws, but the process is equally effective on a more public level. The virtually endless list of assassinations or incarcerations of societal leaders that have mobilised protest movements – Benigno Aquino in the Philippines, Nelson Mandela in South Africa, Xanana Gusmão in East Timor – is an obvious indicator of the power of narrative.¹¹² Neither are such processes limited to the narrative of well-known individuals; the perceived suffering of the forest-dwelling Penan folk in

¹¹¹ Gary Alan Fine, ‘Public narration and group culture: Discerning discourse in social movements’, in Johnston and Klandermans, *Social Movements and Culture*, pp. 127-43. Fine (p.135) identifies three specific forms that such narration can take: horror stories (‘affronts to the movement actor’), war stories (‘collective experiences within the movement’) and happy endings (‘stories that reaffirm the value of the movement’).

¹¹² Of course, the nature of such a narrative is no guarantee of the outcome of the movement it provokes. Mahathir, a widely unpopular national leader, sacked his popular finance minister and lived to tell the tale; in the same situation, Louis XVI of France ultimately lost his head.

Sarawak has been a spur to the environmentalist movement not just in Malaysia, but worldwide (see chapter seven).

We are now beginning to develop a dynamic picture of the relationship between civil society and social movements that accounts both for institutional structures and for the processes of contestation and mobilisation. What is missing from the picture thus far is the *object* of these struggles, and it is thus to the state and its relations with society that we must now turn. At the most fundamental level, the state is both the object of much social contestation and often its source. It has, for instance, been argued that it was the divisive economic policies pursued by the Malaysian regime in the 1970s that led to the emergence of an ethnically divided civil society.¹¹³ State-led modernisation and consequential social dislocation has, historically, been the source of many episodes of contentious politics worldwide.¹¹⁴ What concerns us here, however, is not so much the broad structural changes brought about by the state, which we can to some extent take to be exogenous to the model, but its direct interaction with civil society and social movements. In this context, we can identify three important dimensions to state strategy: hegemony and ‘official’ discourse; regulation and repression; and, regime mobilisation.

¹¹³ Yoshiki Kaneko, ‘Malaysia: Dual structure in the state-NGO relationship’, in Shinichi Shigetomi (ed.), *The State and NGOs: Perspectives from Asia*, Singapore, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2002, pp. 178-99.

¹¹⁴ See, for example, James C. Scott and Benedict J. Kerkvliet, ‘How traditional rural patrons lose legitimacy: A theory with special relation to Southeast Asia’, *Cultures et développement*, 5:3 (1973), pp. 501-40.

Hegemony and 'Official' Discourse

At the broadest level, hegemony can be defined as the ways in which state dominance is maintained 'not so much by sanctions and coercion as by the consent and passive compliance of the subordinate classes'.¹¹⁵ In as much, it is to be understood as an alternative, or more accurately, as a complement to coercive means of domination. Whilst investigations of coercion most usually treat it as a mechanism at the state's disposal and analyse it as such, however, theories of hegemony tend to situate dominance in terms of structural explanations in which the nature of the regime and its hegemonic influence are inseparable.

An alternative approach is to view hegemony as a 'whole range of *practical strategies* by which a dominant power elicits consent to rule from those it subjugates'.¹¹⁶ The importance of this formulation is that it relieves hegemony of its theoretical ubiquity and structural inevitability. A weaker, but even less deterministic and more analytically useful formulation of this might be to define hegemony as a range of practical strategies by which a dominant power *seeks* to elicit consent to rule. Such a formulation has the advantage that, whilst retaining the theoretical validity of hegemony, it would understand hegemony as practical project which is neither inevitable nor inevitably successful. In this reading, hegemony represents the state's discursive input into the cultural arena.

¹¹⁵ James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday forms of peasant resistance*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1986, p. 316.

¹¹⁶ Terry Eagleton, 'Ideology and its vicissitudes in Western Marxism', in Slavoj Žižek (ed.), *Mapping Ideology*, London, Verso, 1994, p. 198; emphasis added.

In pursuing its hegemonic/cultural agenda, the state clearly has an advantage over non-state actors in terms of the institutions it controls and the resources at its disposal. As Sudipta Kaviraj points out:

If they are subjected to state practices... people must develop a practical understanding of what these involve. Every successful transaction with the state on matters relating to property claims, inheritance, civil marriage, litigation about infringement of rights, freedom on newspapers, habeas corpus, etc., constantly forces people to act these concepts.¹¹⁷

In this respect, we can understand controls over the media, the assimilation of trade unions and political controls over universities and other such strategies as attempts by the state to appropriate and control channels of cultural transmission to enhance its own hegemonic stance. Sites of contestation and negotiation exist even within the most tightly controlled institutions, thus rejecting the extreme Althusserian formulation in which all such bodies are necessarily and inevitably 'Ideological State Apparatuses'. Thus, for instance, despite the stringent legalistic controls and extensive regime ownership of the (non-electronic) media in Malaysia, periods of liberalisation and contestation have surfaced.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁷ Sudipta Kaviraj, 'In search of civil society', in Kaviraj and Khilnani, *Civil Society*, p. 312.

¹¹⁸ See Graham K. Brown, 'Apologists and eunuchs? Regime control of the media in Malaysia and its weaknesses', paper presented at the International Workshop on Communications and Democratization in Asia, Institute of Asia-Pacific Studies, University of Nottingham, 25-26 April, 2003.

Repression and Regulation

An alternative strategy of control for the state is to employ repressive measures against civil society. As political opportunity structure theorists make clear, however, it is not just the state's active deployment of its repressive arsenal that affects the emergence and trajectory of popular protest, but also its underlying repressive capacity and its willingness (or perceived willingness) to use these powers. Dynamically, changes in this underlying framework of repression, either incremental or decremental, can provide the opportunity for increased mobilisation.

Repression, however, is arguably just an extreme form of regulation with, perhaps, some unnecessary normative connotations. Regulation here is taken to mean coercive controls over the institutional operations of organisations and individuals. In the Malaysian context, a whole array of state powers constitute such regulation, embodied in such laws as the Official Secrets Act and the Sedition Act, as well as the discretionary powers of bodies like the Registrar of Societies and the Director-General of Trade Unions. On-going regulation of civil society can be an effective means of suppression, arguably even more so than direct repression, precisely because the latter tends to create such narratives of injustice that, as we have seen, are often key to mobilising opposition. To be somewhat facetious, 'Free Anwar' is a much more convincing battle cry than 'Deregulate the Newspaper Industry'.

In the dualistic interpretation of civil society proposed above, then, state hegemony and official discourse constitute the state's response to the discursive aspect of civil society; regulation and repression constitutes its response to the institutional aspect of civil society. The two, however, are interlinked.

Regulation and repression of civil society in effect constricts the channels of cultural and counterhegemonic transmission available. Moreover, in responding to state hegemony through regulated channels, the discourse of civil society itself is inevitably affected. In New Order Indonesia before 1985, for instance, NGOs were not centrally regulated in the same way as in Malaysia, but were under the constant bureaucratic supervision of BANGDES (*Pembangunan Desa* – the Rural Development Arm of the Department of Home Affairs). After 1985, however, NGOs were been specifically required to include the state ideology of *Panca Sila* as their sole ideological motivation in their statement of objectives. This combination of bureaucratic interference together with hegemonic assertion resulted in the emergence of a distinctive conceptualisation of democracy based on a discourse of self-reliance and participation, both in themselves acceptable to the New Order hegemon.¹¹⁹

Regime Mobilisation

Hegemony and coercion are both commonly used concepts in the analysis of state dominance. What is less well examined is the phenomenon of ‘regime mobilisation’, by which I mean collective action organised and mobilised by or on behalf of the state. This can take a variety of forms and be effected through varying degrees of institutionalisation, coercion and ‘free-will’, from the spectacle of goose-stepping troops marching through the Red Square and the ‘spontaneous’ demonstrations of support for the North Korean regime in its confrontations with the United States to more ‘genuine’ demonstrations, such as

¹¹⁹Philip J. Eldridge, *Non-Government Organizations and Democratic Participation in Indonesia*, Kuala Lumpur, Oxford University Press, 1995.

those in support of Philippines president Joseph Estrada during the last days of his presidency.

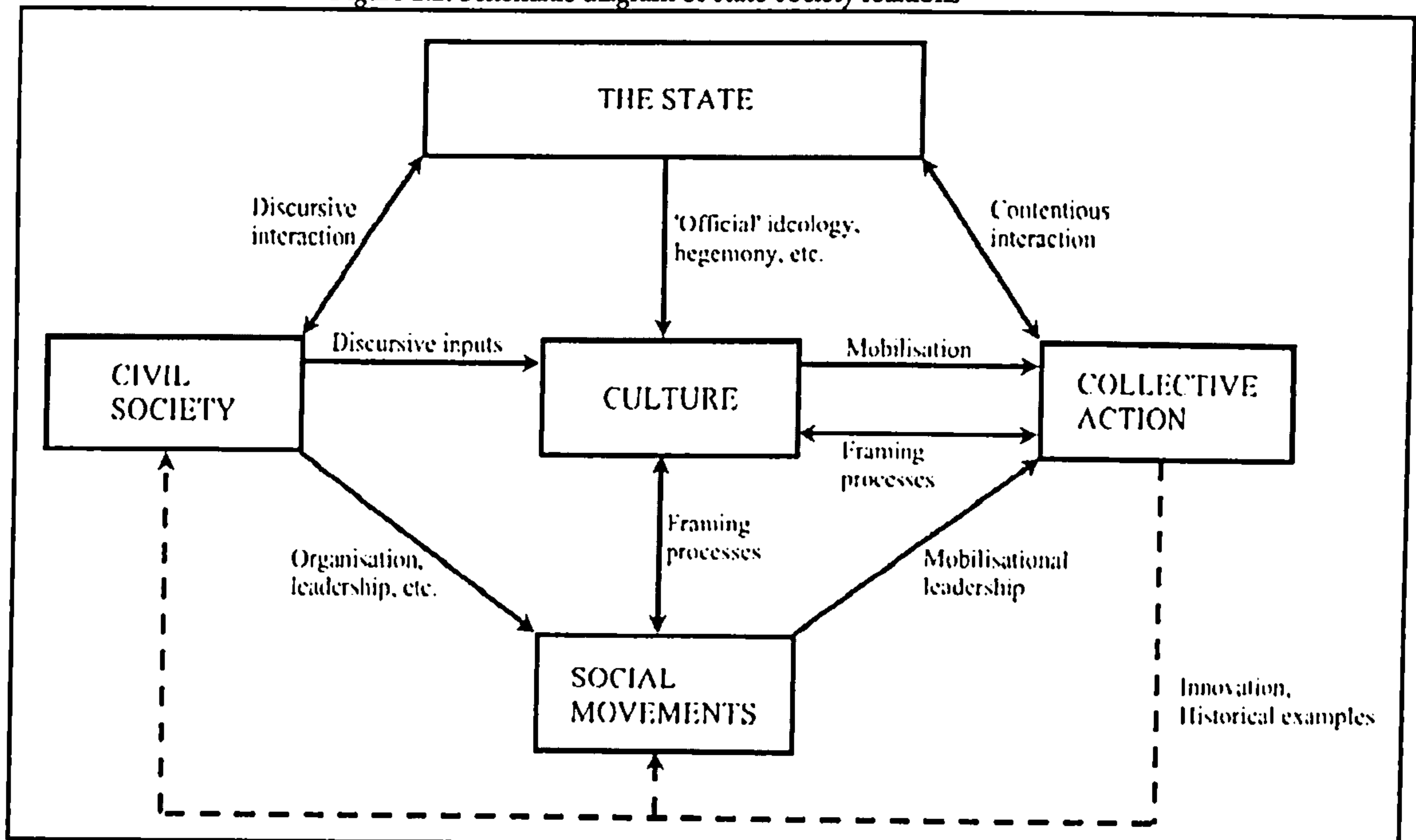
In terms of concrete outcomes or influence, regime mobilisation is inevitably somewhat vacuous. Despite this, however, it frequently attracts spectacular numbers of participants. In the analytical context of the ‘problem’ of collective action, this is hardly surprising, given the fact that the risks to the individual for being involved in such demonstrations are virtually non-existent, compared with the risk of arrest, imprisonment or more surreptitious means of retribution meted out against participants in oppositional demonstrations. Indeed there may be a positive incentive to participate for those seeking regime patronage (or, alternative, the risk of retribution for *not* participating). What, then, are the incentives for authoritarian regimes to indulge in such mobilisation? As with socially driven collective action, it is the performativity of regime mobilisation that is most important. Regime mobilisation allows the state to contest the meaning of collective action frames in a way in which more ‘normal’ state politicking might not. At the most fundamental level, it allows the regime to contest the very ‘meaning’ of collective action as ‘protest’. It also allows the regime to frame its own discourse within the context of collective action. Of course, this ‘competition’ is not a fair one; legislative restrictions on collective action are not applied to the state, and the media in authoritarian states often reproduces regime performances in a far more favourable light than opposition protests.

As a political actor, then, the state has enormous resources in shaping civil society through discursive, coercive and active (mobilisational) mechanisms.

Yet it also has its own peculiar vulnerabilities, most notably in its need to retain broad legitimacy amongst a substantial proportion of the population. The cost of maintaining dominance without such legitimacy – both in domestic economic and, increasingly, in international terms – is hard for even the most authoritarian and autarkical state to endure. It is often in the discursive interaction between the state and civil society that such legitimacy is created and destroyed.

We have now completed our reformulation of civil society and social movements within the context of state-society relations. The programme is summarised schematically in figure 2.2. Having developed this broad schema, the final task of this chapter is to bring the theory closer to our case study by looking at its specific application in multiethnic societies.

Figure 2.2: Schematic diagram of state-society relations



Civil Society and Social Movements in Ethnically Divided Societies

Ethnicity here and throughout this thesis is understood as a sense of common identity based on shared social and cultural norms and practices, a comprehensive list of which is given by Bulmer as:

real or putative common ancestry, memories of a shared past, and cultural emphasis on one or more symbolic elements which define the group's identity, such as kinship, religion, language, shared territory, nationality or physical appearance.¹²⁰

As Ratcliffe notes, a formulation such as this can be problematic in that it 'opens the door to the creation or nomination of an almost limitless number of "ethnic groups" without regard to the significance of the delineating factors'.¹²¹ Instead of viewing this as problematic, however, it can arguably be turned to our advantage, through the key question of political salience. Asking why certain ethnic distinctions gain or lose political salience at certain times may provide an important avenue for understanding the dynamics of the societies in question.

A constructivist notion of ethnicity such as that given above not only avoids the unpleasant Orientalist and biologically deterministic undertones of 'race', but also provides the key to understanding the importance of ethnicity in social

¹²⁰ M. Bulmer, 'Race and ethnicity', in R.G. Burgess (ed.), *Key Variables in Social Investigation*, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, p. 54; quoted in Peter Ratcliffe, "'Race" in Britain: Theory, methods and substance', in Peter Ratcliffe (ed.), *"Race", Ethnicity and Nation: International perspectives on social conflict*, London, UCL Press, 1994, p. 115.

¹²¹ Peter Ratcliffe, 'Conceptualizing "race", ethnicity and nation: Towards a comparative perspective', in Ratcliffe, *"Race", Ethnicity and Nation*, p. 6. Ratcliffe's comments are based on M. Bulmer's definition of an ethnic group as given above.

mobilisation, through its incorporation of 'culture' as a defining characteristic. Culture, Devalle notes, 'is ethnicity's privileged field' in that it 'sustains the political expressions of ethnicity'.¹²² By placing culture as central to our formulation both of state-societal contestation and of ethnicity, we can gain an understanding of the relationship between the two. In essence, ethnicity – even when it is 'constructed' – provides pre-existing 'channels' along which emergent societal mobilisation easily runs, even when movements are not explicitly ethnic in their orientation. Symbolic mobilisers such as potent religious myths – obviously a crucial element in millenarian movements – or heroic historic examples may not cut across ethnic boundaries.

The argument here is that in multicultural and multiethnic societies, social movements, which take (some of) their mobilisation force from cultural practices and norms, will inevitably appeal more to some cultural and ethnic groups than to others. In some cases, movements are obviously directly related to specific cultures and groups, the civil rights movement in the United States and women's movements worldwide being obvious examples. Even where a movement does not 'target' a specific cultural (or ethnic) group, however, the framing process – the reduction of a broad array of demands and grievances into easily digestible, bite-sized (and, in the modern day, byte-sized) cultural semiotics – will find greater resonance in some cultures than others.

The importance of ethno-cultural resonance goes beyond the motivational framing of a movement to influence the repertoire of collective action itself – the substantive form that protest takes. For example, hunger strikes undertaken

¹²² Susana B.C. Devalle, *Discourses of Ethnicity: Culture and protest in Jharkland*, New Delhi, Sage, 1992, p. 235.

by Hispanic American students to protest the content of an ethnic studies programme in 1993 seemed excessive to outsiders, but to that community, inspired by Caesar Chavez, it was ‘culturally consonant’.¹²³ Cultural and ethnic differences and distinctions, then, affect the mobilisational potential of social movements through differing access to, and appreciation of, the processes of mobilisation. Semiotic frames and forms of action that strike a chord in one ethno-culture may be entirely dissonant in another.

Having made this theoretical stand, it is now time to turn our attention to the case study of Malaysia, beginning with a discussion of existing approaches to Malaysian politics.

¹²³ Mayer N. Zald, ‘Culture, ideology and strategic framing’, in McAdam, McCarthy and Zald, *Comparative Perspectives on Social Movements*, p. 268.

CHAPTER THREE

APPROACHES TO MALAYSIAN POLITICS

The previous chapter developed a theoretical model of social mobilisation and the state. Before proceeding to demonstrate this model in the Malaysian context, it is necessary to contextualise the study with a discussion of the existing literature on Malaysia, which is the task of this chapter.

STATIST APPROACHES

Since the 1960s, the dominant approach to studying Malaysian politics has focused attention on the post-colonial state and the relationships between the country's ethnic elites.¹ The most explicit recent example of the statist approach to Malaysian politics can be found in the work of William Case, most notably in his book *Elites and Regimes in Malaysia: Revisiting a consociational democracy*.² From the outset, Case acknowledges that this approach is somewhat limited in that one may be 'unable to grasp the peculiarities of Malaysian politics', but, taking a comparative approach, rejoinders that 'what might be lost in precision is perhaps gained in wider relevance'.³ Here lies the main strength of the elitist approach, as epitomised by Case. It offers an easily

¹ For an early example of such an approach, see Gordon P. Means, *Malaysian Politics*, New York, New York University Press, 1970.

² William Case, *Elites and Regimes in Malaysia: Revisiting a consociational democracy*, Clayton, VIC, Monash Asia Institute, 1996. See also his 'Semi-democracy in Malaysia: Withstanding the pressure for regime change', *Pacific Affairs*, 6:2 (1993), pp. 183-205; 'Aspects and audiences of legitimacy', in Muthia Alagappa (ed.), *Political Legitimacy in Southeast Asia*, Stanford, CA, Stanford University Press, 1995, pp. 69-108; 'Elections as flywheels: Advancing or reversing Malaysia's hard-driving democracy?', paper presented at the Third International Malaysian Studies Conference, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Bangi, Malaysia, 6-8 August 2001.

³ Case, *Elites and Regimes in Malaysia*, p. 4.

identifiable (and relatively easy to research) set of individuals, organisations and institutions as the focus of attention. Case is thus able to produce a clear and persuasive account of regime stability in Malaysia. The story told is one of essential continuity – stable ‘semi-democracy’ maintained by consensual elite unity, which, at various points, has been ‘tested’ by both inter-elite and intra-elite crises.

Case argues that the widely-acknowledged elite bargain fostered at the time of independence – whereby the Chinese elites accepted political under-representation in return for ‘some economic assurances and basic citizenship guarantees’ – was ‘part of a broader tradition of elite accommodation and compromise’, a tradition mainly forged through British tutelage. He goes on to argue that although the first thirty years of Independence (1957-1986) saw the Malay elites in UMNO increasingly encroaching on the Chinese elites’ side of the ‘bargain’, this period nonetheless saw a continuation of the ‘basically persistent’ consensually unified elite configurations. Even in the post-1969 era, when the government started to take substantive measures to redistribute the economy in favour of the Malays under the New Economic Policy, elite unity was nonetheless maintained, due to Malaysia’s generally good economic performance in the 1970s and some political concessions, which took the edge off the Chinese elites’ diminishing slice of the economic pie.⁴

The main problem with Case’s approach is what has been left out. By focusing almost exclusively on the state, and a very narrow definition of the state as manifested in elite relations, ideas of civil society and non-state actor, or ‘mass

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 84-86.

constituents' to use Case's phrase, are more often than not reduced to almost functional aspects of elite competition:

[W]hen opportunities arise, activist subelites may arouse mass grievances against their own leaders by portraying them as too conciliatory... Mass constituents, in turn – their outlooks shaped strongly by structural forces – must select or decline to select among the appeals and choices that are made available to them. But while mass constituents are thus exposed to a range of elite and subelite-sanctioned options they are *unable to move outside these options* to initiate and sustain their own complex political undertakings.⁵

Popular sentiments and mass grievances thus have relevance only when an elite or subelite adopts them for its own furtherance. Civil society is a mobilised, rather than a mobilising force. Granted, he accepts the existence of 'civil elites', but ranks them of lowest importance in terms of 'relative weightage and tasks' – the use of the term 'task' here hardly serving to counter accusations of functionalism – and suggests that the state elites can 'if consensually unified... exclude civil elites without quickly or seriously impairing basic regime stability'.⁶

Case's primary defence of this reductionist approach is that it makes for easier comparison with other countries. As soon as one looks beyond Malaysia, however, the ability of 'mass constituents' to undertake social mobilisation

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 12-13; emphasis added.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 16-22.

under their own banner is undeniable. Case cites the examples of the 1989 events in Tiananmen Square and the massacres in Rangoon in 1990 as proof of the state elites' ability to repudiate civil elites effectively. These are, no doubt, spectacular examples that support Case's case. Equally spectacular, but harder to explain with Case's approach, are the events of Spring 1998 in Indonesia, or, within Case's own time-frame, the Philippines' 'People Power' revolution. Case's desire to 'speak with more than the world's several dozen Malaysianists' is, of course, laudable but to do so by cutting civil society out of the picture, arguably results in him being unable to engage with precisely those he wishes.

Even within the context of Malaysian politics, this is a highly dubious contention to make. Whilst civil elites have clearly played a historically less prominent role in Malaysia than in neighbouring countries, it would nonetheless be remiss to suggest that their 'task' is unimportant or uninfluential. The issue of Islamisation is perhaps the most obvious example of a 'civil elite' forcing an agenda upon the regime, rather than vice versa. Most studies of the Islamisation process have concluded that it was 'an increasing number of largely symbolic concessions to Muslims' aimed at harnessing the legitimacy afforded by the Islamic resurgence.⁷ Even if the response has been purely symbolic, it seems undeniable that Islamisation was forced upon the regime by societal pressures.

Rather than focus on the configuration of state elites, other analysts have focused on the machinery of the state more broadly. Perhaps the most systematic and sophisticated analysis of the institutions of democracy and

⁷ Jomo Kwame Sundaram and Ahmad Shabery Cheek, 'Malaysia's Islamic movements', in Joel S. Kahn and Francis Loh Kok Wah (eds.), *Fragmented Vision: Culture and politics in contemporary Malaysia*, Honolulu, University of Hawaii Press, 1992, p. 97.

authoritarianism in Malaysia has been undertaken by Harold Crouch. Central to Crouch's work is the idea that the state-society relationship in Malaysia engenders both democratic and authoritarian pressures. In his *Government and Society in Malaysia*, for instance, Crouch traces institutional changes since 1970 and concludes that, although this period has seen an increase in authoritarian institutions and powers, the regime nonetheless retains some democratic aspects, most notably regular elections, which force it to be *responsive* to, if not *representative* of, 'public pressures'.⁸

Crouch ably demonstrates the process of incremental authoritarianism in Malaysia, and in particular the ways in which measures and strategies introduced to combat specific threats have afterwards remained in an ever-growing armoury of authoritarianism. Where his argument is slightly weaker is his attempt to demonstrate that democratic pressures nonetheless force the regime into 'responsiveness'. For the most part, he relies on somewhat assumptive statements to the extent that regular elections, although neutered of any real political import, nonetheless serve as a check on the regime. Most tellingly, the chapter in *Government and Society in Malaysia* that explores these democratic pressures is in fact devoted to the 1987 UMNO split.⁹ Although Crouch, like Case, views the origins of the UMNO split as a clash of elites and personalities in which 'ideological and policy differences seem to have played almost no part', he is more concerned with its repercussions in terms of

⁸ Harold Crouch, *Government and Society in Malaysia*, St. Leonard's, NSW, Allen and Unwin, 1996(a), p. 244.

⁹ Crouch's argument concerning the 1987 UMNO split is further expounded in Harold Crouch, 'Authoritarian Trends: The UMNO split and the limits to state power', in Kahn and Loh, *Fragmented Vision*. These events will be dealt with in detail in chapter six of this thesis.

democracy and authoritarianism than with the machinations of the elite. He views the UMNO split in terms of fostering further democratisation, arguing that it represented a drastic increase in the 'competitiveness' of the democratic process. He argues that the Team B/*Semangat '46* challenge was important in that the government was unable to resort to the repressive machinery it had used in facing down previous challenges because of the strength of the dissident movement and its popularity amongst the civil service, police and military. In as much, it was demonstrative of the 'limits to state power', and the return of parliament to being a 'forum of significant political debate'. The failure of *Semangat* to capitalise on this during the 1990 election is explained by Crouch as due to the economic recovery which saw much popular support returning to UMNO. Thus, after examining the roots of the split and the way it played out, Crouch concludes:

[The 1990] election illustrated the significance of electoral competition in the Malaysian system. As long as the BN - in particular, UMNO - was united and the opposition split along communal lines, government victory was assured in each election. But the UMNO split and the steps towards the formation of a multi-communal opposition front raised the level of competitiveness in the system and forced the government to respond to pressures from below to secure its victory.¹⁰

This conclusion is a far cry from Crouch's general assertion that elections force the regime into democratic responsiveness. If the state is to be deemed

¹⁰ Crouch, *Government and Society in Malaysia*, p.129.

‘responsive’, this surely carries the implication that civil society is able to form autonomous demands and pressure to which the state ‘responds’. Yet by placing this responsiveness as contingent upon divisions within the regime - divisions which Crouch attributes ‘in the first instance to personal and factional rivalries’ within UMNO - Crouch undermines societal autonomy from the state.¹¹ Instead, this is reminiscent of Case’s claim that civil society is unable to do any more than select amongst elite-sanctioned options.

Crouch goes some way towards this elsewhere, when he develops further the democratic pressures side of his argument, using examples from both within the Malay and the non-Malay communities to illustrate the ways in which the regime has been forced to take account of popular sentiment.¹² He argues that the regime has responded promptly and substantively when it has felt that its Malay base of support is being eroded, with measures such as the NEP and the Islamisation programme. Response to non-Malay pressures, however, has tended to be slower and more symbolic in nature. In general, Crouch argues, the regime has responded to non-Malay pressures only when the Malay vote is split, as in 1990, and the regime thus requires strong Chinese and Indian support to ensure its victory.

SOCIETAL PERSPECTIVES

Thus far, two interconnected models of Malaysian politics have been considered, which focus attention primarily on the state. An alternative body of literature has also built up on Malaysia, which focuses more attention on society

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

¹² Harold Crouch, ‘Malaysia: Do elections make a difference?’, in R.H. Taylor (ed.), *The Politics of Elections in Southeast Asia*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996(b), pp. 114-35.

more generally, rather than the politics of elections and government. Undoubtedly the best known and the most influential work from this perspective is that of James C. Scott, in particular his detailed study of peasant resistance in a Malaysian village in *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday forms of peasant resistance*, and its more theoretical successor, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden transcripts*.¹³ Scott's primary aim in these two volumes is to 'read, interpret and understand the often fugitive political conduct of subordinate groups'.¹⁴ The main thrust of his argument is that traditional views of the elite-subordinate relationship on which political activity is predicated is inaccurate, in that it overlooks a vast arsenal of subordinate resistance, which does not register on the traditional scale. This includes 'arson, sabotage, boycotts, disguised strikes, thefts and imposed mutuality', 'footdragging, lateness, unpredictability', as well as more 'symbolic' resistance such as 'spirit possession, gossip, aggression through magic, rumor, anonymous threats and violence, the anonymous letter and anonymous mass defiance'.¹⁵

Scott ably demonstrates the extent to which political affiliation reaches into almost every aspect of village life, characterised by a 'relatively straightforward' sociology of wealth and patronage.¹⁶ 'Development' monies provided by the state were channelled through the *Jawatankuasa Kemajuan Kampung* (JKK – Village Development Committees), which were exclusively

¹³ James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday forms of peasant resistance*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1986; James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden transcripts*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1990.

¹⁴ Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, p. 17.

¹⁵ Scott, *Weapons of the Weak*, p. 241; Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, p. 140.

¹⁶ Scott, *Weapons of the Weak*, p. 132.

run by UMNO members. Individual membership of UMNO also reaped substantial benefits, mostly in the form of access to various loans, permits and licenses. Political factionalisation of the village between UMNO and PAS supporters extended to which coffee shop one frequented, and where one bought supplies. Yet for Scott, this is not the end of the story. Rejecting any concept of a hegemonic state, he argues that political infiltration does not have the ability to control the thoughts or perceptions of the peasants, who display their resistance to modernisation associated with this politicisation through the 'everyday' means described above. Symbolic resistance was also evident, such as those who insistently remained members of PAS, despite the economic hardship it brought.

Other micro-level studies of rural society have also emphasised the extent to which organisational affiliation became an integral part of social interaction and resistance. In his analysis of a predominantly Malay plantation settlement, for instance, Zawawi Ibrahim reasserts the importance of both political parties and trade unions in rural social organisation.¹⁷ In this case, it was the arrival of UMNO and the National Union of Plantation Workers (NUPW) in the mid-1960s that galvanised the Malay labourers' resistance to exploitation by the plantation's European owners. UMNO was seen as a form of 'protection' by the labourer, which could act as an intermediary with the European bosses. Yet UMNO was reluctant to involve itself in outright protests and strike activity, a role that the NUPW fulfilled instead. Thus, the relationship between these two organisations and their leaders and members – sometimes complicit alliance,

¹⁷ Zawawi Ibrahim, *The Malay Labourer: By the Window of Capitalism*, Singapore, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1998.

other times more suspicious opposition – became the defining feature social organisation and political resistance. A similar pattern of politicisation, development and dependency is identified in Rogers' examination of a rural village in Johor.¹⁸ In Rogers' case study, however, no rival organisation to UMNO emerged, and thus UMNO was able to develop its patronage network almost uninhibited – by 1978 over eighty per cent of the adult villagers in his case study were UMNO members, and membership of the party was seen as both a duty, and also the only avenue through which grievances could effectively be expressed. In a similar study, Guinness concurs that 'firm' support for UMNO in a village was a means of exerting pressure on the state for the provision of amenities and sanitation.¹⁹

The studies discussed above are all primarily concerned with rural Malay communities, and the ways in which their inhabitants have been reluctantly drawn into the modern state, whether it be through the introduction of agricultural technology, which Scott analyses, or the 'proletarianisation' of labour conditions, which Zawawi describes. In all these studies, societal penetration – essentially through the formation and operation of local UMNO branches – is a key strategy employed by the state.

Another aspect of Malay society that has drawn much attention from scholars is Islam and its revival. William Roff has pointed out that the debate in Malaysia about the role of Islam in politics and society predates even the arrival of the

¹⁸ Marvin L. Rogers, *Local Politics in Rural Malaysia: Patterns of change in Sungai Raya*, Oxford, Westview Press, 1992.

¹⁹ Patrick Guinness, *On the Margins of Capitalism: People and development in Mukim Plentong, Johor, Malaysia*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1992, p. 98.

British, who perceived that 'Moslem law would have ended by becoming the law of Malaya had not the British stepped in to check it'.²⁰ Since the 1970s, however, Islamic resurgence and *dakwah* – propagation movements – have undeniably flourished. *Dakwah* presents an elusive challenge to the regime in that it undermines the state's legitimacy in the cultural arena but, short of outlawing all of the many *dakwah* movements, the government has no legalistic or political mechanism to combat it. As Clive Kessler argues, *dakwah* movements provide 'an important parapolitical outlet, one that the government is reluctant to choke off too clumsily or abruptly and which therefore enjoys a certain immunity'.²¹ In attempting to combat the counter-hegemonic influence of *dakwah*, then, the regime is faced with the problem of de-legitimising a movement that has a strong and popular claim to moral legitimacy, one that the regime itself is eager to appropriate.

Perhaps one of the most important general conclusions that can be drawn from studies of the Islamic resurgence in Malaysia is the extent to which they demonstrate the importance of alternative means of transmission in resisting the state's dominance. A whole host of innovative and informal media have been employed by *dakwah* organisations to spread their word. In an early study of Islamic resurgence, Judith Nagata noted the prevalence of horizontal ties amongst *dakwah* movement, often recruiting in small groups (*usrah*) organised

²⁰ William R. Roff, 'Patterns of Islamization in Malaysia, 1890s-1990s: Exemplars, institutions, and vectors', *Journal of Islamic Studies*, 9:2 (1998), pp. 210-228.

²¹ Clive Kessler, 'Malaysia: Islamic revivalism and potential disaffection in a divided society', *Southeast Asia Chronicle*, 75 (1983), p. 8; emphasis original.

along the lines of the classic Leninist cell-structure.²² Technological innovation has also been well employed by the *dakwah* movement; Roff has noted that Islamic proselytising has expanded beyond printed materials to dissemination 'by sound and video cassettes, by photocopying, fax, and e-mail, and by the Internet'.²³

Thus far, then, we have seen that micro-level studies of rural Malay society have drawn a different picture from that of the statist literature discussed previously. Whilst state penetration and patronage networks are undoubtedly important, this body of literature has also identified important sites of resistance and contestation, which the statist literature tends to overlook. Increasingly, scholars are finding other such sites of contestation across Malaysia's socio-ethnic and geographical divides. Within the urban Malay community, for instance, Islamisation has also been identified as an important site of resistance to the regime. In as much, Zainah Anwar identified in the mid-1980s *usrah* similar to those described by Nagata in a study of *dakwah* movements amongst university students.²⁴ Interestingly, these studies have often emphasised the role of those – including university students – who have migrated from the countryside to the city, in a way similar to Benedict Anderson's 'Creole pioneers'.²⁵ It has been argued that this shift from the countryside to the city

²² Judith Nagata, *The Reflowering of Malaysian Islam: Modern religious radicals and their roots*, Vancouver, University of British Columbia Press, 1984.

²³ Roff, 'Patterns of Islamization', p. 226.

²⁴ Zainah Anwar, *Islamic Revivalism in Malaysia: Dakwah among the students*, Petaling Jaya, Pelanduk, 1987.

²⁵ Benedict R. O'G. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism*, London, Verso, 1981.

has forced a radical reappraisal of Malay identity and Islam. As Sharifah Zaleha notes:

In the new environment, it was no longer possible for the Malay middle class to defend existing identities that were constructed on the presumption that social bonds could be effectively forged through descent, ethnic origin, loyalty to the state, the village, the local patron and religion.²⁶

Conversely, Eric Thompson has identified an essential continuity of narrative amongst rural-urban migrants, concluding that experiences of the urban environment are often shaped by persistent *kampung* discourses.²⁷ The terms of contestation, then, are not just resource driven, but involve the struggle to define culture, identity and identity formation.

Neither is this contestation limited to the Malay community, or to religion and labour as the subject of contestation. Tan Liok Ee, for instance, has argued that the issue of education has been an important site of resistance to the regime amongst the Chinese community.²⁸ The reasons for the survival of Chinese

²⁶ Sharifah Zaleha Syed Hassan, 'Islamisation and urban religious identity: The middle class of Bandar Baru Bangi', in Abdul Rahman Embong (ed.), *Southeast Asian Middle Classes: Prospects for social change and democratization*, Bangi, Penerbit Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 2001, p. 136.

²⁷ Eric C. Thompson, 'Migrant subjectivities and narratives of the kampung in Malaysia', *Sojourn*, 17:1 (2002), pp. 52-75.

²⁸ Tan Liok Ee, 'Chinese schools in Malaysia: A case of cultural resilience', in Lee Kam Hing and Tan Chee-Beng (eds.), *The Chinese in Malaysia*, Shah Alam, Oxford University Press, 2000, pp. 228-254. See also: Tan Liok Ee, 'Dongzhaojong and the challenge to cultural hegemony, 1951-1987', in Kahn and Loh, *Fragmented Vision*, pp. 181-201; Tan Liok Ee, *The Politics of Chinese Education in Malaysia*, Kuala Lumpur, Oxford University Press, 1996.

education are, Tan argues, inseparable from the issue of Chinese identity and ‘the major social and political transformation of the Chinese from an immigrant society to an integral part of an independent nation’.²⁹ Tan draws particular attention to the development of the two Chinese educationalist organisations known collectively as *Dongjiaozong*, and argues that the movement played a vital role in resisting attempts by the Alliance and Barisan Nasional regimes to integrate independent Chinese schools with the state school system, thus obligating them to teach in either Malay or English and subsuming them within the parameters of a ‘National Culture’ based overwhelmingly on Malay standards. She concludes that *Dongjiaozong* has had only mixed success because it ‘has remained entrapped within the prevailing parameter of a political discourse which casts all its actors in ethnic terms’. Nonetheless, what success *Dongjiaozong* has seen is demonstrative of the potential strength of resistance, even within the ethnic minority Chinese community. To this extent, Tan draws attention to the ‘dramatic manifestations’ of civil mobilisation that *Dongjiaozong* has on occasion benefited from, the most spectacular of these being in 1973, when ‘barbers, taxi-drivers, shopkeepers and many other groups, donated a days’ taking to the ICS [Independent Chinese Schools] fund’.³⁰

The predominantly Chinese city of George Town in the northern state of Penang has also been identified as such a site of resistance, where the urban landscape itself has become the contested arena, and where notions of space, development and heritage have been employed by disenfranchised groups to stake their

²⁹ Tan, ‘Chinese schools in Malaysia’, p. 229.

³⁰ Tan, ‘Dongzhaojong and the challenge to cultural hegemony’, pp. 195-7.

claims.³¹ This has involved both Muslim and Christian communities, as well as more secular protests. Nowhere has this contestation for meaning been more evident or more enduring than in the East Malaysian state of Sarawak. Here, the state's desire to exploit the state's vast natural resources – primarily timber – has brought it into often physical confrontation with some of Sarawak's native tribes, many of them still living a pre-modern, semi-nomadic lifestyle. These protests will be the subject of considerable discussion in later chapters. Suffice it here to note that this collision of modernity and tradition has been interpreted by commentators both as a struggle for meaning and identity, and as a more objective struggle for resources.³²

THE PARADOXICAL MIDDLE CLASSES

Since the mid-1990s, a throng of studies has emerged which have sought a more nuanced and detailed understanding of the middle classes.³³ Much of this work

³¹ See, for instance: Goh Beng Lan, 'Modern Dreams: An enquiry into power, cityscape transformations and cultural difference in contemporary Malaysia', in Joel S. Kahn (ed.), *Southeast Asian Identities: Culture and the politics of representation in Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand*, Singapore, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1998, pp. 168-202; Goh Beng Lan, 'Rethinking urbanism in Malaysia: Power, space and identity', in Maznah Mohamad and Wong Soak Koon (eds.), *Risking Malaysia: Culture, politics and identity*, Bangi, Penerbit Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 2001, pp. 159-78; Judith Nagata, 'Heritage as a site of resistance: From architecture to political activism in urban Penang', in Maznah and Wong, *Risking Malaysia*, pp. 179-202.

³² Ida Nicolaisen, 'Timber, culture and ethnicity: The politicization of ethnic identity among the Punan Bah', in Robert L. Winzeler (ed.), *Indigenous Peoples and the State: Politics, land and ethnicity in the Malayan Peninsula and Borneo*, New Haven, Yale Southeast Asia Studies, 1997, pp. 228-59; Fadzilah Majid Cooke, *The Challenge of Sustainable Forests: Forest resource policy in Malaysia, 1970-1995*, Honolulu, University of Hawai'i Press, 1999(a); Tim Bending, 'Telling stories: Representing the anti-logging movement of the Penan of Sarawak', *European Journal of Development Research*, 13:2 (2001), pp. 1-25

³³ See, for instance: Abdul Rahman Embong, 'Malaysian Middle Class studies: A critical review', in Jomo Kwame Sundaram (ed.), *Rethinking Malaysia: Malaysian Studies I*, Kuala

has focussed on the question of why the emerging middle classes have not provided a stimulus for greater democratisation. This question is addressed most directly by Edmund Terence Gomez and Jomo Kwame Sundaram in their book, *Malaysia's Political Economy: Politics, Patronage and Profits*, and a later article 'Authoritarianism, Elections and Political Change in Malaysia'.³⁴ Gomez and Jomo trace the emergence of a middle class through the implementation of the New Economic Policy (NEP), fashioned in the wake of the 1969 ethnic riots. They argue that, whilst the NEP was broadly successful in achieving both its stated objectives – the eradication of poverty and the eradication of race-occupation corollaries – it created in the process a Malay middle class dependent upon regime patronage for its survival, a dependency which the regime 'had for political reasons encouraged'.³⁵

Lumpur, Malaysian Social Science Association, 1999, pp. 107-25; Abdul Rahman Embong, 'Globalisasi, negara dan pembentukan kelas di Malaysia', in Norani Othman and Sumit K. Mandal (eds.), *Malaysia Menangani Globalisasi: Peserta atau mangsa?* Bangi, Penerbit Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 2000, pp. 124-38; Abdul Rahman Embong, 'Beyond the crisis: The paradox of the Malaysian middle class', in Abdul Rahman, *Southeast Asian Middle Classes*, pp. 80-102; Jomo Kwame Sundaram, 'A Malaysian middle class?: Some preliminary analytical considerations', in Jomo, *Rethinking Malaysia*, pp. 289-312; Joel S. Kahn, 'Growth, economic transformation and the middle classes in Malaysia', in D. Goodman and R. Robison (eds.), *The New Rich in Asia: Mobile phones, McDonalds and middle-class revolution*, London, Routledge, 1996(a), pp. 59-74; Joel S. Kahn, 'The middle class as a field of ethnographic study', in Muhammad Ikmal Said and Zahid Emby (eds.), *Malaysia: Critical perspectives*, Petaling Jaya, Persatuan Sains Sosial Malaysia, 1996(b), pp. 12-33; Johan Saravanamuttu, 'Malaysian civil society: Awakenings?', in Maznah and Wong, *Risking Malaysia*, pp. 93-111.

³⁴ Edmund Terence Gomez and Jomo Kwame Sundaram, *Malaysia's Political Economy: Politics, patronage and profit*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1997; Edmund Terence Gomez and Jomo Kwame Sundaram, 'Authoritarianism, elections and political change in Malaysia', *Public Policy*, 2:3 (1998), pp. 113-44.

³⁵ Gomez and Jomo, *Malaysia's Political Economy*, p. 117.

For Gomez and Jomo, then, the primary obstacle to a democratising middle class is the extent to which it is dependent upon the regime for its patronage. Even beyond those directly involved in patron-client business relationships, a sense of dependency or 'subsidy mentality' pervades the Malay middle class:

The limited reformist orientation of the middle class may also be due to the fact that the access of most bumiputras to higher education has been facilitated by state scholarships and ethnic quotas.³⁶

Whilst this may explain the lack of democratic pressures from the Malay middle class, it by no means explains the apparent reluctance of the non-Malay middle class to oppose the regime; indeed one would expect increased opposition given the blatant pro-Malay bias of government policy. Gomez and Jomo argue that after the failure of initial attempts to protect Chinese business interests (e.g. Multi-Purpose Holdings Bhd.) the Chinese business community has, by and large, seen best to work within the NEP-fostered political economy, developing often 'subtle' ties with Malay entrepreneurs, an argument supported by Heng Pek Koon.³⁷

In addition, they suggest two other factors have staved off democratic pressures from the non-Malay middle class: a persistently buoyant economy, which has brought many benefits even to the non-Malays, and a programme of cultural

³⁶ Gomez and Jomo, 'Authoritarianism, elections and political change', p. 135.

³⁷ Gomez and Jomo, *Malaysia's Political Economy*, p. 48; Heng Pek Koon, 'Chinese Responses to Malay Hegemony (1957-1996)', in Zawawi Ibrahim (ed.), *Cultural Contestations: Mediating identity in a changing Malaysian society*, London, ASEAN Academic Press, 1998, pp. 51-82.

liberalisation which has been 'politically expedient and attractive'.³⁸ These two apparently mitigating factors, however, are somewhat problematic. For most of their argument, Gomez and Jomo seek to explain the failure of modernisation theory in the Malaysian case within its own parameters – they highlight factors that have retarded the development of a democratic middle class. But these last two factors, smuggled in without much analysis, are in fact precisely the kind of factor which modernisation theory suggests *would* lead to democratic pressures. Implicit in their argument here, instead, is some notion of political gratitude or loyalty, which is a thorny enough problem in considerations of Malaysian politics, and is directly contradictory to the 'rational choice' type approach which predicates modernisation theory and which is adopted throughout the remainder of their argument.

This view of the middle classes – both Malay and non-Malay – as politically dependent is widely accepted. Studies of the Chinese middle class, for instance, have concluded that Chinese businesses have 'become more dependent on Malay patronage', and on UMNO patronage in particular.³⁹ Yet other scholars have questioned these conclusions. In a focussed study of political affiliations within the middle classes, for instance, Peter Searle has shown that, whilst there has undoubtedly been a proliferation of politically-linked businesses and entrepreneurs since the 1970s, a 'dynamic core' of politically independent non-ethnically exclusive businesses has also developed, particularly during the

³⁸ Gomez and Jomo, 'Authoritarianism, elections and political change', p. 136.

³⁹ Heng Pek Koon and Sieh Lee Mei Ling, 'The Chinese business community in Peninsular Malaysia, 1957-1999', in Lee and Tan, *The Chinese in Malaysia*, pp. 123-68.

1990s.⁴⁰ He thus concludes that the accepted characterisation of Malaysia's political economy as being divided into a politically dependent Malay business class and a distinct Chinese business class 'no longer seem appropriate'.⁴¹ These conclusions are supported by other empirical studies that have demonstrated the remarkably similar performance of politically affiliated businesses and of their non-affiliated counterparts.⁴²

In many ways, the contributions discussed in this section complement the statist approach of scholars discussed above. They develop broadly similar arguments but focus on different areas: political economy and the institutions of democracy and authoritarianism respectively. Read together, they build up a persuasive and sophisticated picture of Malaysian politics. At the core of both contributions, however, there lies some ambiguity. In the case of Gomez and Jomo, this ambiguity circles around exactly what kind of pressures – democratic or authoritarian – the middle classes produce. In Crouch's work, there again remains some ambiguity about the exact role of elections.

Some light can possibly be thrown on these ambiguities if we consider Mitchell's critique of Statist theories.⁴³ Mitchell argues that state centred analyses suffer from a common problem in defining its 'boundaries'. The interface between state and society - both conceptually and empirically - has

⁴⁰ Peter Searle, *The Riddle of Malaysian Capitalism: Rent-seekers or real capitalists?* Honolulu, University of Hawai'i Press, 1999.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 248.

⁴² M. Fazilah binti Abdul Samad, 'The performance of politically affiliated businesses in Malaysia', in Jomo, *Rethinking Malaysia*, pp. 1-24.

⁴³ Tim Mitchell, 'The limits of the state: Beyond statist approaches and their critics', *American Political Science Review*, 85:1 (1991), pp. 77-96.

proved to be 'elusive, porous and mobile'.⁴⁴ Thus, the ability of society to influence state decisions is rendered analytically unclear. This analytical problem is maybe nowhere more demonstrable than with the literature discussed thus far. At the one extreme, Case adopts a state-purist position, positing almost complete state autonomy from society. As already argued, the experience of many Southeast Asian nations has rendered such a conceptual separation as palpably absurd. Whilst Crouch, Gomez and Jomo all incorporate societal pressures into their arguments, they encounter problems at precisely the point Mitchell's critique would predict.

In the economic sphere, the boundary between state and society is never more blurred than when regimes, parties and government individuals have substantial 'private' economic interests of their own and a host a patronage opportunities and government rents under their control in the public sector. This blurring of the boundary may well account for Gomez and Jomo's sometimes contradictory claims about the nature of the state-society relationship. A similar boundary problem arises in Crouch's work. In an ideal, 'model' representative democracy, elections should serve as a one of the few well-defined interfaces between state and society – the state providing an impartial mechanism for society to voice its preferences. But when elections are subject to all kinds of state interference – from constituency gerrymandering to monopolies on media and information, as is the in Malaysia – then this boundary becomes again increasingly blurred. This may give rise to the kind of ambiguities we see in Crouch.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 77.

AN EMERGING SYNTHESIS

Thus far, then, this review has identified three broad trends in Malaysian studies, which have respectively focused attention on the state, society, and the political economy of the middle class. The insights and conclusions of these different approaches are by no means completely exclusive, and since the early 1990s, a number of attempts have been made at synthesis. Writing in the mid 1990s, the anthropologist Joel S. Kahn made a strong argument for such a synthesis, with a broadened conceptualisation of the middle class as the key:

Very few Malaysianists – in Malaysia or overseas – have done more than mention the middle class in passing; and there have been even fewer attempts to clarify the use of the concept in Malaysian conditions, or to assess its impact on the taken-for-granted contours of Malaysian society.⁴⁵

The economic role of the middle classes is, as already noted, an integral part of many analyses of Malaysia's political economy, but Kahn argues for a broader examination of the middle classes – not just the Malay businessmen, but also the growing numbers of white collar workers, professionals and technicians – to fill the 'yawning gap' between elite analysis and subaltern studies.

The middle classes, Kahn argues, have an important role to play 'in both the legitimisation of and resistance to regimes of power'. Thus, he rejects the 'assumption of unity' within much of the literature, which reduces the middle classes to being 'an epiphenomenon of the economy, or the structure of

⁴⁵ Kahn, 'Growth, economic transformation and the middle classes', p. 59.

power'.⁴⁶ Central to Kahn's proposed project is thus an examination of the role the middle classes play in presenting and representing ethnicity, identity and culture. In as much, he explicitly rejects formulations of middle class politics by other Malaysian observers such as Johan Saravanamuttu, who employ an exclusively economic definition of the middle classes.⁴⁷

Although Kahn does not explicitly address the concept of civil society, then, his formulation of the Malaysian middle classes raises similar concerns, and demands a more nuanced interpretation than the dependency-democratisation paradox explored above. An earlier volume that addresses some of these concerns, co-edited by Kahn with Francis Loh Kok Wah, is *Fragmented Vision: Culture and Politics in Contemporary Malaysia*. In their introduction to the volume, Kahn and Loh note that 'analyses of Malaysian economy and polity... have only had limited reference to the cultural dimension of social change in Malaysia'.⁴⁸ Although their emphasis is on the politics of culture, rather than the middle class or civil society *per se*, the pieces collected within the volume nonetheless serve to bring attention to how aspects of civil society can influence and shape the political situation, rather than simply being able to respond *ex post* to top-down political options, as Case suggests.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 70-73.

⁴⁷ Kahn, 'The middle classes as a field of ethnographic study'. Kahn himself has been criticised for going to the other extreme to Saravanamuttu, and relying too much on the role of the state in his conceptualisation of the middle classes. See Abdul Rahman Embong, 'Social transformation, the state and the middle classes in Post-Independence Malaysia', in Zawawi, *Cultural Contestations*, pp. 83-116.

⁴⁸ Joel S. Kahn and Francis Loh Kok Wah, 'Introduction', in Kahn and Loh, *Fragmented Vision*, p. 2.

Perhaps the strongest demonstration of the importance of civil society in *Fragmented Vision* is Francis Loh's chapter on Kadazan revivalism. In this essay, Loh argues that the early 1980s saw a growing nationalism amongst the mainly Christian Kadazan people of Sabah.⁴⁹ This revivalism is attributed to the emergence of a Kadazan middle-class intelligentsia, and a simultaneous return to popularity of Kadazan folklore and ritual, mainly under the auspices of the Kadazan Cultural Association. This movement eventually saw the multi-ethnic, but Muslim-dominated BERJAYA party swept out of office in the 1985 state elections and replaced by *Parti Bersatu Sabah* (PBS), a Kadazan-based party formed when Joseph Pairin Kitingan, a vocal proponent of Kadazan 'rights', was thrown out of the BERJAYA party barely six months previously.

Loh's primary aim is to examine how 'culture and cultural distinctiveness gains political saliency'.⁵⁰ His analysis of this episode in Malaysia's political history speaks volumes to the concerns raised so far in this review. Whilst it is certainly true that the new 'state elite' created by PBS contained many of the old BERJAYA elite, it would be wrong to perceive Sabah politics during this time as a case of internal elite fracture, as one might conclude if one focused purely on the state. Indeed, although Loh accepts the involvement of the Kadazan elite in the revivalist movement, he rejects out of hand any claims that it was 'an outcome of ideological manipulation on the part of the intelligentsia to serve their own interests'.⁵¹ Thus, the rapid emergence of PBS as the dominant party in Sabah can be attributed to exactly the kind of 'complex political undertaking'

⁴⁹ Francis Loh Kok Wah, 'Modernisation, cultural revival and counter-hegemony: The Kadazans of Sabah in the 1980s', in Kahn and Loh, *Fragmented Vision*, pp. 225-53.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 225.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 248.

by 'mass constituents' which Case rejects. In this respect, it is worth noting that Loh perceives the revivalist movement as having been 'formalised' by the creation of PBS, rather than vice versa. By shifting the focus away from the state, Loh demonstrates the way that developments in civil society can force change upon the regime. In this case, the changing parameters of civil society in Sabah created a political space for a strong Kadazan party.

Few academics have directly addressed the question of civil society in Malaysia. Those who have, tend to employ somewhat uncritically a liberal interpretation, contextualised and limited by local circumstances. Civil society in Malaysia is thus typically characterised as being divided along ethnic lines. In his classic study of communalism in Malaysia written in the early years of Independence, K. J. Ratnam concluded that interest groups and NGOs have had a significant impact on the political process only when 'they operate within a communal framework and represent communally sensitive issues'.⁵² These social, cultural and linguistic differences have since been exacerbated by the ethnically-divisive policies pursued by the government since the 1970s under the auspices of the New Economic Policy (NEP).⁵³ Differential access to the government and its patronage, in both economic and political terms, has thus led to the emergence of different civil society orientations between communities.

⁵² K. J. Ratnam, *Communalism and the Political Process in Malaysia* (Singapore: University of Malaya Press 1965), p. vii.

⁵³ Yoshiki Kaneko, 'Malaysia: Dual structure in the state-NGO relationship', in Shinichi Shigetomi (ed.), *The State and NGOs: Perspectives from Asia*, Singapore, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2002, pp. 178-99.

Such is the approach taken by Jesudason, who argues that civil society in Malaysia has been 'truncated' by three factors:

1. The development of a strong state that precedes political participation;
2. The centrality of the state in economic development; and
3. Religio-cultural schisms in society.⁵⁴

Jesudason's formulation of civil society in Malaysia is a useful synthesis of important themes in Malaysian politics, but does not offer any new understanding that cannot be garnered from the literature already discussed. A more recent and more nuanced argument from a similar perspective is provided by Meredith Weiss.⁵⁵ Whilst she accepts the ethnically delimited nature of civil society in Malaysia, Weiss argues that the *reformasi* movement helped establish greater 'norms' of interethnic collaboration in civil society. In introducing the concept of *reformasi* as a social movement, Weiss thus transforms Jesudason's relatively static interpretation of civil society into a more dynamic model.

⁵⁴ James V. Jesudason, 'Statist democracy and the limits of civil society in Malaysia', National University of Singapore, Dept. of Sociology Working Paper no. 119 (1993), p. 13.

⁵⁵ Meredith L. Weiss, 'The Politics of Protest: Civil society, coalition building and social movements in Malaysia', PhD Thesis, Yale University, 2001(a); Meredith L. Weiss, 'Overcoming race-based politics in Malaysia: Establishing norms for deeper multiethnic co-operation', in James Chin and Ho Khai Leong (eds.), *Mahathir's Administration: Performance and crisis and governance*, Singapore, Times Books International, 2001(b), pp. 62-99.

A more theoretically critical usage of civil society in the Malaysian context has been employed by Sheila Nair.⁵⁶ She argues for a Gramscian interpretation of civil society, similar to that offered by Neera Chandhoke.⁵⁷ Whereas Chandhoke formalises civil society as an arena for discursive contestation, however, Nair understands it more narrowly, as a sphere for counter-hegemonic activity, in particular resisting the 'official nationalism' of the *Barisan Nasional* regime. Although she derides the West's 'privileging' of the nation-state, her articulation of state-society relationships thus leaves her open to precisely the kind of criticism offered by Scott. She depends too much on the state as the prime mover in social relationships, and relies on neo-Marxian 'contradictions' as the sole opportunity for civil society:

The incompleteness of the ideological project opens up opportunities for resistance within civil society... In Malaysia, the contradictions evident in the [regime's] nationalist constructions enable alternative ideological possibilities to be expressed in a number of ways.⁵⁸

Civil society so perceived is almost nothing more than an oversight by the state. The clear implication is that, were the state only to get its act together, a

⁵⁶ Sheila Nair, 'States, Societies and Societal Movements: Power and resistance in Malaysia and Singapore', PhD Thesis, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, 1995; Sheila Nair, 'Constructing civil society in Malaysia: Nationalism, hegemony and resistance', in Jomo, *Rethinking Malaysia*, pp. 84-106.

⁵⁷ Neera Chandhoke, *State and Civil Society: Explorations in Political Theory*, New Delhi, Sage, 1995.

⁵⁸ Nair, 'Constructing civil society in Malaysia', p. 94.

‘complete’ Althusserian hegemony could be achieved, excluding all dissenting voices, presumably in perpetuity.

Thus far, then, a case has been made for the use of civil society and social movements theory in the study of Malaysian politics. Whilst both Weiss and Nair employ some conceptualisation of social movements as the dynamic force in civil society, however, they both lack an explicitly stated understanding of the relationship between the two, a failing that, as we saw in the last chapter, is also common to most theoretical writings on the concepts. The remainder of this thesis addresses these issues and, in doing so, provides an exposition of the theoretical model formulated in chapter two.

CHAPTER FOUR

HISTORICAL AND POLITICAL CONTEXT:

CIVIL SOCIETY AND SOCIAL MOVEMENTS BEFORE 1980

This chapter sets the empirical context for the thesis with an analysis of political and societal developments from the late colonial period and Independence until 1980. It identifies two trends in the emergent state-society relationship which have important implication in respect of the theoretical framework outlined in the second chapter. Firstly, the successive tightening of legislation for social control – ‘incremental authoritarianism’ in Harold Crouch’s phrase¹ – proved an effective strategy for the regime in responding to societal mobilisation. Trade unionism and the student movement alike were effectively demobilised by legislative changes and the occasional detention of their leadership. The success of this strategy relied on the relative acquiescence of the groups involved and society more generally to such changes. Secondly, and more broadly, it argues that the ‘grand narratives’ of colonial and early post-colonial Malaysian society – ethnicity and labour – appeared to have decline in political salience by the end of the 1970s as the BN regime consolidated its grip on the state. At the same time, the early rustlings of a new multiethnic civil society were detectable.

LEGACIES OF COLONIALISM: ETHNICITY AND LABOUR

The formation of an independent Malaysia, both geographically and politically, was a protracted and often painful affair. Geographically, it reached its present borders in 1965, after the expulsion of Singapore from the wider Malaysian Federation, which had been formed in 1963 by the incorporation with peninsular

¹ Harold Crouch, *Government and Society in Malaysia*, St. Leonard’s, NSW, Allen and Unwin, 1996(a).

Malaya – itself independent since 1957 – of Singapore and the Borneo states of Sabah (previously British North Borneo) and Sarawak. Politically, Malaysia's staggered independence from British rule came against the backdrop of tumultuous Japanese Occupation, a communist insurgency and Emergency and an abortive attempt by the British to impose a centralised state, the 'Malayan Union' plan.

Given the relative youth of the Malaysian state and the trauma of its birth, it is hardly surprising that this continues to have repercussions in the contemporary scene. In institutional terms, for instance, the wide array of repressive state mechanisms at the regime's disposal have been traced back to the conditions of Independence and, in particular, the British-fostered Emergency regulations to counter the communist uprising.² Perhaps most important here is the particular reliance in Malaysia on the police, rather than the army, as a mechanism of civil control and repression. This is in stark contrast to other postcolonial states in the region, such as Indonesia and Burma, where the army has been the primary vehicle of repression.³

A result of its geographical diversity and the British colonial policy of importing labour, Malaysia is a diversely multi-ethnic society, comprised of indigenous

² Richard Stubbs, 'The Malayan Emergency and the development of the Malaysian State', in Paul B. Rich and Richard Stubbs (eds.), *The Counter-Insurgent State*, London, MacMillan, 1997, pp. 50-72. See also Zakaria Haji Ahmad, 'Malaysia', in Zakaria Haji Ahmad and Harold Crouch (eds.), *Military Civilian Relations in South-East Asia*, Singapore, Oxford University Press, 1985, pp. 118-35.

³ It has, however, been noted that the military is of declining importance in the region. See Muthiah Alagappa, 'Asian civil-military relations: Key developments, explanations and trajectories', in Muthiah Alagappa (ed.), *Coercion and Governance: The declining political role of the military in Asia*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2001, pp. 433-98.

bumiputera (lit. ‘sons of the soil’) and mainly Chinese and Indian immigrant communities. The *bumiputera* comprise over half the population, with a substantial Chinese minority, and a smaller Indian population. Higher birth rates amongst *bumiputera*, however, have seen their share of the population increase from a bare majority at the time of Independence to around two-thirds today (see table 4.1). The *bumiputera* themselves are divided into the Malays, who form the vast majority of the peninsular *bumiputera*, and the various tribes of Sarawak and Sabah, including the Iban, Melanau, Bidayuh and Dayak in Sarawak, and the Kadazan-Dusun, Bajau and Murut in Sabah.

Table 4.1: Ethnic Distribution of Malaysia, 1964 and 2000⁴

	1964	2000
<i>Bumiputera</i>	50.1%	66.1%
Chinese	36.8%	25.3%
Indian	11.2%	7.4%
Others	1.9%	1.2%

Malaysia is as diverse religiously as it is culturally. All Malays are by constitutional definition Muslim, as are some of the non-Malay *bumiputera* tribes, including the Melanau and Bajau, and a significant proportion of the Indian population. The Indian community also has large numbers of Hindus and Christians, and a smaller number of Sikhs. Christianity is the main religion amongst non-Muslim *bumiputera* tribes, such as the Kadazan-Dusun, often with a strong animistic influence. Christianity also has a substantial following amongst the Chinese. Aside from a small number of Muslim converts, the

⁴ Source: Government of Malaysia, *Eighth Malaysia Plan, 2001-2005*, p. 89, figure 4.1; Gordon P. Means, *Malaysian Politics*, New York, New York University Press, 1970, p. 12, table 1. Figure for 1964 excludes Singapore, which is overwhelmingly Chinese. The figures given are thus geographically directly comparable.

majority of the rest of the Chinese population practice some form of Taoism or Buddhism.⁵

Since Independence, Malaysia has been governed by a multi-ethnic coalition, increasingly dominated by its largest component, the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO). Together with the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) and the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC), these three parties formed the Alliance government, which took over from the British administration. When parliament was restored in 1971 after the 1969 Emergency (see below), the Alliance had been expanded to take in a number of smaller 'mosquito' parties, some of which flitted in and out of the coalition, and was later renamed as the *Barisan Nasional* (BN, or National Front).⁶ The BN has remained the dominant political force since.

INSTITUTIONS AND PRACTICE OF DEMOCRACY

Malaysia is a constitutionally and institutionally democratic, but there are few, if any, academic observers who would characterise the country as a fully functional democracy. Institutional bias and undemocratic practices virtually ensure the regime re-election at the federal level. State governments have been less easy for the regime to control, with three out of the thirteen states – Kelantan, Sabah and Terengganu – having fallen into opposition hands at one

⁵ See Susan E. Ackerman and Raymond L. M. Lee, *Heaven in Transition: Non-Muslim religious innovation and ethnic identity in Malaysia*, Kuala Lumpur, Forum, 1988.

⁶ The BN coalition as lined up in 1971 also included the *Parti Islam SeMalaysia* (PAS - Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party), until then the largest opposition party, which had controlled Kelantan since Independence. PAS left the coalition again in 1977.

time or another. In such cases, however, the federal government has often resorted to draconian measures to reel in the errant state.⁷

Among the factors that have been identified as serving to inhibit the democratic process in Malaysia are:

Control of the media. Virtually all the mainstream daily newspapers are owned by companies themselves controlled by, or closely associated with, BN component parties and individuals.⁸ Slavishly pro-government reportage is thus the norm, particularly during election periods.⁹ Non-regime controlled publications are severely restricted by the Printing Presses and Publications Act, which requires them to apply annually for a publishing permit and which allows the government to ban any publication or periodical. The regime has also made it clear that it will not allow opposition parties broadcast time on the national radio and television corporation RTM (*Radio Televisyen Malaysia*) as it is 'the official channel of the government of the day [which] conveys official

⁷ On Kelantan, see Simon Barraclough, 'The dynamics of coercion in the Malaysian political process', *Modern Asian Studies*, 19:4 (1985): 797-822.

⁸ Edmund Terence Gomez, *Political Business: Corporate involvement of Malaysian political parties*, Townsville: James Cook University of North Queensland, 1994; Zaharom Nain, 'The structure of the media industry: Implications for democracy', in Francis Loh Kok Wah and Khoo Boo Teik (eds.), *Democracy in Malaysia: Discourses and practices*, Richmond: Curzon, 2002, pp. 111-37.

⁹ For a detailed content analysis of newspaper coverage during the 1959 and 1964 elections, see Abdul Latiff Abu Bakar, *Peranan Media dalam Pilihan Raya Persekutuan* [The role of the media in federal elections], Shah Alam, Fajar Bakti, 1998. No such study has been carried out of more recent elections. Recent changes in media content are discussed briefly in Francis Loh Kok Wah and Mustafa K. Anuar, 'The press in Malaysia in the early 1990s: Corporatisation, technological innovation and the middle class', in Muhammad Ikmal Said and Zahid Emby (eds.), *Malaysia: Critical perspectives*, Petaling Jaya, Malaysian Social Science Association, 1996, pp. 96-131.

information to the people'.¹⁰ Nonetheless, some degree of press freedom does exist in small pockets. Until recently, the Chinese press was relatively independent, and opposition groups have made effective use of alternative media, most notably the Internet, although some analysts have questioned the ultimate efficacy of the Internet as a tool of opposition dissemination.¹¹

Repressive legislation. A number of powerful and discretionary acts have imbued the state with wide-ranging repressive capabilities. Most notorious amongst these is Internal Security Act (ISA), which allow for effectively indefinite detention without trial, with little legal recourse for detainees. The Police Act requires permits to be obtained for all public gatherings – a requirement stringently enforced for opposition groups, and all but ignored for government parties. In July 1999, the Penang branch of the Democratic Action Party complained that it received only twelve permits for *ceramah* (public talks) in two years, whilst BN parties were able to hold twenty-two public gatherings in the same state within a three month period because 'the same requirement [of obtaining a permit] was not applied to Barisan Nasional component parties'.¹² Amendments to the Societies Act and the Official Secrets Act, in 1981 and 1986 respectively, fettered even further the arena of public debate. Conversely, as we

¹⁰ *Daily Express*, 22 July 1999.

¹¹ Jason P. Abbott, 'Democracy@internet.asia? The challenges to the emancipatory potential of the net: Lessons from China and Malaysia', *Third World Quarterly*, 22:1 (2001), pp. 99-114. The MCA purchase of the *Nanyang* group of newspapers in June 2001 has considerably curtailed the independence of the Chinese media. See Graham Brown, 'Apologists and eunuchs? Regime control of the media in Malaysia and its weaknesses', paper presented at the International Workshop on Democratisation and the Media in Southeast Asia, Institute of Asia-Pacific Studies, University of Nottingham, 25 April 2003.

¹² 'Complaint about permits.' *New Straits Times*, 14 July 1999.

shall see later, these laws have also occasionally provided the focal point for opposition collaboration and unification.

Constitutional amendments. With its habitual two-thirds majority, the regime has amended the constitution to its needs as it sees fit. Government politicians from Mahathir down often show disrespect for the constitution as the supreme law of the land; in 1997, for instance, the then vice-president of the MCA Fong Chan Ong claimed that ‘the people should be grateful to the Government for ensuring their freedom of speech and religion and the independence to practise their own cultures and traditions’ – rights enshrined in the constitution, which, at least theoretically, supersedes any government policy.¹³ It has been claimed by the opposition DAP that the government has amended the constitution over a thousand times since independence. Indeed, Means argues that

the Constitution is valued for its capacity to provide the rituals of legitimacy, but [its] constitutional limitations on the government provide little more than a temporary check on the exercise of power.¹⁴

Control of the Judiciary. Writing in 1987, the prominent social activist Chandra Muzaffar suggested that the Judiciary was an important force that ‘may help preserve Malaysian democracy’.¹⁵ Since then, however, the independence of the Judiciary has been greatly reduced, bringing it firmly under the control of

¹³ *New Straits Times*, 24 April 1997.

¹⁴ Gordon P. Means, *Malaysian Politics: The Second Generation*, Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1991, p. 142.

¹⁵ Chandra Muzaffar, *Challenges and Choices in Malaysian Politics and Society*, Penang, Aliran, 1989, p. 147.

the Executive. This has been defended by the regime as necessary to ensure the democratic accountability of the Judiciary.¹⁶ Indeed, Mahathir has even gone so far as to suggest that the Judiciary needs further reform as ‘they tend to favour [the opposition]’.¹⁷ Despite Mahathir’s protestations, however, the judiciary remained overwhelmingly politically compliant throughout the 1990s, as evidenced in the various trials of Anwar Ibrahim.¹⁸

‘Money politics’. Initially under the guise of the 1971 promulgated New Economic Policy (NEP), the regime has developed a fearsome machinery for dispensing patronage to supporters of the government. This ‘money politics’ involves both state and private funds – the BN parties control between them a massive corporate empire – and operates on the individual, corporate and even state level.¹⁹ The abuse of public funds is often unabashed. In the run up to the March 1999 state elections in Sabah, for instance, it was declared that the Federal Government ‘could not be generous [with funding] to an opposition state government’ and would only provide larger allocations of federal monies if the BN won the election.²⁰ A similar threat was been made in relation to Kedah,

¹⁶ Mahathir Mohamad, *The Malaysian System of Government*, Kuala Lumpur, Prime Minister's Office, 1995.

¹⁷ ‘Mahathir interview – Politics and the Anwar affair.’ *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 24 June 1999.

¹⁸ For an analysis of judicial independence in these trials, see William Case, ‘The Anwar Ibrahim trial and its wider implications’, in Colin Barlow and Francis Loh Kok Wah (eds.), *Malaysian Economics and Politics in the New Century*, Cheltenham, Edward Elgar, 2003.

¹⁹ See Edmund Terence Gomez, *Money Politics in the Barisan Nasional*, Kuala Lumpur, Forum, 1991; Gomez, *Political Business*; Gomez and Jomo, *Malaysia’s Political Economy*.

²⁰ ‘Bigger allocations only with BN govt, says PM.’ *New Straits Times*, 11 March 1999.

one of the states that PAS had the greatest possibility of capturing at the 1999 general election.²¹

Electoral gerrymandering. The process and conduct of elections themselves is also often highly dubious. A Commonwealth observer group somewhat reluctantly invited to oversee the 1990 general elections concluded that the conduct of elections in the country was 'free but not fair'.²² Regular constitutional redelineation exercises, carried out by the nominally independent Elections Committee, invariably favour the regime, including increasing overweightage in traditional government strongholds, such as Johor and Sarawak. In the 1999 general election, for instance, the government won more than three quarters of the seats on a popular vote of barely fifty-six per cent. Actual fraud during elections has also been widely alleged, though such claims are hard to substantiate. Former Sabah Chief Minister Joseph Pairin Kitingan has claimed that 'pollution in the electoral role' was the main reason for the BN's continued success in the state.²³

SOCIAL MOVEMENTS AND CIVIL SOCIETY BEFORE 1980

Ethnic Mobilisation

Donald Horowitz has persuasively argued that a multiethnic coalition, such as the BN, is the most stable form of government for a multicultural society, but that only one such coalition can survive long term in any single polity.²⁴ Such a

²¹ 'Sanusi: State can't afford Opposition regime.' *New Straits Times*, 1 July 1999.

²² Commonwealth Observer Group on the Malaysian Elections, *Malaysian Elections: 20 and 21 October 1990*, London, Commonwealth Secretariat, 1991.

²³ Interview, Joseph Pairin Kitingan, Penampang, August 1999.

²⁴ Donald L. Horowitz, *Ethnic Groups in Conflict*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1985; Donald L. Horowitz, 'Incentives and behaviour in the ethnic politics of Sri Lanka and Malaysia', *Third World Quarterly*, 10:4 (1989), pp. 18-35.

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coalition must necessarily situate itself in the ethnic middle ground, and challenger coalitions are thus forced to ethnicist extremes, making enduring cooperation impossible. Although he is not concerned with consociationalism *per se*, Horowitz's studies nonetheless underline the strength of consociationalism as a form of government in multiethnic societies, including its ability to preclude effective political opposition. Supporters of the consociationalist view have argued nonetheless that it is in fact *more* democratic than other forms of democracy:

The government-versus-opposition norm prescribed by normative democratic theory appears to be a principle of exclusion: a large minority should be kept out of the government.²⁵

Opponents have argued that consociationalism engenders a process of 'ethnic outbidding', which would ultimately bring about the downfall of democracy in such societies.²⁶ Most observers of Malaysian politics, however, concede that the debate over consociationalism has been redundant since the ethnic riots of May 1969, which brought about a radical change in Malaysian government, and the end of any consociationalist tendencies that might have existed.

The process of decolonisation in Malaysia contributed to the ethnicisation of its society at every level. The geographical formation of Malaysia had ethnic ramifications. In the early 1960s, the British government asked Malaya to

²⁵ Arend Lijphart, *Democracy in Plural Societies: A comparative exploration*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1977, p. 29.

²⁶ Alvin Rabushka and Kenneth Shepsle, *Politics in Plural Societies: A theory of democratic instability*, Columbus, Merrill, 1972.

incorporate Singapore into its federation. The British government was becoming increasingly worried by the rise of communism in Singapore, and incorporation into Malaya was seen as a way to neutralise this. The inclusion of Singapore – with its overwhelmingly Chinese population – would, however, have tipped the ethnic balance too far away from Malay dominance for the Malayan government's comfort. Malaya's Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman thus demanded the inclusion of the north Borneo states²⁷ to offset the impact of Singapore's entry. Clearly, Singapore's hasty departure from the federation thus tilted the scales once again in favour of the *bumiputera*, although this effect was somewhat mitigated by unexpected divisions within the *bumiputera*. Tunku Abdul Rahman's assumption that the East Malaysian *bumiputera* would act in tandem with the peninsular Malays was confounded when some communities, most notably the Christian Kadazans in Sabah and Dayak in Sarawak, began articulating their own agenda and demands.²⁸

A range of other factors in the decolonisation process aggravated these demographic differences and contributed further to the ethnicisation of society. The social unrest of the immediate pre-Independence period radicalised the ethnic tensions left behind by the British ethnic division of labour.²⁹ The overwhelmingly Chinese profile of the communist insurgency was perhaps the

²⁷ The original proposal had included both Sabah (then British North Borneo) and Sarawak and what is now the Sultanate of Brunei. Brunei, however, pulled out during the negotiations.

²⁸ See, for instance, Loh, 'Modernisation, cultural revival and counter-hegemony', and Jayum A. Jawam, *The Ethnic Factor in Modern Politics: The case of Sarawak, East Malaysia*, Kingston-upon-Hull, Centre for Southeast Asian Studies, University of Hull, occasional papers no. 20, 1991.

²⁹ Timothy N. Harper, *The End of Empire and the Making of Malaya*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2000.

most important factor here. Others have traced this heightening of tensions further back to the Japanese Occupation from 1943-45, and their select discrimination of the Chinese.³⁰ Moreover, the process of negotiating Independence itself contributed further to divisions between ethnic groups, particularly over such issues as the status of Islam as the official religion, English and/or Malay as the official language and role of 'special rights' for the Malays. The process of decolonisation was thus not just a negotiation between a nascent independent Malaya and its erstwhile colonial masters, but also an internal negotiation between the major ethnic groups of the new state.³¹ Particularly important here was the original British plan for Malayan independence, the Malayan Union plan, which would have stripped the Malay monarchs of all but ceremonial powers and granted broad citizenship rights to non-Malays. Malay protests against this plan were led by the newly formed UMNO, and had long-lasting ramifications on the construction of ethnic politics in the country.³² 'Malay nationalism' became the backbone of Malayan politics, aimed at improving the economic lot of the Malays in relation to the Indian and especially the Chinese, and also to establish Malay identity as the basis of

³⁰ See Cheah Boon Kheng, 'Sino-Malay conflicts in Malaya, 1945-1946: Communist vendetta and Islamic resistance', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 12:1 (1981), pp. 108-117 and Cheah Boon Keng, 'Memory as history and moral judgement: Oral and written accounts of the Japanese occupation of Malaya', in P. Lim Pui Huen and Diana Wong (eds.), *War and Memory in Malaysia and Singapore* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2000), pp. 23-41.

³¹ Lee Kam Hing and Heng Pek Koon, 'The Chinese in the Malaysian political system', in Lee and Tan, *The Chinese in Malaysia*, pp. 194-227.

³² For the classic study of the Malayan Union protests, see Anthony J. Stockwell, *British Policy and Malay Politics during the Malayan Union Experiment, 1942-1948*, Kuala Lumpur: Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society, 1979.

Malaysian politics.³³ The anti-Malayan Union agitation and the issue of Malay 'special rights' became an important recourse for UMNO to assert its political role in protecting Malay special rights.

The formation of Malaysia, then, in particular the Malayan Union plan and the inclusion of Singapore, stoked ethnic tensions. Ethnic violence associated with the struggle for independence and Singapore's entry into the federation was sparked on a number of occasions. In 1950, three days of rioting broke out in Singapore when the high court annulled the Muslim marriage of a Dutch girl brought up by a Malay family, and returned her to Holland. Demonstrations by Singaporean Malays against what they saw as an insult to their religion, apparently orchestrated by militant left-wing groups agitating for a 'Greater Indonesia', descended into violence against both Europeans and Chinese.³⁴ Rioting broke out again in 1956 over the alleged infiltration of Chinese middle schools in Singapore by the Malayan Communist Party. The riots raised the prospect of communal conflict as the sole fatality caused by the rioters themselves was a Malay driver beaten by the Chinese rioters, but appeals for calm by Malay political leaders averted wider clashes.³⁵ The 1956 riots also left their mark on the Singapore government, which became convinced that a tight internal security apparatus 'was essential if they were to persuade the British to

³³ Muhammad Ikmal Said, 'Malay nationalism and national identity', *Suomen Antropologi*, 2 (1995), pp. 11-31.

³⁴ See Anthony J. Stockwell, 'Imperial security and Moslem militancy, with special reference to the Hertogh riots in Singapore', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 17:2 (1986), pp. 322-335. On the links with left-wing Malay groups, see Firdaus Abdullah, *Radical Malay Politics: Its origins and early development*, Kuala Lumpur, Pelanduk, 1985.

³⁵ Richard Clutterbuck, *Riot and Revolution in Singapore and Malaya, 1945-1962*, London, Faber and Faber, 1973.

allow them to full independence' in the context of the Malaysian Federation.³⁶ After Singapore's inclusion in the Malaysian federation, ethnic rioting again broke out in 1964 following anti-PAP agitation, this time by UMNO-sponsored groups.³⁷ Thirty-three people were killed in those disturbances, which played a decisive role in fomenting the break between Singapore and Kuala Lumpur. In an inflammatory passage in his memoirs, Lee Kuan Yew alleged that if Singapore had not been expelled from Malaysia, on going legal proceeding following the riots 'would mean a devastating exposure of key UMNO leaders' methods of incitement to racism and bloody riots'.³⁸

Aside from the status of Singapore, one of the most contentious ethnic issues of the early years was that of the national language, with educated Chinese and Indians – many of whom at the time were not proficient in *bahasa Melayu* (Malay) – eager for English to be maintained as a national language. The Constitution designated Malay as the sole national language, but allowed the usage of English for a period of ten years, from 1957. As 1967 approached, communal antipathies were again raised by the demands of some radical Malay groups that Malay be enforced as the sole language in all government institutions, including schools. As Means notes, however, much of the ethnic tension of this period was overshadowed by the prevailing external threats to Malaysia – *konfrontasi* with Indonesia, and the Philippines' claim on Sabah.³⁹

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 141.

³⁷ Michael Leifer, 'Communal violence in Singapore', *Asian Survey*, 4:10 (1964), pp. 1115-21.

³⁸ Lee Kuan Yew, *From Third World to First: The Singapore story, 1965-2000*, New York, HarperCollins, 2000, p. 622.

³⁹ Means, *Malaysian Politics*.

Nonetheless, prior to 1969, ethnic rioting had broken out on a number of occasions across the country, resulting in around fifty fatalities.⁴⁰

These ethnic disturbances were overshadowed on 13 May 1969 when widespread ethnic violence broke out following a general election. Such was the political impact of these riots that it is virtually impossible to analyse Malaysian politics over the last three decades without some consideration of the events of May 1969. This is not just because of the events themselves and their political repercussions, but also a reflection of the extent to which they have become embedded in the popular memory and political discourse of Malaysians of all ethnicities. As much as Independence itself, 13 May 1969 is arguably the defining moment – in the minds of Malaysians – of Malaysian history. In a recent survey of social attitudes towards history in Malaysia, this view was particularly strong amongst Malay respondents, who ranked race riots as the second most important event in Malaysia's history; Chinese and Indian respondents ranked them of fifth and sixth importance respectively.⁴¹

The events themselves are not entirely clear. Polling for the 1969 general election took place on 10 May for the Peninsular states, with the East Malaysian states scheduled to hold their polls later in the month. When the results of the voting were counted, it became clear that the Alliance government has lost

⁴⁰ See Government of Malaysia, *Towards Preserving National Security*, Kertas Perintah 1988, 14 (Appendix I) for a list of such incidents.

⁴¹ See James H. Liu, Belinda Lawrence, Colleen Ward and Sheela Abraham, 'Social representations of history in Malaysia and Singapore: On the relationship between national and ethnic identity', *Asian Journal of Social Psychology*, 5:1 (2002), pp. 3-20. All groups ranked Independence as the most important event. It should be noted that the survey sample was restricted to university undergraduate students.

substantial support, particularly the MCA, which lost twenty out of the thirty-three seats it contested. Although the government was at no risk of losing its majority, it seemed likely that it would lose control of several states, including the urban centres of Selangor and Penang, and even its two-thirds majority in the federal parliament, which it had held since independence and has held again ever since.⁴² The Chinese opposition parties arranged celebratory parades, which provoked retaliatory demonstration by UMNO members and supporters, apparently led by the *Menteri Besar* (Chief Minister) of Selangor, Harun bin Haji Idris. On 13 May, the demonstrations descended into riots, which lasted four days and saw the deaths of at least two hundred people and the destruction of six thousand (overwhelmingly Chinese) homes.⁴³ In response to the crisis, a third national state of Emergency was declared, and Parliament and the Constitution were suspended. Academic observers at the time concluded that democracy in Malaysia was finished.⁴⁴

Parliament was, however, restored in 1971, after all the major opposition parties except the DAP had been coopted into the government, which was later renamed the *Barisan Nasional*. In addition, the Prime Minister since independence, Tunku Abdul Rahman had been somewhat unwillingly retired and been replaced by his deputy, Tun Abdul Razak, who had been Director of the National Operations Council, which had run the country during the suspension

⁴² Early election results (no final tally was produced) suggested that the Alliance had in fact won less than fifty per cent of the vote. See K.J. Ratnam and R.S. Milne, 'The 1969 parliamentary election in West Malaysia', *Pacific Affairs*, 43:2 (1970), pp. 203-26.

⁴³ Leon Comber, *13 May 1969: A historical survey of Sino-Malay relations*, Kuala Lumpur, Heinemann Asia, 1983. The official death toll for the riots stands at 196, but the real toll is widely believed to be much higher.

⁴⁴ Rabushka and Shepsle, *Politics in Plural Societies*.

of Parliament. Beyond these superficial changes, it was clear that the fundamental basis of Malaysian politics had changed. Gone were the *laissez-faire* economy and the political consociationalism, which had characterised the political situation in the immediate post-independence period. In their place, the government promulgated a series of chauvinistic pro-Malay policies.

The government argued that the root cause of the May 1969 riots had been the economic disparities between the Malays and the non-Malays, a legacy of the colonial administration and its policy of an 'ethnic division of labour'.⁴⁵ In an attempt to reverse this, the Razak administration implemented the New Economic Policy (NEP). The NEP had two ostensible goals – the complete eradication of poverty, and the eradication of the association between ethnic group and economic role. In reality, however, it heralded a new era of state interventionism and Malay chauvinism; in the words of Alasdair Bowie, it represented 'a form of Third World economic nationalism [in which] the principal antagonist was not foreign but rather domestic [i.e. the Chinese]'.⁴⁶

That May 1969 marks a turning point in Malaysian politics is undisputed. Many commentators have noted that it marks a departure from the Independence struck bargain of 'Politics for the Malays, Economy for the Chinese' towards a much more aggressively pro-Malay stance in all areas of society. What is less commonly noted is the importance of this period in terms of Malaysian political consciousness. Social, economic and ethnic groupings

⁴⁵ For the official government report on the riots, see The National Operations Council, *The May 13 Tragedy: A Report*, Kuala Lumpur, 1969.

⁴⁶ Alasdair Bowie, 'The dynamics of business-government relations in industrialising Malaysia', in Andrew MacIntyre (ed.), *Business and Government in Industrialising Asia*, London, Allen and Unwin, 1994, p. 171.

often define themselves today in terms of their deal before and after 1969. Given the radical shift in politics associated with the 1969-71 period, this is hardly surprising. May 1969 represent more than concerns over economic and political power, however. It has entered the Malaysian consciousness as a political myth: an almost ever-present threat (or reminder) of what may happen if the ethnic balance is disturbed. This mythical quality has undoubtedly been refined by the regime's constant reminders of the events, which have made it, to use the words of one opposition leader, a 'political bogey with which to frighten the people into voting BN'.⁴⁷ Thus, for instance, in the run-up to the November 1999 general elections, Mahathir openly stated that it was a 'fact' that

a weak government will bring about chaos and racial rioting...

We did not get two-thirds majority [in 1969] and there were riots... If I don't tell the people this, then I am not carrying out my responsibilities.⁴⁸

The curbs on political participation in the wake of the 1969 riots led to a fall in directly expressed ethnic tensions. The inclusion of PAS in the widened *Barisan Nasional* government proved a moderating influence.⁴⁹ PAS' inclusion in the government also provided the social space for a number of new and critical Islamic organisations to arise, however, most notably *Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia* (ABIM - Islamic Youth Movement of Malaysia), fronted by Anwar Ibrahim.⁵⁰ These organisations spearheaded a popular Islamic revivalist

⁴⁷ Interview, Joseph Pairin Kitingan. Pairin's PBS has since rejoined the BN.

⁴⁸ *Borneo Post*, 11 August 1999.

⁴⁹ Syed Ahmad Hussein, 'Muslim politics and the discourse on democracy', in Loh and Khoo, *Democracy in Malaysia*, pp. 75-107.

⁵⁰ Jomo and Ahmad, 'Malaysia's Islamic movements'.

movement, mostly inspired by the religious struggle in Iran.⁵¹ The success of ABIM in particular was largely a result of the NEP, under the auspices of which the number of Malay students at local universities had increased drastically. Yet ABIM's involvement in student politics, and its focus on rural poverty rather than ethnic issues *per se*, also mitigated its ethnic chauvinism. By 1980, ethnicity was thus apparently of declining importance in the political process.

The Labour Movement Before 1980

The labour and trade unions movement in Malaysia has historically occupied a curious position. Inherently tied to a socialist ideology that rejected ethnicity as the mobilising force for popular politics, the movement itself was nonetheless rent by ethnic divides, largely a legacy of the colonial organisation of labour.⁵² The limited participation of the Malay community in waged labour during the colonial period left the unions ethnically marginalised in the Malay-dominated postcolonial polity. Even as Malays began entering the workforce in greater numbers, the tendency to use their local UMNO branches as the medium for voicing labour grievances and settling disputes rendered the unions less

⁵¹ Interviews: Raja Petra Raja Kamaruddin, Free Anwar Campaign Director, Bangsar, April 2001 and Zulkifli Sulong, *Harakah* editor, Kuala Lumpur, May 2001. A simple illustration of the Islamic revival can be seen in a comparison of the Malay films of the 1960 and those of the modern period, in particular in the form of dress by the women.

⁵² On the colonial labour movement, see Leong Yee Fong, *Labour and Trade Unionism in Colonial Malaya: A study of the socio-economic and political bases of the Malayan labour movement, 1930-1957*, Pulau Pinang, Penerbit Universiti Sains Malaysia, 1999. The literature on the ethnic division of labour in colonial Malaya is wide and varied; a good exposition is provided by Colin E.R. Abraham, *Divide and Rule: The roots of race relations in Malaysia*, Petaling Jaya, Institute for Social Analysis, 1997, whilst a more critical treatment can be found in Paul H. Kratoska, 'Rice cultivation and the ethnic division of labor in British Malaya', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 24:2 (1982), pp. 280-314.

effective and reinforced ethnic divisions within the movement.⁵³ In addition, the overwhelmingly Chinese constituency of the communist insurgency left a legacy of ethnically-delimited militancy with, broadly speaking, Chinese-based unions favouring a militant approach to labour demands, and Indian-based, often state-sponsored unions, favouring a less combative approach.⁵⁴

With the outbreak of the communist insurgency, labour agitation and strikes were 'intense' in the early post-war years – more than one million workdays were lost to strikes in 1946 and 1947.⁵⁵ Inimitably linked with the communists and other militant organisations including 'triad' gangs and Chinese secret societies, these protests were often strong-handed, provoking equally strong reactions from the security forces. In April 1947, after police fired on strikers in a Kedah rubber estate, the British administration stepped in to restore labour discipline, and began working closely with employers and the secret services to avert further strike action.⁵⁶ The administration's repression of the labour movement was stepped up considerably following the declaration of Emergency in 1948; the police forces cracked down on unions and labour organisations, detaining leaders and raiding offices, and closing down almost half the country's unions. Those unionists who survived the purge were seen as having

⁵³ See, especially, Zawawi, *The Malay Labourer* and Minder Bhopal, 'Malaysian unions in political crisis: Assessing the impact of the Asian contagion', *Asia Pacific Business Review*, 8:1 (2001), pp. 73-100.

⁵⁴ See, for instance, Jomo Kwame Sundaram and Patricia Todd, *Trade Unions and the State in Peninsula Malaysia*, Singapore, Oxford University Press, 1994. On the Indian union sector, see P. Ramasamy, *Plantation Labour, Unions, Capital and the State in Peninsular Malaysia*, Kuala Lumpur, Oxford University Press, 1994.

⁵⁵ Harper, *The End of Empire and the Making of Malaya*, p. 133.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 135.

collaborated.⁵⁷ Popular support for the labour movement was also shattered by the activities of the unions themselves, which had 'degenerated into a lawless and destructive movement'; labour militancy came to an abrupt halt.⁵⁸

The labour movement was, however, remobilised in the immediate pre-Independence period, from 1956-57 (see Figure 4.1). Whereas the prior mobilisation was linked directly with the communist organisations of the Emergency, however, this resurgence was more closely associated with the Malaysian Labour Party. The Labour Party had been trounced by the Alliance in the 1955 pre-Independence elections, and had subsequently sought to broaden its support through the trade unions, encouraging an upsurge in labour activism.⁵⁹ A strong market for tin and rubber, strengthening the movement's demands for higher wages, exacerbated this new militancy. In the face of government repression, including the arrest of over a hundred unionists in 1958, and labour legislation that allowed employers to sack striking workers, the resurgence could not sustain its momentum.⁶⁰ Nonetheless, it indirectly ushered in further legislative restrictions on union activities in 1959, effectively eradicating political trade unionism.⁶¹

⁵⁷ Jomo and Todd, *Trade Unions and the State*, p. 85.

⁵⁸ Leong Yee Fong, 'The emergence and demise of the Chinese labour movement in Colonial Malaya, 1920-1960', in Lee and Tan, *The Chinese in Malaysia*, p. 181.

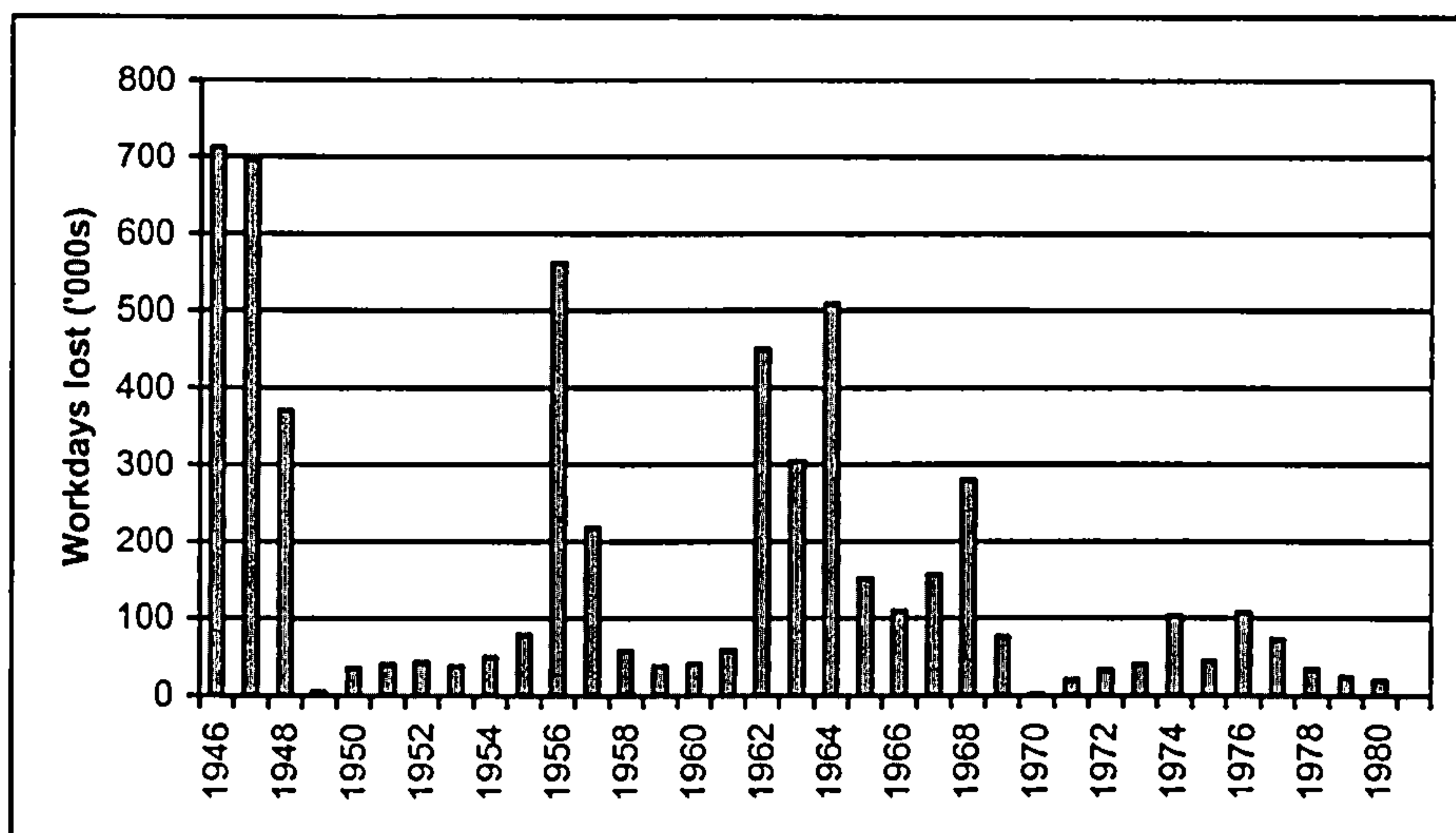
⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ Jomo and Todd, *Trade Unions and the State*, p. 95

⁶¹ Leong, 'The emergence and demise of the Chinese labour movement', p. 189.

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Figure 4.1: Workdays Lost Due to Strikes, 1946-1980⁶²



Following Independence, the new post-colonial state enjoyed a ‘honeymoon’ period in labour relations, as the left focussed on electoral contests rather than labour agitation.⁶³ Political parties associated with the labour movement performed respectably in the 1959 general elections. The Socialist Front – a coalition of the Chinese-based Labour Party and the Malay-based PRM (*Parti Rakyat Malaysia*, or Malaysian People’s Party) – won thirteen per cent of the vote and eight seats. The left-leaning PPP (People’s Progressive Party) also performed well, winning over six per cent of the vote and four seats.

The end of the Emergency in 1960 gave the unions more freedom to mobilise, at least briefly. From 1962 onwards, a variety of factors led to a renewed confrontation between the labour movement and the state. The period from 1962 to 1969 saw the most sustained labour mobilisation since the war, although annual levels never reached peaks of the mid-1940s. For the most part, however, this increase in labour activism has been attributed to more

⁶²Source: Adapted from Jomo and Todd, *Trade Unions and the State*, table 2-16 and Harper, *The End of Empire and the Making of Malaya*, p. 133. Figure for 1946 for April-December only.

⁶³ Jomo and Todd, *Trade Unions and the State*, p. 106.

conventional and less political labour demands, such as pay and conditions.⁶⁴ In as much, it is worth noting that the period coincided with the rise of the Malayan (later Malaysian) Trades Union Congress (MTUC) as the main umbrella body for the union movement. The MTUC had a long-standing policy of non-participation in politics. Nonetheless, the government's toleration of even this more benign labour movement was short-lived. Further legislative restrictions on unions were enacted in 1964 under the guise of the Second Emergency at the time of the Indonesian *konfrontasi*.

In the 1964 general election, the Socialist Front improved its share of the vote to more than sixteen per cent, surpassing even PAS, but this translated into only two seats. This performance, however, was quickly followed by a period of fragmentation and dispute in the parliamentary left. Over the following two years, the Socialist Front collapsed amid acrimonious disagreements between the Labour Party and PRM.⁶⁵ The formation of the Democratic Action Party (DAP) as a Peninsula off-shoot of Lee Kuan Yew's Singapore-based People's Action Party further split the left. The Labour Party subsequently underwent its own internal split between its militant leftwing and the more moderate rightwing, with the former eventually gaining the upper hand. Following the militant take-over, the party withdrew from electoral politics.

In 1967, after the collapse of the Socialist Front and largely inspired by the widespread protests in Hong Kong and Macau following the advent of the

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 116. One notable exception to the de-politicisation of the union movement was the 100-day strike by newspaper workers at the *Utusan Melayu*, protesting its acquisition by UMNO.

⁶⁵ R.K. Vasil, *Politics in a Plural Society: A study of non-communal political parties in West Malaysia*, Kuala Lumpur, Oxford University Press, 1971.

Cultural Revolution in China, militant labour activism surged. In June, a wave of demonstrations and small riots hit Malaysia and Singapore.⁶⁶ Falling rubber prices had hit both the urban and rural poor hard, but the demonstrations were overwhelmingly Chinese, a fact that the government used welcomingly to support its allegations of a Communist plot. Following the disturbances, two Hong Kong-based magazines and three songs eulogising Mao Zedong were banned, and three Labour Party leaders, including one state assemblyman, were detained under the ISA.⁶⁷ In November, a clumsy policy decision by the government gave the left the opportunity it had been waiting for. At the time, Malaysia was under-going a currency transition from the old currency based on the British sterling to a new currency based on gold. After Harold Wilson's devaluation of the pound, the Malaysian government took the surprising and short-sighted decision to devalue the old currency by fifteen per cent, but not the new currency. Poor farmers and urban workers of all ethnic groups were particularly affected by the move, as they tended to keep their savings in cash, much of which was in the old currency. The Labour Party called for a *hartal* (general strike) in Penang to protest the move. The city quickly descended into rioting and violence, leaving eleven dead and over a hundred injured on the first day of the strike.⁶⁸ The government responded by imposing a twenty-four hour curfew and bringing the army in to patrol the streets. As the disturbances spread to other areas, however, it became clear that the violence was communally linked. After an attempt to organise a similar *hartal* in Kuala Lumpur failed, the rioting faded out. Official tolls put the total dead at twenty-nine, with two

⁶⁶ 'The Communist wolf.' *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 15 June 1967

⁶⁷ 'Round-up.' *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 16 July 1967

⁶⁸ 'Red or racial?' *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 03 December 1967

hundred injured and over a thousand arrested.⁶⁹ Among those arrested were twenty-four Labour Party leaders, including the chairman of the Penang Division. The Penang *hartal* was the last hurrah of militant labour activism. The Labour Party collapsed shortly after and, two years later, the 1969 Emergency saw the introduction of further legislative restrictions on trade unions, including measures forcing public service unions to withdraw from the MTUC, and ushered in a period of labour demobilisation and 'hollow corporatism' that would last throughout the 1970s.⁷⁰

Some observations can be made of the trends in the labour movement elaborated above, which will have important ramifications for the discussion of the labour movement in later chapters. Firstly, it should be observed that labour mobilisation from after the war until 1980 followed a pattern of periodic, but ever-decreasing, upsurges in activity. Secondly, associated with this was an increasing depoliticisation of the unions, and a concomitant move away from militancy. Although prominent unionists such as the MTUC General Secretary V. David remained active in opposition politics, the unions themselves increasingly steered clear of political entanglements, and by the 1970s what little labour mobilisation remained was almost exclusively industrial rather than political. Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, this survey of the labour movement before 1980 has demonstrated the extent to which the use of increased legislative restriction and selective repression has been a highly effective tool for the government in the Malaysian context.

⁶⁹ Nancy Snider, 'What happened in Penang?', *Asian Survey*, 8:12 (1968), p. 966.

⁷⁰ Jomo and Todd, *Trade Unions and the State*, p. 126.

'New' Sites of Resistance and Opposition

Thus far, then, this brief sketch of social mobilisation and civil society prior to 1980 has highlighted two important trends. Firstly, ethnic divisions in Malaysia became increasingly delineated, both institutionally and socially, although the new political environment of the 1970s saw a drop in the fervour of these confrontations. Secondly, the mobilising potential of the trade unions and labour movement declined drastically over the same period. It has been argued that, by the 1980s, the labour movement had been 'coopted' by the regime far enough to 'secure its allegiance to the state'.⁷¹ Whilst it will be shown in later chapters that the labour movement in fact retained some importance as a site of resistance and opposition in Malaysia, it cannot be denied that its mobilising potential was a fraction of its previous strength.

During the 1970s, social opposition and mobilisation remained almost exclusively linked to these two themes of labour and ethnicity. Nonetheless, this period did see the emergence of a number of organisation and groups that have had a profound impact on Malaysian politics since the 1980s. Amongst these were the Consumer Association of Penang (CAP) and *Sahabat Alam Malaysia* (SAM - Friends of the Earth Malaysia), formed in the late 1960s and early 1970s by Mohamed Idris, who remains active with both organisations to date. Also founded at this time were the Environmental Protection Society of Malaysia (EPSM) and the Selangor Graduates Society (SGS), both led by Gurmit Singh K.S., who also remains active today. Last, but by no means least, *Aliran Kesedaran Negara* (ALIRAN - National Consciousness Movement) was formed in 1977, and grew to be perhaps the most influential NGO in the 1980s and

⁷¹ Nair, 'Constructing civil society in Malaysia', p. 94.

1990s. The emergence of these groups was concomitant with the appearance of 'new' social movements as important phenomena in Malaysian politics. Again, the impact of these movements was somewhat limited until the 1980s, yet some patterns and trajectories were already becoming evident in the 1970s. In particular, their ability to form cross-ethnic solidarities and alliances was evident from the outset.⁷²

The 1970s also saw the brief emergence and demise of student activism. As mentioned above, the development of student activism was integrally linked with the drastic increase in Malay student numbers under the NEP. Organisations like ABIM flourished in this environment. An uneasy truce emerged on the campuses between the Malay and non-Malay groups, who found it hard to co-operate, but were joined by a common idealism and desire for political accountability. Although student activism remained a predominantly Malay affair, it thus did not take on communal overtones – although a government White Paper blamed, ironically, Chinese communists for student unrest.

The main cause adopted by this activist movement was rural poverty. From 1974 through 1976, a number of large demonstrations were held in affected areas, as well as on the university campuses. The government response was the same as its tried and tested formula against the trade unions: new legislative restrictions and selective repression. The Universities and University College (Amendment) Act in 1975 prohibited students from membership of any organisation or society without prior written authorisation from the vice-

⁷² Interview, Gurmit Singh K.S, environmentalist, Petaling Jaya, July 2001.

chancellor. They were further not permitted to 'say or do anything that could be interpreted as supporting, sympathizing with, or opposing any political party or trade union'.⁷³ The ability of university staff to participate politically was also restricted. In terms of repression, the demonstrations themselves were faced down with massive deployments of Federal Reserve Units and mass arrests were made – at one demonstration over one thousand students were arrested. The majority of arrests were short-lived – most were released within a few days. Student leaders, however, were selectively detained for longer periods under the ISA. Anwar himself was detained for almost two years; another leader, the former secretary general of the PRM and lecturer at Universiti Malaya, Syed Husin Ali was also detained for six years for his involvement. Student activism, or at least the mass mobilisation thereof, was effectively brought to an end.

⁷³ Crouch, *Government and Society in Malaysia*, p. 93.

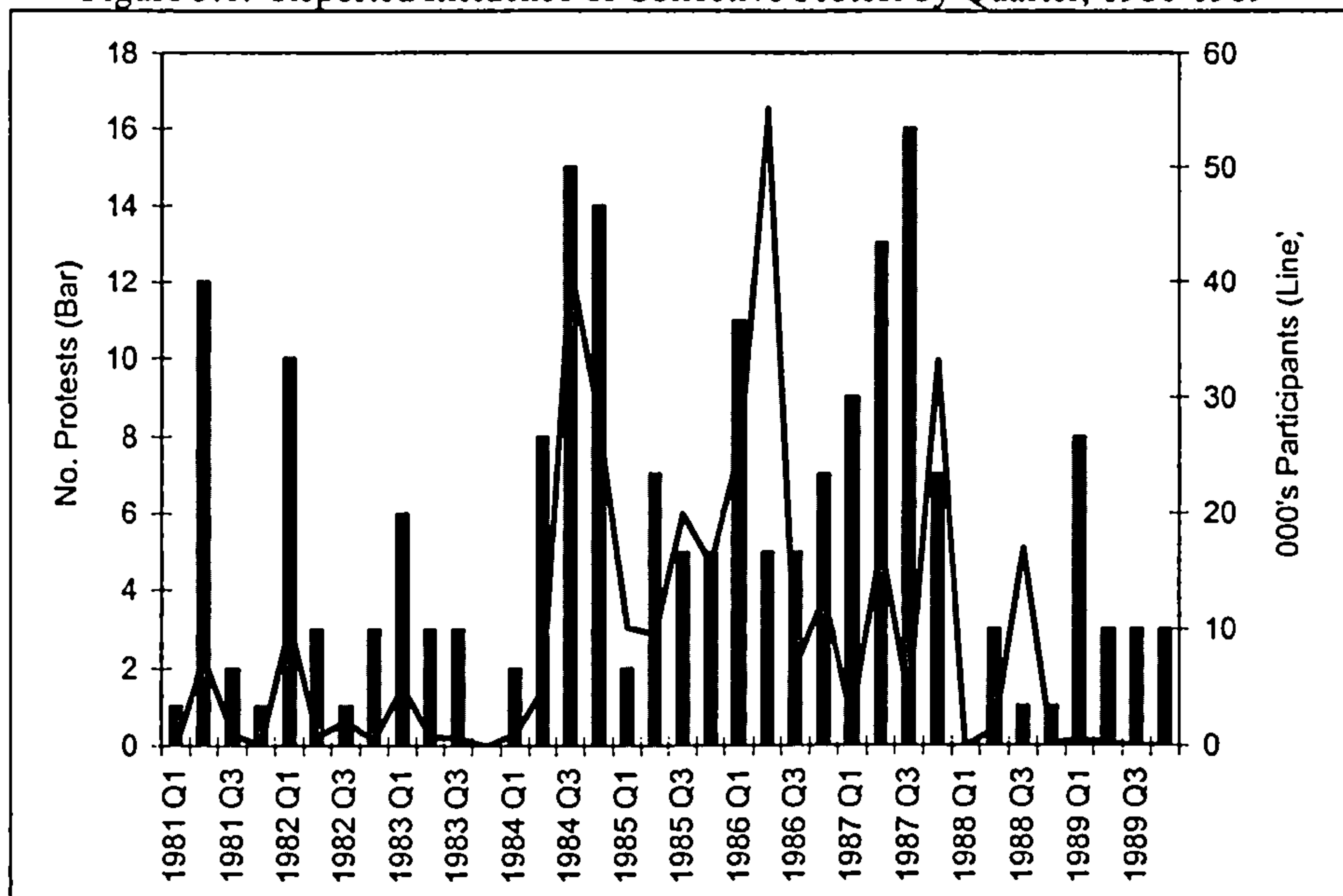
CHAPTER FIVE

CIVIL SOCIETY ASCENDANT:

THE POLITICS OF PROTEST, 1981-1987

The mid-1980s saw an unprecedented social challenge to the *Barisan Nasional* regime in Malaysia and its hegemonic foundations. This chapter examines the development and transformation of civil society and social movements in these years, arguing that the emergence of a broadly-based middle class and the concomitant ‘new’ social movements – in particular environmentalism and a broadly conceived notion of human rights – ushered in a transformation of civil society towards more multiethnic concerns and predicated a renewed social challenge on the legitimacy of the regime, particularly in the years 1984–1987. Despite this, however, social mobilisation beyond civil society elites remained firmly rooted in ethnic concerns, although not always immediately visibly so.

During the mid-1980s, Malaysian society experienced a surge in protest mobilisation against the BN regime (see Figure 5.1). Whilst previous cycles of protest had been predominantly rural and rooted in ethnic concerns, protest movements in the 1980s started to break through both these boundaries, with urban, nonethnic discourses taking up an increasingly important role in civil society, a transformation driven by the emergence of a new middle class. Yet whilst nonethnic discourses penetrated civil society, the processes of social mobilisation remained rooted in ethnicity, even when ‘new’ issues were at stake. In some cases, these ‘new’ protest movements made an explicit ethnic connection to their demands, but often the interplay was more subtle and understated.

Figure 5.1: Reported Incidence of Collective Protest by Quarter, 1980-1989¹

By the 1980s, the New Economic Policy (NEP) was beginning to have marked transformative effects on the country's class structure. A large middle class with a substantial Malay component was emerging, largely driven by extensive rural to urban migration.² To a large extent dependent on regime patronage – both through the allotment of development projects and through preferential treatment such as quota-based access to higher education – the formation of this new Malay class had repercussions on all levels of the polity. In the state itself, UMNO increasingly became a party of 'rent-seeking' entrepreneurs and professionals, replacing the teachers and British-trained aristo-bureaucrats that had previously dominated the grassroots and the leadership respectively.³

¹ Source: Collected daily newspaper reports, 1981-1989.

² For an analysis of the middle class that deals with its migratory origins, see Abdul Rahman Embong, 'Beyond the crisis: The paradox of the Malaysian middle class', in Abdul Rahman Embong (ed.), *Southeast Asian Middle Classes: Prospects for social change and democratization*, Bangi, Penerbit Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 2001, pp. 80-102.

³ Edmund Terence Gomez and Jomo Kwame Sundaram, *Malaysia's Political Economy: Politics, patronage and profit*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1997.

Symbolic of this was the rise of Mahathir himself – the first UMNO leader not from the Malay aristocracy. The MCA also deepened its patronage networks, mainly through the establishment in 1975 of Multi-Purpose Holdings Berhad (MPHB), a large conglomerate principally designed to protect Chinese business against the ravages of the NEP.⁴ This new middle class was not entirely without ideological conviction, however, and came to play an important role in expanding civil society during the early and mid 1980s.

CIVIL SOCIETY: BUILDING NETWORKS AND SHIFTING LEADERSHIP

The emergence of this new middle class was critical to the formation during the 1980s of important civil society coalitions and ‘trust networks’ across class, regional and ethnic divides. Such groupings are fundamental to the development of a strong and proactive civil society. Indeed, popular movements for political change are unlikely to be successful in the absence of such coalitions.⁵ Clearly, the more divided a society, the more difficult the

⁴ See Bruce Gale, *Politics and Business: A study of Multi-Purpose Holdings Berhad*, Kuala Lumpur, Eastern Universities Press, 1985; and Alasdair Bowie, ‘The dynamics of business-government relations in industrialising Malaysia’, in Andrew MacIntyre (ed.), *Business and Government in Industrialising Asia*, London, Allen and Unwin, 1994, p. 167-94. The importance of MPHB to the MCA was made clear in the mid-1980s with the rise of its director, Tan Koon Swan, to the presidency of the MCA (see next chapter). It has also been noted that the establishment of MPHB was an attempt to overcome dialect-based divisions within the Chinese community by establishing a nationwide business association to replace the dialect-based associations that had previously dominated; see Lee Kam Hing and Heng Pek Koon, ‘The Chinese in the Malaysian political system’, in Lee Kam Hing and Tan Chee-Beng (eds.), *The Chinese in Malaysia*, Shah Alam, Oxford University Press, p. 211.

⁵ See, for instance, Misagh Parsa, *States, Ideologies and Revolutions: A comparative analysis of Iran, Nicaragua and the Philippines*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2000; Doug McAdam, Sidney Tarrow and Charles Tilly, *Dynamics of Contention*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2001.

formation of such coalitions. As we have seen in the Malaysian context, deep ethnic divisions have historically formed a substantial impediment to such coalitions.

During the 1980s, however, civil society was transformed by the development of such multiethnic networks and coalitions. This transformation was driven by two main factors. Firstly, multiethnic coalitions of NGOs and activists, formed to fight specific government legislation, broadened into a more concerted attempt to reshape civil society in a more multiethnic mould. Secondly, civil society was further transformed during this period by the ascendancy of a number of organisations voicing 'new' concerns, such as environmentalism and human rights. Behind both these factors lay the emergence of the new middle class.

In attempting to reconcile elitist theories of revolutionary change with more 'bottom up' structural accounts, McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly note that 'the process of cross-class coalition formation was [in Nicaragua and the Philippines] punctuated and, in large part, fueled by a succession of ill-conceived regime actions'.⁶ A similar process occurred in Malaysia during the 1980s, when regime actions – specifically, government legislation aimed directly at reining in civil society – promoted the formation of impressively wide interethnic coalitions on two separate occasions. In March 1981, a diverse group of NGOs began cooperating in opposition to proposed amendments to the Societies Act, which would have seriously restricted their freedom to operate.⁷

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 203.

⁷ 'Mahathir gets memo from 18 societies.' *New Straits Times*, 21 March 1981.

The Societies Act is one of the regime's most powerful pieces of social control legislation, giving the government powers to deregister and declare illegal any society or organisation. Amongst the proposed amendments, the most Draconian would have made it obligatory for all societies to register as 'political' or 'friendly', and forbade any political involvement or even comment by 'friendly' societies. Opposition to the amendments was widespread amongst civil society organisation, and prompted the organisation of a coordinated front against the amendments, formalised by the formation of a 'co-ordination committee' between the main groups, which was later named the Secretariat for the Conference of Societies (SCS). Over sixty NGOs eventually took part,⁸ of which important participants were:

- *Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia* (ABIM - Islamic Youth Movement of Malaysia): A large, student-based Islamic organisation that had been instrumental in large demonstrations against rural poverty in the 1970s. Its president, Anwar Ibrahim, was a charismatic and popular figure and vocal critic of the government, for which he been detained under the ISA;
- *Aliran Kesedaran Negara* (ALIRAN - National Consciousness Movement): A small but influential Penang-based reform movement created in the late 1970s by a group of academics;

⁸ 'Pledge by 64 groups against changes to Act.' *New Straits Times*, 18 April 1981. The academic Chandra Muzaffar, who was ALIRAN president at the time of the protest, counts the total number of NGOs involved as 118; Chandra Muzaffar, 'Non-government organizations (NGOs) as a vehicle of social change', in Colin Barlow (ed.), *Modern Malaysia in the Global Economy: Political and social change into the 21st century*, Cheltenham, Edward Elgar, 2001, p. 191.

- The Consumers' Association of Penang (CAP): Another influential Penang-based social reform organisation;
- The Malaysian Bar Council: The executive branch of the Bar Association, a mandatory body representing all practicing lawyers; and
- The United Chinese School Committees Association (UCSCAM) and the United Chinese School Teachers Association (UCSTAM): A large and (within the Chinese community) hugely influential educationalist lobby.

Chaired by Anwar, the SCS also notably included organisation from all the main religious, ethnic and class groups in the country, including the Young Christian Workers and the Hindu Youth Council. Such a social coalition that breached the major societal divides was unprecedented. In as much, it marked an important milestone in the development of civil society, and came to play an important role as a model for later attempts to foster interethnic co-operation. Indeed, for this very reason, some prominent activists still view it as civil society's 'finest moment'.⁹

It has been typical to attribute the successful alignment of diverse NGOs under the SCS to growing middle class disillusionment with perceived increasing authoritarianism by the regime.¹⁰ Johan Saravanamuttu, for instance, describes

⁹ Interviews, Gurmit Singh K.S., former president of EPSM, Petaling Jaya, July 2001 and Chandra Muzaffar, former president of Aliran, Petaling Jaya, April 2001.

¹⁰ See, for instance, Simon Barraclough, 'Political participation and its regulation in Malaysia: Opposition to the Societies (Amendment) Act 1981', *Pacific Affairs*, 57 (1984), pp. 450-61.

it as a 'middle class revolt'.¹¹ The participation of otherwise conservative professional groups such as the Bar Council and the Malaysian Medical Association certainly gives credence to this view. It is also important to recognise, however, that the proposed amendments would have seriously hampered the organisation, operations and fund-raising of all societies, irrespective of their political, ethnic or class allegiances. In as much, it is worth noting that a similar coalition of interests failed to emerge to protest the 1980 amendments to the Trade Unions Act, equally draconian in their own way, but restricted in impact to the union sector.¹² The formation of the SCS must thus be viewed within the context of the amendments themselves. It was arguably the convergence of self-interest between these diverse societies as much as loftier principles that was the immediately motivation for the SCS.

If opposition to the amendments provoked greater cooperation between societal organisations, however, they were not able to mobilise corresponding support in terms of collective protest or popular mobilisation of the wider public. The campaign produced a petition of some seventy thousand signatories, but otherwise received little demonstration of support from the public as a whole, beyond the activist 'core'.¹³ The only instance of reported collective protest

¹¹ Johan Saravanamuttu, 'Malaysian civil society – awakenings?', in Maznah Mohamad and Wong Soak Koon (eds.), *Risking Malaysia: Culture, politics and identity*, Bangi, Penerbit Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 2001(b), p. 101; see also his 'The state, ethnicity and the middle class factor: Addressing nonviolent democratic change in Malaysia', in Kumar Rupesinghe (ed.) *Internal Conflict and Governance*, New York, St. Martin's Press, 1992.

¹² For details of the amendments and their repercussions on industrial relations, see Ponniah Arudsothy, 'The state and industrial relations in developing countries: The Malaysian situation', *ASEAN Economic Bulletin*, 6:3 (1990), pp. 308-329.

¹³ 'Societies Act: 70 000 sign up in protest.' *New Straits Times*, 18 November 1981.

against the amendments was a demonstration by two hundred lawyers, fronted by the Bar Council, outside the Kuala Lumpur High Court.¹⁴ Whilst the spectacle of quintessentially middle class lawyers being dispersed by riot police may have been 'disquieting' for the regime,¹⁵ it failed to resonate with the wider public. The formation of the SCS thus foreshadowed another trend that was to emerge throughout the 1980s – the divergence between civil society and social mobilisation.

From 1982 onwards, the SCS lost momentum, partly due to the cooptation of the charismatic Anwar into UMNO in March of that year, and further by the revocation the following year of some – though not all – of the provisions in the amended act.¹⁶ Nonetheless, in an appraisal of the SCS, the human rights group ALIRAN noted that, although an 'unforeseen' consequence of the opposition to the amendments, the formation of such a multi-ethnic confederation was 'encouraging in a society like ours, beset by communalism and chauvinistic politicians'.¹⁷ In an attempt to keep this multiethnic spirit of the SCS alive, ALIRAN also instigated its 'Dialogue of Concern' – an annual colloquy of NGOs themed on nonethnic issues. Another formal coalition grew out of these

¹⁴ 'Amendments: Bar puts its case to MPs.' *New Straits Times*, 8 April 1981.

¹⁵ Barraclough, 'Political participation and its regulation in Malaysia', p.461.

¹⁶ According to some sources, these two events are connected. It is suggested that Anwar set a precondition for joining UMNO that the Act be watered down, essentially to save face, as he had been so strident in his opposition to it. Other sources reject this claim, however, noting that the Societies Act came under the purview of Deputy Prime Minister and Home Minister Musa Hitam. As Musa was apparently one of the most determined opponents of Anwar being allowed into UMNO, it is unlikely that he would have struck such a deal. An alternative viewpoint suggests that the amendments were withdrawn because the new leadership was keen to emphasise its liberal credentials.

¹⁷ 'Working Together.' *Aliran Monthly* 2:2, March 1982.

dialogues, the Movement for Freedom and Justice (PKK – *Pergerakan untuk Kebebasan dan Keadilan*). Although it was comprised of many of the same organisations as the SCS, the coordinating role that had been ABIM's was taken over by ALIRAN and Chandra Muzaffar, ALIRAN's president, became its chief spokesperson. In contrast to the SCS, however, the ALIRAN 'Dialogues' and the PKK had little or no public profile. Their importance lay rather in their facilitation of an enduring interethnic dialogue across civil society. Participants thus viewed such a dialogue approvingly as a 'trust-building exercise' between different sectors of society, albeit only at the level of civil society elites.¹⁸

Many of the public themes and ambitions of the SCS were reignited in 1986, when another broad coalition across civil society was formed, once again in protest against authoritarian amendments to the legal system, this time to the Official Secrets Act (OSA). The amendments included proposals to make all government documents automatically 'secret', unless explicitly declassified, and to make the dissemination of such documents a heavily punishable offence, even if the information was already in the public domain by other means.¹⁹ The organisations involved in the new coalition were much the same as those involved in the SCS, although ALIRAN and the National Union of Journalists

¹⁸ Interviews, Chandra and Gurmit Singh.

¹⁹ The amendments have been linked to a confrontation between the government and the *Asian Wall Street Journal*, which published a number of critical column in 1985. The government responded by banning (temporarily) the newspaper and expelling its two resident journalists, although this latter move was overturned by the Supreme Court. See Diane K. Mauzy, 'Malaysia in 1986: The ups and downs of stock market politics', *Asian Survey*, 27:2 (1987), pp. 231-241.

(NUJ) played a much more prominent role in the anti-OSA movement, in the latter case probably because they felt most at risk from the new law.²⁰

The anti-OSA campaign was even more successful than the SCS in arraigning a coalition of civil voices against the regime. Most notable is the fact that a number of normally regime-associated actors joined the protest against the amendments. These included Malaysia's two surviving former prime ministers, Tunku Abdul Rahman and Tun Hussein Onn, and Musa Hitam, who had recently resigned as Mahathir's deputy.²¹ The former Auditor-General, Ahmad Noordin, also became actively involved in the campaign.²² Two of the smaller and more independently minded BN parties – PBS and GERAKAN – even urged Mahathir to 'rethink' the amendments.²³ Once again, however, the protest was marked by the absence of significant public demonstrations of support. Another petition was organised, this time reaching around fifty thousand, and two small public rallies held but, as with the SCS protest, they were attended overwhelming by members of the organisation involved, rather than drawing on broader public

²⁰ 'Govt revises OSA Bill.' *New Straits Times*, 3 December 1986.

²¹ 'People have cause to fear amendment - Hussein.' *New Straits Times* 19 November 1986; 'Consider views on OSA amendments.' *New Straits Times*, 21 November 1986.

²² 'Ahmad Noordin picked to lead campaign.' *New Straits Times*, 10 November 1986. As Auditor-General, Ahmad Noordin had, against the government's wishes, published the report of his investigation into a major financial scandal, which hinted at top level government involvement, including the finance minister Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah.

²³ 'Gerakan urges Govt to rethink OSA.' *New Straits Times*, 3 November 1986; 'Review proposed changes to Secrets Act: PBS.' *New Straits Times*, 6 November 1986.

support.²⁴ One closed-door *ceramah* (political talk) held in Penang did, however, attract over two thousand members of the public.²⁵

It has been typical to treat the protests against the Societies Act and against the Official Secrets Act as essentially synonymous, but a comparison of the two movement yields some significant points. In terms of similarities, there are two important aspects. Firstly, as perhaps the only instances of a coalescence of organisations from across all sectors of civil society before 1987, it is interesting to note that both were in reaction to legislative restrictions on the ways in which these organisations could operate, suggesting that when fundamental organisational restrictions are imposed, diverse groups have come together in protest. This points to an important, arguably quintessential, theme in Malaysian opposition politics – not so much whether, but *when* my enemy's enemy is my friend. The second similarity worth noting is that both these movements were unable to mobilise significant support from the broader public. Such collective protests that did occur were 'internal' mobilisations by the activists involved – by the Bar Council the first time, and by the NUJ on the second occasion.

To understand the differences between the two coalitions, we must look beyond the protests themselves, to the conditions in which they arose. As we shall see, the anti-OSA movement emerged at a time of economic recession, of raised societal mobilisation, with a number of long-running protests putting pressure on the regime, and at a time when the internal politics of the BN was in a state of

²⁴ 'NUJ sends signature petition to Dr M.' *New Straits Times*, 6 December 1986; '400 press union members picket NST offices.' *Straits Times*, 23 April 1987.

flux. Indeed, the coalition emerged almost immediately in the wake of Musa Hitam's sudden resignation from his post as Deputy Prime Minister in February 1986 – the first public sign that something was seriously amiss within UMNO (see next chapter). In comparison, the SCS movement arose during much more favourable conditions for the regime. Whilst the protest straddled the transfer of power from Hussein Onn to Mahathir, this was undoubtedly the most ordered and planned succession in Malaysia's history – a demonstration, perhaps, of UMNO's confidence in itself at the time, and contrasting strongly with the political uncertainty following Musa's unprecedented departure. The changing dynamics of BN politics – these changes themselves heightened by societal and economic pressures – can thus help explain the presence of more 'establishment' figures in the anti-OSA protest.

It can also be seen from the differences between the two protests that the contours of civil society itself had shifted considerably in the intervening years. The most important changes here were associated with the shifting leadership of civil society, however informal it may have been. In the early years of the 1980s, the most prominent leading force was ABIM and Anwar Ibrahim in particular, as evidenced by his chairmanship of the SCS. The Malaysian Trades Union Council (MTUC), led by V. David, was also prominent, both in the opposition to legislative changes – it had led its own campaign against earlier changes to the labour laws – and also in other areas such as consumer rights, where it led a number of campaigns against price hikes in basic provisions.²⁶ Within the Chinese community, the business-oriented Chinese Assembly Halls

²⁵ 'The Penang Ceramah.' *Aliran Monthly*, 6:11/12, December 1986.

and the educationalist *Dongjiaozong* organisations were the most important groups. Towards the mid-1980s, however, other organisations began to take central stage, both in terms of media representation and also civil society networks. ABIM and the MTUC lost their standing as the main representatives of civil society. ABIM was much diminished by the departure – treachery some said – of Anwar for UMNO, and increasingly concerned itself with international Islam – the Palestine question in particular – rather than local politics. Whilst the MTUC remained prominent throughout the 1980s, it restricted itself more to matters directly pertaining to the unions and the labour movement (at least until 1988), possibly because its own position as the only national level representative for the labour movement was threatened by the government's recognition of CUEPACS (Congress of Unions of Employees in the Public and Civil Services) as an alternative negotiating body (see below). In the place of ABIM and the MTUC, a number of other organisations took up prominent positions in civil society. ALIRAN – a relatively young organisation in 1981 – had, by 1984, taken on an important coordinating role. Others were the Consumers Association of Penang (CAP), *Sahabat Alam Malaysia* (SAM – Friends of the Earth Malaysia) and the Selangor Graduates' Society (SGS). SGS' president, Gurmit Singh, had also taken over the chairmanship of the SCS after Anwar's departure for UMNO and was also chairman of another prominent organisation, the Environmental Protection Society of Malaysia (EPSM).

These changes in the organisational networks and network leadership demonstrate two important points. Firstly, civil society was increasingly

²⁶ 'MTUC to step up boycott.' *New Sunday Times*, 3 May 1981.

becoming dominated by much smaller organisations of ‘professional activists’ – a fact that the regime often highlighted in public confrontations with civil society, arguing that these organisations were unrepresentative and, hence, undemocratic. ALIRAN and CAP had between them less than two hundred members in 1983, and there is every possibility that many of these were members of both.²⁷ This compares to the MTUC, with membership through its affiliated unions at around six hundred thousand.²⁸ It is also interesting to note that both ALIRAN and CAP, along with SAM, were based in the affluent Chinese majority state of Penang, which was, in the 1986 general election, to become a stronghold of the opposition DAP.

Secondly, the rise of these smaller organisations also brought to the fore very different concerns and issues. MTUC and ABIM very much represented the grand narratives of Malaysian history – ‘Labour’ and ‘Islam/Ethnicity’ respectively. The new organisations, however, reflected different, ‘newer’, concerns – environmentalism, consumer protection and even human rights. Of course, this does not mean that Labour and Islam were spent forces; the MTUC and PAS were still important organisations, and the DAP retained (although often downplayed) its Socialist inclinations. Nonetheless, in terms of the purely societal movements, as opposed to those with governmental ambitions, and – perhaps more importantly – in terms of organisational roles within civil society, the ‘new’ movements took on important roles which belied their size.

²⁷ ‘Consumer bodies and foreign funds.’ *New Straits Times*, 23 November 1985.

²⁸ Ministry of Labour and Manpower, *Labour and Manpower Report 1982/83*.

This shift had important implications not only for the organisations themselves, but also in the reproduction and negotiation of civil society and its discourses through the regime controlled mass media. The MTUC and ABIM, large organisations which openly challenged the regime, tended to receive a very negative press. In contrast, the more nominally 'apolitical' organisations like CAP and SAM, whose agenda was not directly confrontational with the regime and which seemed to push for the concerns of the not entirely slavish media's readership, tended to receive a much more favourable press. Even when they did directly criticise the regime, the press did not always censure and censor this. In 1983, for instance, when SAM criticised the government over the state of the country's roads, the *New Straits Times* picked up the story and ran several follow ups.²⁹ Even ALIRAN, a more directly political organisation, received some sympathetic press coverage compared to the virtual blackout it receives today.³⁰ The regime's tolerance of these new movements was, however, short lived. By 1985, it had already become concerned with their consistent 'running down' of the government.³¹ In 1987, Mahathir went as far as to label some of these organisations 'saboteurs' and 'enemies of the state'. This change in stance was coincident with a drastic increase in social mobilisation under the aegis of these 'new' movements, to which we will return later.

The new civil society that emerged during the 1980s was thus a reflection of the growing political importance and awareness of the educated middle class. Academics (Chandra Muzaffar of ALIRAN, Jomo Kwame Sundaram of the

²⁹ 'SAM: Look into state of highways.' *New Straits Times*, 10 December 1983.

³⁰ See, e.g., 'BMF affair: Aliran puzzled by statement.' *New Straits Times*, 3 January 1984.

³¹ 'Stop it, Govt tells errant consumer association.' *New Straits Times*, 14 November 1985.

Institute for Social Analysis), lawyers (Param Curumaswamy of the Bar Council) and engineers (Gurmit Singh of EPSM) were the new voice of civil society, replacing the unionists and Islamists of previous years.³² This middle class civil society also brought forth a new social discourse, based on concepts of human rights, political transparency and environmentalism, but also – conforming to what we have seen is often characterised as a peculiarly ‘Asian’ trait – social responsibility and obligations. The Consumers Association of Penang and *Sahabat Alam Malaysia* were particularly concerned with social obligations as well as rights; indeed their chairman S.M. Mohamed Idris denies that his organisations are in any sense ‘human rights’ groups.³³ Yet if the new civil society was drawn overwhelmingly from the middle class, it was by no means representative of the entire class, much of which remained dependent upon state patronage, and it thus had difficulty mobilising broad support for its discursive vision. Nowhere was this more clear than in the legislative protests discussed above. In as much, Saravanamuttu’s description of these protests as ‘middle class revolts’ is misleading; they were revolts *from* the middle class, even *for* the middle class, but certainly not *of* the middle class *as a whole*. Indeed, it is worth noting that in his own more recent survey of middle class

³² The obvious exception from this is S.M. Mohamed Idris, the founder and president of both CAP and SAM. Lacking any formal higher education, Idris is, however, a phenomenal autodidact, and – as I have witnessed – is capable of holding his own in an academic discussion of the applicability of Marxist analysis to the Malaysian situation. Idris’ lack of formal education is, in any case, somewhat made up for by his brother, Muhideen Abdul Kadir, deputy president of CAP and former PRM treasurer, who has both a civil engineering and a law degree to his name.

³³ Interview, George Town, October 2001.

attitudes, Saravanamuttu has found that 'a large proportion of this class woefully lacks political awareness and civil orientation'.³⁴

Despite the general lack of middle class mobilisation, however, the new civil society became closely involved in an emerging non-middle class social resistance to the state in the mid-1980s. As the contours of civil society shifted towards 'new' interests during the first half of the 1980s, Malaysia saw a concomitant increase in collective action and social mobilisation within these parameters, most notably a series of high profile protests against proposed development projects. Yet whilst these new movements ushered in a transformation in civil society, the mobilisation of these movements was most successful when there was also an ethnic element in the protest.

'NEW' SOCIAL MOVEMENTS: DEVELOPMENT AND ENVIRONMENTALISM

As the regime's developmentalist drive took hold, increasing groups of individuals found themselves dislocated or disadvantaged by the speed and trajectory of development. The 1980s saw the proliferation of small, unintegrated protests against the negative side-effects of development – ranging from dust pollution to rubbish dumps.³⁵ There were two particular sites of

³⁴ Johan Saravanamuttu, 'Is there a politics of the Malaysian Middle Class?', in Abdul Rahman Embong (ed.) *Southeast Asian Middle Classes: Prospects for social change and democratisation*, Bangi, Penerbit Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 2001(a), p. 116. An earlier survey by Saravanamuttu, which found stronger democratising sentiments among the middle class, has been criticised for its over-reliance on existing civil society elites as its respondents, thus invalidating its results. See Abdul Rahman Embong, *State-Led Modernization and the New Middle Class in Malaysia*, London, Palgrave, 2001, p. 150.

³⁵ '100 residents demonstrate against dust pollution.' *New Straits Times*, 17 August 1981; 'Protest by 500 residents of Kampung Pisang.' *New Straits Times*, 8 October 1984; 'Officials to meet residents over rubbish dump.' *New Straits Times*, 6 July 1987.

sporadic protests. Firstly, a number of 'squatter' communities – ramshackle villages and suburbs which built up over time on disused private or state-owned land – staged vehement and sometimes violent protests when attempts were made to reclaim the land for development.³⁶ Secondly, 'settlers' in the state-owned FELDA (Federal Land Development Authority) plantations schemes began protesting what they saw as exploitation by FELDA.³⁷ These protests, whilst often vehement, reflected the social dislocation that caused them, in that they lacked integration or sustained movement characteristics.

The first major sustained protest movement to reflect these concerns emerged in 1984, when residents of the town of Papan in Perak began protesting a proposed radioactive waste dump near the town.³⁸ Regular protests were held through the second half of 1984, sometimes attracting thousands of participants.³⁹ Indeed, as one newspaper report candidly admitted, most of the town's two thousand residents took part on a regular basis.⁴⁰ A brief reprieve came in 1985 – and with it, a drop in protest activity – when the courts allowed an operating injunction against the company concerned – Asia Rare Earth, a subsidiary of the Japanese firm Mitsubishi – on safety grounds, but this was lifted in February

³⁶ See, for instance, 'Tear gas used in scuffle with squatters.' *New Straits Times*, 11 October 1984; 'Squatters protest against takeover attempt.' *New Straits Times*, 21 May 1985.

³⁷ '500 FELDA settlers stage protest.' *New Sunday Times*, 17 July 1983; 'Watch on FELDA scheme after incident.' *New Straits Times*, 16 May 1988. For more on the development of the FELDA schemes, see Zawawi Ibrahim, *The Malay Labourer: By the Window of Capitalism*, Singapore, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies 1998 and Halim Salleh, 'Peasants, proletarianisation and the state: FELDA settlers in Pahang', in Joel S. Kahn and Francis Loh Kok Wah (eds.), *Fragmented Vision: Culture and politics in contemporary Malaysia*, Honolulu, University of Hawaii Press, 1992, pp. 107-31.

³⁸ '500 stage protest over radioactive dump site.' *Straits Times* 19 June 1984.

³⁹ '3,000 join peaceful protest in Papan.' *Straits Times*, 2 July 1984.

1987, provoking further demonstrations by over ten thousand people.⁴¹ The protest was resolved unexpectedly in 1989, however, when Asian Rare Earth went bankrupt.

On the surface, the protests appeared to have been a purely environmentalist movement against the dumping of nuclear waste, and they were often taken as such. Singapore's *Straits Times* newspaper, for instance, referred to the demonstrations as 'Malaysia's first anti-nuclear protest'.⁴² Yet the Papan movement had originally sought only the relocation – not the complete cancellation – of the waste dump.⁴³ It was thus a more complex movement than the simple environmentalism it appeared to entail. Below the surface, the Papan movement was in fact symptomatic of the complex interplay of ethnicity, state and civil society which characterise social movements in Malaysia.

Although the issue of ethnicity was never publicly connected with the Papan movement, those who were involved have stressed it as an important mobilising element.⁴⁴ According to environmentalists involved in the campaign, the waste dump had originally been planned near a Malay settlement, but the location had quietly been moved to Papan – a predominantly Chinese town – before the plans had been made public.⁴⁵ It was this sense of outrage that the government saw fit to impose on a Chinese town what was too dangerous to locate next to a Malay village that had brought the town as a whole onto the streets.

⁴⁰ 'Demo against Mitsubishi.' *New Straits Times*, 12 December 1984.

⁴¹ 'Cops warn panel against anti-ARE demo.' *New Straits Times*, 6 April 1987.

⁴² 'Radioactive waste dump fuels resistance.' *Straits Times*, 30 June 1984.

⁴³ '500 stage protest over radioactive dump site.' *Straits Times* 19 June 1984.

⁴⁴ Interview, SAM activists, August 2001.

Despite this strong ethnic undercurrent, however, both the demonstrators and the government sought to present their case as purely environmentally related. Various environmental experts were engaged by both sides to declare the safety or danger of the site.⁴⁶ Local residents set up the decidedly unethnic sounding Perak Anti-Radioactivity Committee (PARC) to co-ordinate the protests. Whilst it welcomed the involvement of environmentalist groups like SAM and EPSM, however, PARC explicitly rejected the advances of political parties which offered help.⁴⁷ Nonetheless, the eagerness of the DAP and smaller SDP (Social Democratic Party) – Chinese based parties both – to get involved in the campaign and PAS' virtual silence on the matter, clearly indicate the ethnically delimited *political* appeal of the protest movement.⁴⁸ Conversely, the local determination to keep ethnically oriented political parties out of their movement demonstrates the local desire to keep their protest publicly nonethnic.

If ethnicity was kept below the surface of the Papan movement, other anti-development protests were more explicitly linked with ethnicity. In 1984, for instance, the DAP started a campaign against a proposal to develop *Bukit Cina*, an old Chinese cemetery and Buddhist temple in Malacca.⁴⁹ The burial place of a number of prominent Chinese pioneers, *Bukit Cina* was seen as integral to the local Chinese identity, and many Chinese thus took the development proposal as a deliberate ethnic slight by the government.⁵⁰ The campaign saw regular

⁴⁵ Interview, Gurmit Singh.

⁴⁶ "'Back your claims" challenge.' *New Straits Times*, 3 July 1984.

⁴⁷ 'Radioactive waste dump fuels resistance.' *New Straits Times*, 30 June 1984.

⁴⁸ 'Papan people burn effigies of Mitsubishi products.' *New Straits Times*, 10 December 1984.

⁴⁹ 'Lim leads demo on Bukit China.' *New Straits Times*, 3 July 1984.

⁵⁰ Interview, DAP activists, April-November 2001.

protests for six months, and the state government eventually backed down.⁵¹ On the other side of Malaysia – and the ethnic divides – another protest movement was emerging in Sarawak among the Penan and other native tribes. Nomadic jungle-dwellers, who had long resisted attempts to lure them into city life, the Penan began, in the mid-1980s, setting up blockades to prevent logging in the jungle. Blockades were up for months at a time, and were manned by hundreds of tribesmen.⁵² At the height of the blockading, the government arrested over eighty Penan in the space of a week.⁵³ As the cat-and-mouse game of blockade and dismantle intensified, the Penan began even more aggressively burning down bridges.⁵⁴ The destruction of the Sarawak rainforests and the displacement of its inhabitant tribes became something of a *cause célèbre* within the environmentalist movement, with groups like SAM and EPSM setting up permanent centres in Sarawak.⁵⁵ At the time, the regime blamed this movement on the incitement of a Swiss artist, Bruno Manser, who had been living with the Penan for a number of years. As the Penans' protests gained national and international media coverage, however, other native groups in Sarawak and Sabah, including the Muruts and Orang Ulu, began echoing

⁵¹ '1,500 in protest at Bukit China.' *New Straits Times*, 9 July 1984; 'DAP's jog up Bukit China.' *New Straits Times*, 25 August 1984.

⁵² 'Sarawak cops detain four.', *New Straits Times*, 27 July 1987.

⁵³ 'Penans detained over blockades.' *New Straits Times*, 17 January 1989.

⁵⁴ 'Penans get support of Bar Council, ABIM.' *New Straits Times*, 15 June 1987; 'Penans held for burning bridges.' *New Straits Times*, 1 September 1987.

⁵⁵ Interview, SAM activists.

their calls, and taking similar action against logging, even without the benefit of a European artist-in-residence.⁵⁶

The juxtaposition of these three sustained protest movements is illuminating in that they all engaged aspects of environmentalism, anti-development and ethnicity, albeit to varying degrees. Whilst the *Bukit Cina* protests made a direct connection between ethnicity and development, the two other movements were less explicit in their ethnic orientation. As already noted, the Papan protests in fact sought to avoid ethnic references. In Sarawak, the issue of ethnicity surfaced as a result of who was *affected* by the logging, rather than as an aspect of the logging protest itself. As in Papan, the broad environmentalism of the movement was an extension of more specifically development related protest. There is no evidence to suggest, for instance, that the Papan objected to the deforestation of Bangladesh, or even logging in other parts of Sarawak.

The proliferation of environmental and anti-development movements over the 1980s opened up a whole range of framing opportunities, which were difficult for the regime to counter. As governments around the world have discovered, the emotive quality of ‘environmentalism’ as a mobilising force is hard to counter. Yet for a regime like the BN – whose legitimacy was, to a large extent based on its ability to deliver development – environmentalism and associated concerns with over-development, such movements represented an unprecedented challenge to its hegemonic foundations.

⁵⁶ ‘Muruts now against logging.’ *New Straits Times*, 7 July 1987; ‘Anti-logging groups getting bolder.’ *New Straits Times*, 13 June 1989.

Wherever and whenever they arose, these 'new' protests tended to attract the attention and support of the established civil society organisations, even where an immediate discursive connection was not obvious. The Penans' protests in Sarawak, for instance, attracted support from groups as diverse as the Bar Council and ABIM – strange indeed when one considers that ABIM was an Islamic *dakwah* organisation, and that the Penans were animist, and that there were few Penans wealthy enough to engage the services of any Bar Council lawyers.⁵⁷ The connection, however, was not just discursive, but active – protest of any form would naturally attract the attention of other protestors.

These expressions of support can thus be interpreted in two ways – as an attempt to broaden coalitions of civil society activism and concern, and as an attempt to incorporate these 'new' frames of meaning within the existing discursive structures of established organisations. As environmentalism and concerns about the negative effects of development emerged as potentially powerful sources of mobilisation, so the 'big players' of civil society sought to claim these concerns as their own. In doing so, they had mixed success. As already noted, the Papan demonstrators rejected the advances of opposition political parties, whilst welcoming the involvement of environmentalist groups. In contrast to this, however, the DAP was very successful in penetrating the FELDA protests and established a number of branches in FELDA settlements – much to the annoyance of the regime, which viewed these as its own territory.⁵⁸ Both DAP and ALIRAN had similar success in organising squatter protests.⁵⁹ It

⁵⁷ 'Penans get support of Bar Council, ABIM.' *New Straits Times*, 15 June 1987.

⁵⁸ 'Three more DAP branches.' *New Straits Times*, 10 October 1987.

⁵⁹ 'Squatters protest against takeover attempt.' *New Straits Times*, 21 May 1985.

should be observed that where emerging protest movements had an organisation infrastructure of their own, as in Papan, they were less eager to accept the assistance of the existing civil society groups.

What is interesting about these environmentalist and anti-development movements, then, is the extent to which they were the subject of much contestation between existing civil society groups. As this new paradigm emerged as a frame of action which clearly offered great mobilisational potential, existing groups – within the context of a divided civil society – sought to appropriate these new frames as part of their own. On some occasions, this process of appropriation was aided by the presence of ethnic undercurrents and the organisational shortcomings of the new movement. Other movements, however, fought to keep control of their own frame of action – precisely fearing, it could reasonably be asserted, that the ‘aid’ offered by existing organisations would result in the distortion and reconceptualisation of what were, originally, specifically goal-oriented movements.

We have seen, then, that there was a dialectical relationship between the emergence of a middle class-based, multiethnic civil society and the mobilisation of often decidedly non-middle class protest against the social dislocation of the regime’s developmentalist drive. Civil society groups helped give organisational form to these protests, and brought them onto the national stage. In turn, however, this mobilisational potential attracted the attention of other civil groups and political parties, which sought to appropriate those concerns as their own. Yet we also saw that successful sustained protest mobilisation was often also linked with ethnicity – an influence anathema to the

middle class civil society. It is thus to the ethnic currents of mobilisation that we must now turn.

‘OLD’ SOCIAL MOVEMENTS: ETHNICITY AND LABOUR

Despite the rise of a nonethnic, middle class-based sphere of civil society, ethnicity remained the masterframe for mobilisation throughout the period of heightened contention in the mid-1980s. Even where ‘new’ concerns were *discursively* paramount, ethnicity remained the main cultural *mobilising* force. The ‘Save Bukit Cina’ campaign mentioned above was an example of a movement which combined ‘new’ interests with ethnic concerns. In fact, all the protest movements which arose in Malaysia during the 1980s and were able to mobilise significant collective action over a period of time, were at least partially ethnically oriented. Within the two main ethnic groups – the Malays and the Chinese – it is possible to discern some consistent trends in their mobilisation, which belied the other changes in civil society explored above and which are reflective of the underlying structures of Malaysian politics.

Chinese Social Movements

During the period 1981–1987, there were three specifically Chinese movements of contentious politics. The first of these was the *Bukit Cina* controversy discussed above. The second came about as a direct result of the economic collapse of 1985, and was tied in with a number of government financial scandals. In the 1970s, as a response to the regime’s more aggressively pro-Malay stance, the Chinese community had – with the backing and partial involvement of the MCA – set up a number of ‘Deposit Taking Co-operatives’ (DTCs), a financial pooling system designed to protect Chinese economic

interests and to ensure the continued provision of community services such as private schools.⁶⁰ Following the nationwide economic collapse of 1985, however, two of the largest DTCs announced that they were close to collapse, provoking a series of demonstrations and occupations by investors demanding that the government help the ailing co-operatives.⁶¹ The last instance of substantial specifically Chinese mobilisation in this period was the surface cause for the 1987 'Operation Lalang' crackdown. In August 1987, the government announced the promotion of a large number of non-Mandarin speaking teachers in Chinese schools, provoking outrage amongst the Chinese community. Educationalism has long been an important aspect of the Chinese community, and the government's move was immediately condemned by the United Chinese School Committees Association (UCSCAM) and the United Chinese School Teachers Association (UCSTAM).⁶² A number of small rallies were held, and a boycott called, which saw over thirty thousand students kept away from school by their parents.⁶³ Some factions within the MCA also expressed support for the boycott, which in turn provoked demonstrations from UMNO loyalists, particularly UMNO Youth.⁶⁴ This escalation of mobilisation and counter-

⁶⁰ For more on the DTCs and the dynamics of Chinese business in Malaysia see Heng Pek Koon, 'The Chinese business elites of Malaysia', in Ruth McVey (ed.), *Southeast Asian Capitalists*, Ithaca NY, Cornell University Press, 1993.

⁶¹ e.g. 'Co-op depositors protest outside Wisma MCA.' *New Straits Times*, 17 November 1986; 'Depositors stage 'sit-in' at co-op head office.' *New Straits Times*, 7 January 1987; '21 held over co-op demo.' *New Straits Times*, 7 January 1987. These protests will be the subject of more discussion in the following chapter.

⁶² 'Five parties support "boycott classes" move.' *New Straits Times*, 12 October 1987.

⁶³ 'Get them back to school.' *New Straits Times*, 16 October 1987.

⁶⁴ 'UMNO members hold protest.' *New Straits Times*, 12 October 1987.

mobilisation was abruptly halted by the October 1987 crackdown, which also banned all public rallies.

These three protest movements, the latter two of which will be the subject of more extensive analysis in the next chapter, reflect three of the main political concerns of the Chinese community in Malaysia: fear over the undermining of their cultural heritage, the erosion of their economic strength, and educationalism. All these protests were primarily *defensive*, seeking to prevent the further erosion of Chinese societal and economic autonomy and distinctiveness.

An increased willingness to mobilise in defence of the Chinese community cannot, however, be explained by the *issues* at stake, as these were perennial ones. From the perspective of the political opportunity structure, the timing of these protests – emerging in 1984, 1986 and 1987 – thus suggests a regime crisis in these years, rather than in the post-1987 period. As we shall see in the next chapter, the largest Chinese party in the government coalition, the MCA, was beset with internal turmoil over these years. These protests also coincided with an increase in the electoral fortunes of the Chinese-based DAP opposition party. In the period 1982–1984, the DAP won three by-elections against prominent MCA leaders, not only increasing their parliamentary representation significantly, but also suggesting a wider disillusionment with the MCA. This disillusionment was borne out by the DAP's performance in the 1986 general election, where the DAP won twenty-four seats and over a fifth of the popular vote, its best performance to date. This points us to the importance of political

parties and elections in social mobilisation trajectories, something which will be discussed further below.

Malay Social Movements

If Chinese societal protests were primarily defensive, the Malay-based opposition was overwhelmingly offensive, pushing in particular for further Islamisation of society. In as much, it continued a trend which had become evident since the early 1970s, with the rise of ABIM and other *dakwah* organisations. The Islamic revivalism of the 1970s was given a huge fillip by the outcome of the Iranian Revolution in 1979. Many of the prominent Islamists who emerged in the 1980s attribute their involvement in the cause to the inspirational example of the Iranian Revolution.⁶⁵ Upon taking office, the Mahathir administration indicated a renewed drive towards Islamisation – symbolised by the cooptation of Anwar into UMNO. Yet Mahathir is known as no great Islamist – opposition groups frequently contrast his faltering reading of the Qur'an in Arabic with Anwar's fluent recital from memory.⁶⁶ The Islamisation drive of the early 1980s should thus be understood as an attempt to appropriate the political strength that came from Islamic revival by a regime that recognised that if it did not do so, the opposition undoubtedly would.⁶⁷

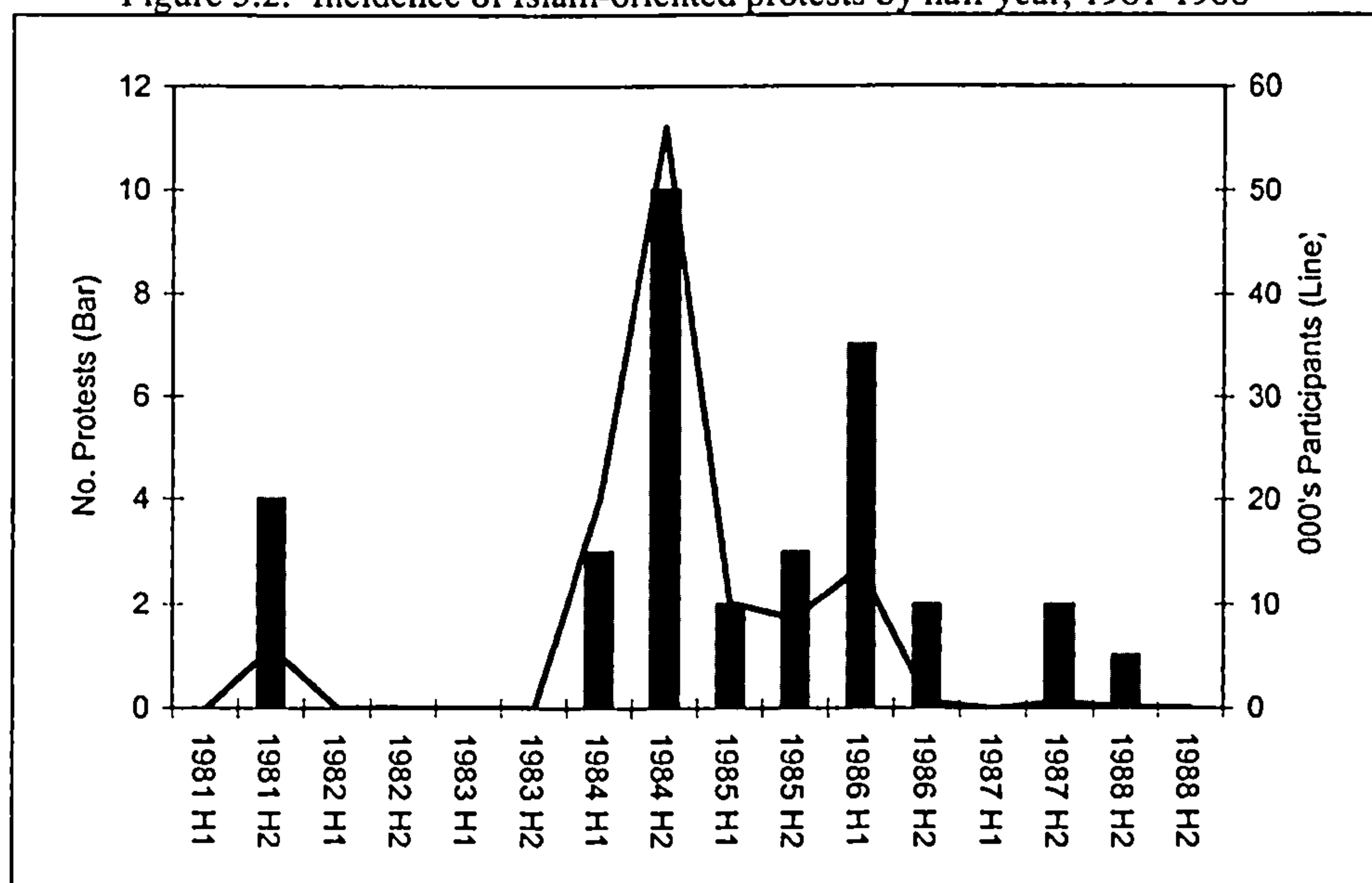
⁶⁵ Interviews, Raja Petra Kamaruddin, Free Anwar Campaign Director, Bangsar, April 2001 and Zulkifli Sulong, *Harakah* editor, Kuala Lumpur, May 2001.

⁶⁶ Interviews with PAS activists, April-November 2001.

⁶⁷ This view is expounded in, amongst others, Jomo Kwame Sundaram and Ahmad Shabery Cheek, 'Malaysia's Islamic movements', in Kahn and Loh (eds.), *Fragmented Vision*, pp. 79-106. For an alternative viewpoint, see R. S. Milne and Diane K. Mauzy, 'The Mahathir Administration in Malaysia: Discipline through Islam', *Pacific Affairs*, 56:4 (1983/84), pp. 617-48.

The renewed commitment to Islam by the Mahathir administration does appear to have had the effect of demobilising Islamic opposition movements, at least in the short run. There were virtually no reported incidents of collective action mobilised in support of Islam between 1982 and the early months of 1984 (see figure 5.2). It should be remembered, however, that social movements are not only to be reckoned in terms of collective action, but even in terms of civil society more broadly conceived, it appears that Islamic movements were suffering somewhat. ABIM, as has previously been noted, was reduced considerably by Anwar's departure, and *Darul Arqam*, the other major Islamic force in civil society (PAS excepted), was yet to make its presence felt on a national level (see chapter seven). It should also be noted that this lull in societal Islamic mobilisation came not long after the regime had used its Draconian powers to oust a PAS-led state government in Kelantan.⁶⁸

Figure 5.2: Incidence of Islam-oriented protests by half year, 1981-1988⁶⁹



⁶⁸ See Simon Barraclough, 'The dynamics of coercion in the Malaysian political process', *Modern Asian Studies*, 19:4 (1985), pp. 797-822.

The Islamic movement was revived in 1984 by a renewed confrontation between PAS and UMNO. Dubbed by the press the *kafir-mengkafir* issue, it was primarily a heightening of the long-running rhetorical argument over which party – PAS or UMNO – was the ‘true’ representative of Islam.⁷⁰ The dispute heightened political divisions within the Malay community, with many mosques having to resort to two *imams* to lead supporters of the rival parties in prayer. To support its claims, PAS held a series of *ceramah* and other demonstrations.⁷¹ The regime responded in August 1984 by imposing a ban on all political rallies in the Malay majority states of Kedah, Perak and Kelantan which PAS, for the most part, ignored.⁷² The movement finally petered out in mid-1986, following a dismal performance by PAS in the 1986 general election.

This pattern of Malay-Muslim mobilisation thus suggests once again the importance of political parties in social movement prospects. After the lull in societal Islamic activity in the early 1980s – attributable to the regime’s commitment to further Islamisation – the increased level of collective action from 1984 until mid-1986 – mainly under the aegis of PAS – corresponds with a period when PAS’ was on the political offensive. PAS, however, was not the only Islamic organisation to be enjoying a resurgence at this time. The number and influence of *dakwah* (Islamic propagation) organisation had spread considerably

⁶⁹ Source: Collected daily newspaper reports, 1981-1988.

⁷⁰ ‘The PAS *ceramah* onslaught.’ *New Straits Times*, 9 August 1984. *Kafir* means infidel, and *mengkafir* means to call or pronounce someone an infidel. For an extended analysis of the discursive elements of the debate, see Mohamad Abu Bakar, ‘Konservatisme dan konflik: Isu ‘kafir mengkafir’ dalam politik kepartian, 1955-2000’, *Pemikir*, 21 (2000), pp. 121-59.

⁷¹ For instance, ‘‘Protest’ prayers by PAS members.’ *New Straits Times*, 13 July 1984; ‘The PAS *ceramah* onslaught.’ *New Straits Times*, 9 August 1984.

⁷² ‘‘PAS will not stop holding *ceramahs*’.’ *New Straits Times*, 13 August 1984.

at this time, causing the regime some concern.⁷³ As the DAP's success in the 1986 election foreshadowed an increase in Chinese-based collective action, however, PAS' dismal performance in the election – garnering only one seat – was followed by the dissolution of the previously reinvigorated societal mobilisation.

The foregoing analysis of ethnic mobilisation has highlighted two main issues. Firstly, it has again pointed to the period 1984–1987 as being key to the dynamics of the regime challenge that was to emerge after the 1987 UMNO general assembly. Secondly, from a more theoretical perspective, it has introduced another important aspect of mobilisation – the role of political parties. We will return to these themes at the conclusion of this chapter. Before doing so, however, we must consider a final form of social mobilisation – one that is often neglected in studies of Malaysia: the labour movement.

The Labour Movement

In the last chapter, we saw that it has generally been argued that the systematic demobilisation and repression of labour in the 1960s, backed up by ever increasing restrictions on the organisation, unionisation and mobilisation of labour has resulted in a weak labour movement.⁷⁴ This weakness has been exacerbated by ethnic divisions within the movement.

Despite intermittent attempts at reconciliation, the labour movement remained organisationally fragmented throughout the 1980s. A broad strategic divide

⁷³ 'Thrashing out problems of dakwah activity.' *New Straits Times*, 9 May 1985.

between the two major union centres – the Malaysian Trades Union Congress (MTUC) and the Congress of Unions of Employees in the Public and Civil Services (CUEPACS) – over how to push workers' claims hampered the movement's political power and mobilisational potential. In 1980, the MTUC suffered a damaging split, when six major unions also affiliated to CUEPACS left the congress.⁷⁵ The split was essentially caused by differing strategies between the two factions. The CUEPACS affiliated unions representing public servants, who were relatively highly educated and had established contacts within the government, favoured a mild approach to industrial negotiations, whilst the alternate faction, headed by V. David of the Transport Workers Union, was more militant in its approach. Ethnic differences may also have played a part here. Figures for the breakdown of union membership by ethnicity are unavailable, but the preferential policies of the NEP meant that public sector employees – who formed the bulk of CUEPACS' membership – were overwhelmingly Malay.

Although the government initially disapproved of the union split, apparently concerned about having to deal with too many labour bodies, it increasingly played on these differences in a 'divide and rule' strategy, instigating the two labour centres against each other. In 1982, for instance, the government stunned the unions by announcing that it would treat CUEPACS with equal status to the MTUC as a national labour representative. This predicated a violently oscillating relation between the two organisation throughout the 1980s, at some times

⁷⁴ See, for instance, Arudsothy, 'The state and industrial relations in developing countries'; Jomo Kwame Sundaram & Patricia Todd, *Trade Unions and the State in Peninsula Malaysia*, Singapore, Oxford University Press, 1994.

agreeing, though never quite managing, to merge for the sake of 'labour unity', at other times almost reaching outright warfare, particularly over the annual selection of representative for the International Labour Organisation conference.⁷⁶ In addition to encouraging differences between the MTUC and CUEPACS, the regime sought to undermine the power of the more militant MTUC in particular by encouraging in-house unions, which would weaken the bargaining power (and mobilising potential) of the national-level organisations.⁷⁷

In the event, however, the main labour dispute of the 1980s came not from the MUTC but from CUEPACS. In 1983, following the split, Ahmad Nor was elected president of CUEPACS with the public support of the regime, and, along with the secretary-general A. Ragunathan, was often seen to favour the BN. Immediately after he was elected, Ahmad declared CUEPACS' apolitical stance – in fact a tacit support of the regime's position – stating that 'politics and unions don't mix'.⁷⁸ In 1984, thirty thousand members of CUEPACS were even 'instructed' by Ahmad to attend a pro-government rally to 'show their support' for Mahathir.⁷⁹ Ahmad's tenure with CUEPACS was short lived, however, as was his political allegiance to the regime – in 1986 he quit as CUEPACS president to become the chairman of the opposition Social Democratic Party (SDP).⁸⁰

⁷⁵ 'Unionised but not unified.' *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 3 October 1980.

⁷⁶ 'MTUC: Don't split labour unity.' *New Straits Times*, 1 December 1984; 'CUEPACS chief picked for Geneva conference.' *New Straits Times*, 23 May 1984.

⁷⁷ 'In-house trade unions?.' *New Straits Times*, 24 March 1983.

⁷⁸ 'Politics and unions don't mix: Ahmad.' *New Straits Times*, 12 August 1983.

⁷⁹ '30 000 CUEPACS members to attend rally.' *New Straits Times*, 4 January 1984.

⁸⁰ 'CUEPACS' president is new chairman of SDP.' *New Sunday Times*, 2 March 1986.

This apparent turnabout in Ahmad's political inclinations reflected a shift in CUEPACS as a whole towards a more confrontational stance against the regime. From 1984, a number of public sector pay disputes involving the larger unions and the statutory negotiating bodies for civil servants, the National Joint Councils (NJC), raised tensions between CUEPACS and the government, culminating in 1985 and 1986 with a series of mass pickets and illegal strikes.⁸¹ This confrontation fell off again after the government agreed to meet CUEPACS representatives for negotiations and a pay settlement was reached. At the same time, Ahmad Nor resigned his presidency of the union body to join the SDP, and Ragunathan renewed CUEPACS' apolitical stance in the run up to the 1986 general elections.⁸²

This broad picture of labour mobilisation is conducive with the trends in other social movement mobilisation outlined above, with sustained high levels of protest emerging in the mid 1980s. Overall, labour protests and official strikes surged in the mid 1980s despite the economic recession, during which time classical industrial relations economics would suggest that labour protests should be falling. The internal instability of the BN regime in these years thus provided the political opportunity for labour activists to press their claims.

⁸¹ '14,000 artisans to picket nationwide.' *New Straits Times*, 24 May 1985.

⁸² "'CUEPACS to stay neutral in polls'." *New Straits Times*, 15 July 1986.

Figure 5.3: Official strike activity, 1980-1989⁸³

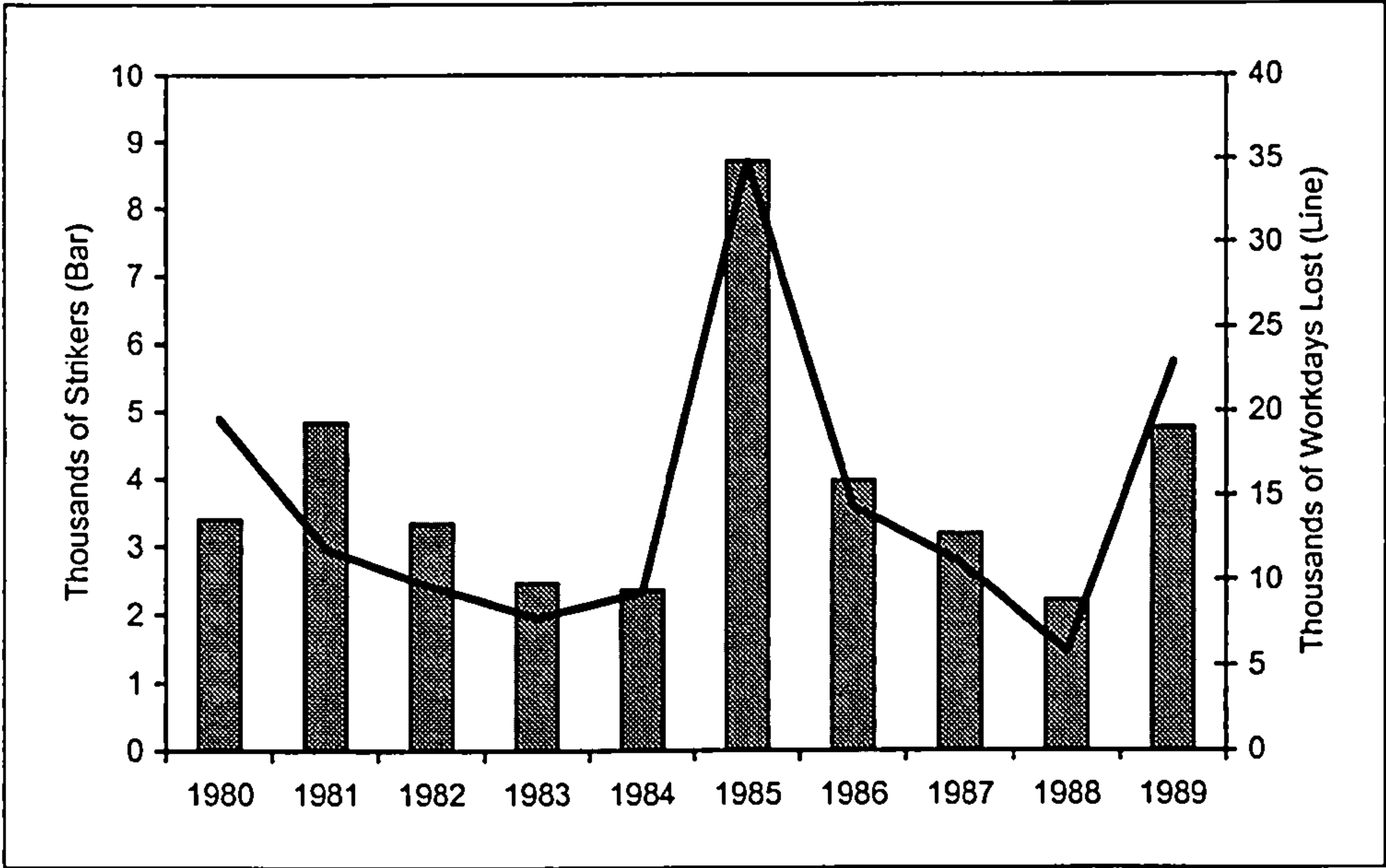
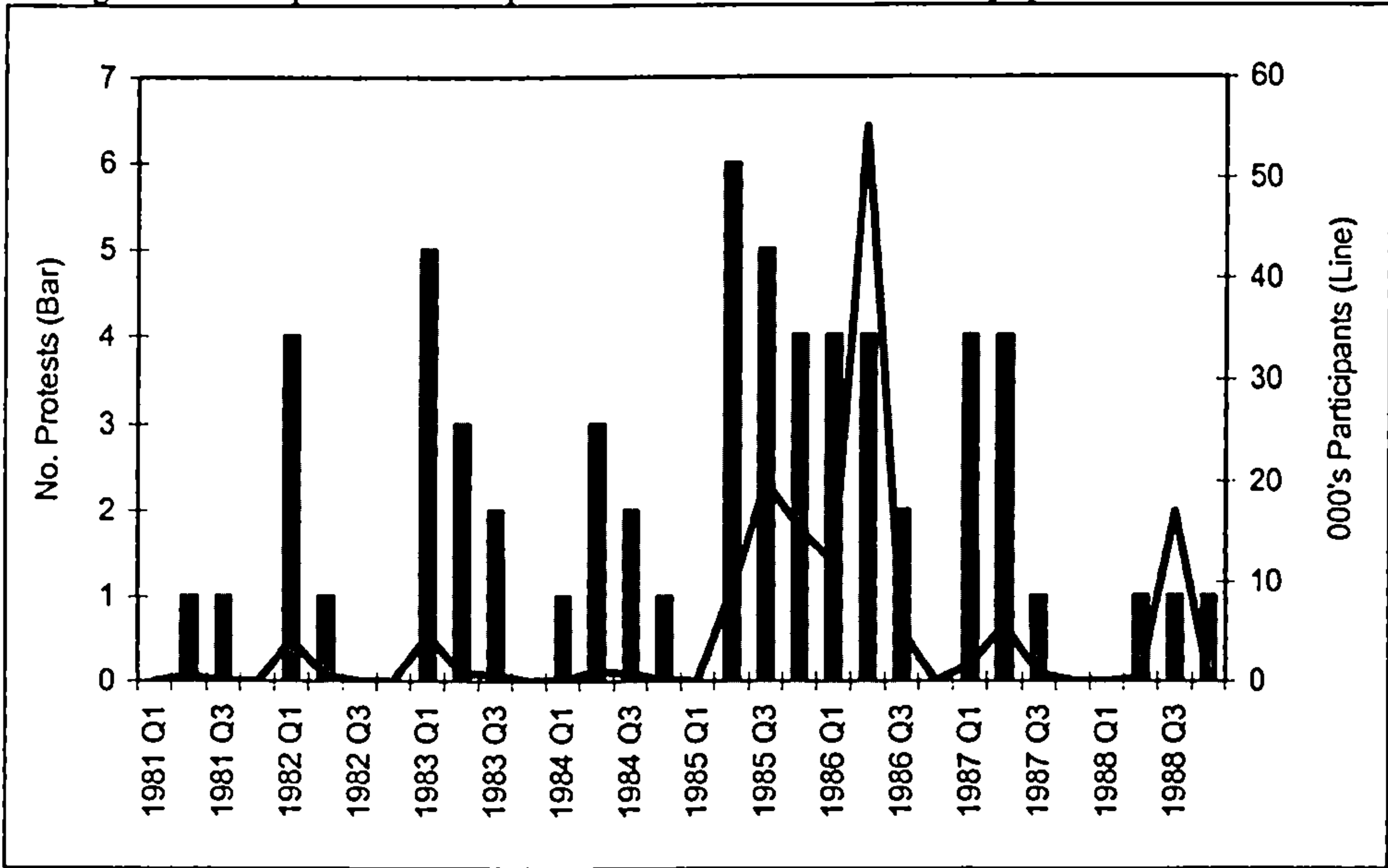


Figure 5.4: Reported labour protests and unofficial strikes by quarter, 1981-1989⁸⁴



⁸³ Source: Malaysia, Ministry of Labour and Manpower, *Labour and Manpower Report*, various years.

⁸⁴ Source: Daily newspaper reports, 1981-1989.

THE STATE RESPONSE

We have seen that the emergence of a broadly middle class, nonethnic sphere of civil society and the associated mobilisation of 'new' social movements in the mid 1980s presented an unprecedented challenge to the regime and its hegemonic foundations. The regime's response to these developments differed greatly from its approach towards previous challenges. In combating Islamic resurgence since the 1970s, the regime had employed a variety of complementary strategies aimed at undermining the societal challenge it posed.⁸⁵ The cooptation of popular and charismatic leaders, most notably Anwar's entry into UMNO in 1982, was complemented by a largely symbolic Islamisation drive, which sought to appropriate the resurgent Islamic discourse into the regime and nullify its oppositional potential. The broad success of this approach is evidenced by PAS' disastrous performance in the 1986 general election, and the subsequent demobilisation of Islamic protest activity although, as we shall see in later chapters, Islamic opposition to the state was down, but not out. Similarly, the regime had continued its strategy of harassment and cooptation against the labour movement, which had resulted in the broad alignment of CUEPACS with the regime for much of the decade.

In contrast, a strategy of cooptation was markedly absent from the regime's interaction with the middle class-led civil society. If attempts were made to coopt its leaders and their organisations into the regime, they were clearly unsuccessful. Given the deliberate and often public moves by organisations such as ALIRAN and CAP (as well as the more issue-specific Perak Anti-

Radioactivity Committee) to distance themselves from party politics – whether BN or opposition – it is hardly surprising that the regime met with little success. Many unionists, including the MTUC secretary-general V. David, aspired to a parliamentary career; by the late 1970s, it was equally clear that Anwar was positioning himself for a move into party politics. The same could not be said of Chandra Muzaffar, Gurmit Singh or any of the other leaders of this new generation of civil society.⁸⁶ Moreover, the cooptation of these individuals would have been less attractive to the regime. Anwar brought many of his loyal followers into UMNO with him; such strong ‘followership’ was absent from middle class civil society organisations and their leaders.⁸⁷

In approaching the new civil society prior to 1987, the regime adopted less directly confrontational tactics. Firstly, as we have seen, it introduced new legislation to regulate the activities of civil society groups – a strategy that backfired somewhat, as it provoked greater coordination and cooperation within civil society. Secondly, it engaged in a discursive contest with the new civil

⁸⁵ See, for instance, David Camroux, ‘State responses to Islamic resurgence in Malaysia: Accommodation, co-optation and confrontation’, *Asian Survey*, 36(9), pp. 852-69.

⁸⁶ As we will see in later chapters, Chandra Muzaffar did eventually make the move into opposition party politics in 1999 but had resisted attempts to lure him into the opposition coalition in the run-up to the 1990 elections. When interviewed during his tenure as *Parti Keadilan Nasional* deputy president, Chandra expressed great satisfaction at his move into party politics – a satisfaction that, however, had clearly dissipated by the time he left the scene again in 2001.

⁸⁷ The term ‘followership’ is used wryly by Clive Kessler in his analysis of Malay political culture. He suggests that the concept of ‘leadership’, often perceived to be prominent in Malay culture, is not analytically problematic. What is problematic, is explaining why so many people *follow* these leaders. See Clive Kessler, ‘Archaism and Modernity: Contemporary Malay political culture’, in Joel S. Kahn and Francis Loh Kok Wah (eds.), *Fragmented Vision: Culture and politics in contemporary Malaysia*, Honolulu, University of Hawaii Press, 1992, pp. 133-57.

society over its goals and ambitions. Environmentalism in particular was singled out as the work of 'extremists' bent on 'disrupting' growth.⁸⁸ A notion of 'development' was propagated, which was presented as a 'national' goal and environmentalism was thus 'anti-national', tantamount to treason.⁸⁹ As we saw earlier, the regime also tried to brand the new wave of NGOs as undemocratic, and as stooges for the opposition parties, 'foreign interests', or even the pitiful remnants of the communist insurgency.⁹⁰ Despite – or perhaps even because of – these moves, however, the new NGOs had, by the mid-1980s, 'acquired a certain legitimacy', albeit limited to the middle class.⁹¹ With the political crisis of 1987, the regime thus took more Draconian action against the new civil society, which will be dealt with in the next chapter.

THEORETICAL PARENTHESIS: CIVIL SOCIETY, POLITICAL PARTIES AND ELECTIONS

Theories of civil society usually postulate it as a sphere of political association autonomous and separate from the state. Political parties, following this approach, fall clearly on the state side of the equation. As we have seen, however, in countries such as Malaysia this distinction is less clear. Political parties, particularly in the opposition ranks, frequently act in the civil society arena, organising societal campaigns and mobilising protest movements. Initially, this unclear distinction may seem theoretically problematic. As

⁸⁸ 'Don't cause disruption.' *New Straits Times*, 15 November 1985.

⁸⁹ 'Lim and Gurmit rapped over Bakun statement.' *New Straits Times*, 31 December 1985.

⁹⁰ 'Musa: New tactics by CTs.' *New Straits Times*, 8 April 1983; 'Consumer bodies and foreign funds.' *New Straits Times*, 23 November 1985.

⁹¹ Chandra, 'Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) as a vehicle of social change', p. 191.

Mitchell points out, however, the 'greyness' of this boundary in fact provides us with an important inroad into understanding the relationship between the two.⁹²

Arguably precisely because they are denied any genuine opportunity to influence the state from within, opposition parties in Malaysia frequently act in a way more akin to civil society organisations, organising rallies and protests, and attempting to influence the state from outside. Indeed, for PAS in particular, it is important to note that its political agenda (i.e. contesting parliamentary seats and its periods of governance at the state level) increasingly became only one aspect of a broader societal agenda that sought greater Islamisation of society.⁹³

Whilst an integral part of this agenda was the eventual implementation of an Islamic state – a necessarily political objective – the party also attempted to influence the transformation of Malay society through less directly political means, in its exhibitions, *ceramah* and other cultural activities. The fact that this increased societal agenda may have been driven by the party's lack of political success is, to an extent, irrelevant to our discussion. What is important is that the party operated on two levels, both as a political party and as a civil society organisation. Of course the two aspects were mutually reinforcing – success in the societal sphere would inevitably lead to greater support for the party at elections. A similar case, although less clear, can be made for other opposition parties such as the DAP. Thus, for instance, the party's success in

⁹² Tim Mitchell, 'The limits of the state: Beyond statist approaches and their critics', *American Political Science Review*, 85:1 (1991), pp. 77-96. Mitchell speaks in terms of a state-society divide, rather than using the explicit terminology of 'civil society'. The thrust of his argument is, however, equally applicable in the theoretical framework employed here.

⁹³ Interviews with PAS activists, April-November 2001.

preventing the development of Bukit Cina was not a reflection of its parliamentary strength, but of its societal campaign.

If pursuing a civil society agenda provided opposition parties an avenue to circumvent their lack of political representation, the holding of regular elections in effect brought the political and social dimensions of opposition politics together. Despite the fact that elections in Malaysia are so heavily slanted towards the regime that it is virtually unimaginable it might lose, elections nonetheless retain a broad legitimacy in the country, even among opposition activists. In this context, elections might be understood by opposition parties as a referendum on their societal performance. The relationship of the 1986 general elections to the dynamics of ethnic mobilisation is instructive here.⁹⁴ Approaching the elections, PAS was seen as being on the political offensive – largely because of its contentious societal campaign – and expected a strong performance. The party's surprisingly dismal performance was followed by a sharp demobilisation of its societal campaign. In contrast, the DAP's strong showing – attributable both to political factors such as ongoing factionalism in the MCA and to its successful pursuit of societal agenda – gave the party a renewed confidence to press societal campaigning. This interplay of civil society and party politics is affected by the capricious nature of the Malaysian ethnically-gerrymandered first-past-the-post electoral system. The huge difference between PAS' and the DAP's performance – one federal seat compared to twenty-four, respectively – and its subsequent effects on societal mobilisation

⁹⁴ For an analysis of the 1986 elections, see Sankaran Ramanathan and Mohd. Hamdan Adnan, *Malaysia's 1986 General Election: The Urban-Rural Dichotomy*, Singapore, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Occasional Paper No. 88, 1990.

belied a much closer performance differential in terms of the proportion of votes captured – around fifteen percent for PAS and twenty-one percent for the DAP.

If elections provide the opportunity for the enmeshment of civil society and political objectives, however, they also have a darker side in perpetuating or even heightening ethnic division. Across the developing world, the link between democratisation and the outbreak of ethnic conflict has been well documented, especially since the end of the cold war.⁹⁵ Elections, it is argued, engender processes of ‘ethnic outbidding’, in which the contest for the votes of any given ethnic party results in parties parading ever greater degrees of ethnic chauvinism. In Malaysia, the explicitly ethnic configuration of the BN coalition ensures that elections remain ethnically charged events. As we shall see in the following chapter, this ethnic dimension of elections took on an even greater importance in 1990, when the BN regime faced its sternest electoral test since 1969.

Elections, then, are not merely ‘political’ events, but are embedded in the interplay of civil society and the state. A clear demonstration of this linkage beyond Malaysia comes from the Philippines, where elections under varying conditions of authoritarianism – both prior to and after Marcos’ declaration of martial law – provided the focus for the resurgence of civil society through the formation of broad coalitions under the banner of the National Movement for Free Elections (NAMFREL). In the Malaysian case, elections constituted a kind of conduit between civil society and political opposition. As we shall see in the

⁹⁵ For a recent formulation, see Jack Snyder, *From Voting to Violence: Democratization and nationalist conflict*, London, W.W. Norton, 2000.

next chapter, this crosscutting role of elections was to prove decisive in the dynamics of the regime crisis after the 1987 UMNO split.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has examined the expansion of civil society and the emergence of new social movements in the 1980s. In the theoretical framework developed in chapter two, it was argued that existing writings on social movements and civil society mistakenly assume a dynamic homogeneity between the two. Exemplifying this, we have traced in this chapter the divergence between an emergent, middle class-led, discursively nonethnic civil society in Malaysia, and the persistence of ethnicity as the masterframe for protest mobilisation. Civil society, however, was not entirely impotent without ethnic claims to draw upon. In 1982, for instance, a campaign by environmentalist organisations against a proposed dam in a national park successfully brought about its cancellation.⁹⁶ Nonetheless, by the mid 1980s, there was clear evidence of a dynamic slippage between the multiethnic goals and aspirations espoused by civil society and ethnic dynamics of social protest. Only where these interests coincided – as in Papan and Bukit Cina – were significant social movements able to sustain themselves. In focussing attention primarily on the transformation of civil society itself, this chapter has only briefly touched upon the state and its relationship with civil society. The next chapter addresses this aspect in greater detail with an examination of the political crisis of the latter half of the 1980s and how this related to the emergent civil society and social movements.

⁹⁶ 'Action group to campaign against dam project.' *New Straits Times*, 29 April 1982; 'Tembeling: Energy needs won't be hit.' *New Straits Times*, 17 January 1983.

CHAPTER SIX

CRISIS AND RESPONSE I:

STATE AND SOCIAL MOBILISATION, 1987–1990

This chapter reinterprets the regime crisis in the latter half of the 1980s, particularly in the years 1987–1990. Standard explanations of this crisis, which centred on the 1987 schism in UMNO and its repercussions, tend to suggest that the crisis was a function of the economic collapse of 1985, which intensified factionalism within the party.¹ This chapter argues that this presents only a partial explanation of the crisis and its resolution, and that to understand it fully, including its lasting impact on the contours of Malaysian politics, we must situate the crisis more explicitly within the social transformations of the period. It was in the context of the increased social mobilisation of the mid-1980s that the government factionalism provoked by the economic crisis spilled out into a cycle of ethnic outbidding, which ultimately provided the justification for the dominant faction in UMNO to reassert its position through the most extensive societal repression Malaysia had seen since 1969.

In the last chapter, we saw that civil society in Malaysia underwent a drastic transformation and expansion during the early and mid-1980s. This was accompanied by an unprecedented surge in social movement activity and collective protests, mainly by those sectors of society disenfranchised or dislocated by the regime's drive for economic growth. Together, these two developments presented an unprecedented societal challenge to the regime and

¹ See, for instance, William Case, *Elites and Regimes in Malaysia: Revisiting a Consociational Democracy*, Clayton VIC, Monash Asia Institute, 1996 and Harold Crouch, *Government and Society in Malaysia*, St Leonard's NSW, Allen and Unwin, 1996.

its hegemonic foundations. In this chapter we shall see that this challenge was exacerbated by a number of political crises within the *Barisan Nasional* regime that at times threatened the coalition's survival, particularly in the period 1987-1990. It will be argued that the principle cause of the political crisis was party factionalism heightened not only by economic contraction, but also by the impact and logic of social mobilisation at the time. Moreover, the subsequent crackdown on civil society and social mobilisation associated with the October 1987 'Operation Lalang' arrests effectively *redirected* the increased societal opposition of the preceding years towards more political and electoral participation. Whilst this, combined with the UMNO split, resulted in a substantial democratic opening in the 1990 general elections, there was nonetheless no real threat of the BN losing its parliamentary dominance given its long-standing subversion of the democratic process.

POLITICAL OPPORTUNITIES: ELITE FRACTURE

In states such as Malaysia, where one party or coalition has an enduring monopoly on political power, 'normal' non-contentious struggles for power by individuals or groups of individuals are likely to take the form of factionalism within the dominant political organisation. Put simply, anyone who aspires to be Malaysia's prime minister solely or primarily as an end in itself is more likely to do so from within the BN regime than to challenge it from the outside. Indeed, even for those who would seek major transformation of the state,

working to 'change from within' is often a tempting option when facing an entrenched regime.²

Factionalism within a dominant elite is, however, often in itself a source of contentious mobilisation, particularly when this factionalism reaches crisis point. Weaknesses within the regime brought about by factional struggles provide the political opportunity for more contentious, socially-based challenges to the state to emerge. The most celebrated recent example of this is the factional struggle within the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in the late 1980s, which provided the political opportunity for a democratising social movement to emerge that ultimately brought about a far greater degree of democratisation than even the reformers under Gorbachev had ever envisaged.³ A salutary lesson that perceived factional weaknesses in a regime are not always what they seem to be is however demonstrated by the tragic experience of the Chinese students who decided to continue their occupation of Tiananmen Square in May-June 1989, a decision attributed to their mistaken perception that the Chinese Communist Party was in the midst of a critical factional struggle.⁴

In Malaysia, factional struggles within the BN coalition were to prove vital to the emergence and direction of a sustained challenge to the regime in the latter half of the 1980s. In 1987, Malaysian politics was thrown into upheaval by a serious

² Supporters of Anwar Ibrahim since his 1998 fall from government have often used this line to defend his original decision to join UMNO in 1982. Interview, Raja Petra Kamaruddin, Free Anwar Campaign Director, Bangsar, April 2001.

³ See M. Steven Fish, *Democracy from Scratch: Opposition and regime in the New Russian Revolution*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1995.

⁴ Doug McAdam, Sidney Tarrow and Charles Tilly, *Dynamics of Contention*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2001, pp. 206-23.

factional dispute within UMNO and a subsequent split in the party that many within the Malay community still viewed as both the vehicle for Independence and the sole protector of Malay rights. The UMNO split was, however, only one part of a broader internal crisis – or series of crises – facing the BN regime in the latter half of the 1980s, including factional struggles in the MCA and GERAKAN, the deterioration of UMNO-MCA relations, the demise of the BERJAYA party in Sabah in 1985 and the 1987 Sarawak ‘coup’.

Factionalism in UMNO

As the entrenched dominatrix of an entrenched coalition regime, it is unsurprising that UMNO has a long history of factional divides within the party. At its 1987 general assembly, however, factionalism within UMNO reached cataclysmic proportions, which was fought out in the party general assembly, in the courts and eventually in the 1990 general election, and which was to have substantial repercussions on the mobilisation of societal opposition to the regime. Just as political opportunity theorists argue that we must examine the timing and conditions under which social movements emerge, so it is equally important that we understand why the UMNO split happened when it did, especially given its repercussions on societal mobilisation. Before proceeding, a brief description of UMNO’s internal structure is necessary for an understanding of what follows.

UMNO’s party hierarchy is complex in the extreme, a fact that only heightens the party’s factional tendencies. The top two posts in the party are the presidency and the deputy presidency, which, in the BN coalition translate *de facto* into the government posts of prime minister and deputy prime minister. The next rung down consists of five vice presidents. Two of these posts are *ex officio* and

automatically allotted to the respective presidents of the party's youth wing, UMNO Youth, and its women's wing, Wanita UMNO. The other three vice presidencies are elected at the party elections; although nominally equal in status, there is a practical pecking order in the vice presidencies dependent on the number of votes received and record in office. The party assembly also elects twenty-five members of the top decision making body, the Supreme Council, to which the incoming party president nominates a further ten. UMNO party elections are usually held every three years, with delegates sent by the party's regional divisions, themselves made up of countless smaller branches. Because of the expectation of cabinet portfolios for those successful in the party elections, some commentators have characterised the UMNO party elections as more important in determining the government of the country than general elections, which, as we have seen, rarely present much of a challenge to the regime.⁵ More importantly for our purposes here, the triennial elections are inevitably the focus of factional rivalries.

In April 1987, the party elections saw an unprecedented challenge to the existing leadership under Prime Minister and UMNO president Mahathir. In past party elections, senior posts were occasionally contested: Hussein Onn faced a weak challenge for the party presidency in 1978 and, as we shall see presently, the previous two elections had seen contests for the deputy presidency.⁶ In 1987, however, the contest went a step further with, in effect, two separate slates

⁵ See Jomo Kwame Sundaram, 'Elections' Janus face: Limitations and potential in Malaysia', in R.H. Taylor (ed.), *The Politics of Elections in South East Asia*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996, pp. 90-113.

⁶ On the challenge to Hussein Onn, see Harold Crouch, 'The UMNO crisis: 1975-77', in Harold Crouch, Lee Kam Hing and Michael Ong (eds.), *Malaysian Politics and the 1978 Elections*, Kuala Lumpur, University of Oxford Press, 1980, pp. 11-36.

of candidates. One faction, dubbed by the press 'Team A', comprised the incumbent party president Mahathir, his nominated deputy Ghafar Baba and their supporters, including Anwar Ibrahim. The challenger faction, Team B, was led by former finance minister and UMNO vice-president Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah and former deputy prime minister Musa Hitam.

The factionalism that led to the 1987 split can be traced back to the administration of Malaysia's second prime minister Tun Abdul Razak Hussein, who took over from Tunku Abdul Rahman following the 1969 riots. After Razak's first deputy, Dr Ismail Abdul Rahman, died of a heart attack in 1973, Hussein Onn was appointed deputy prime minister, a decision attributable both to his political closeness to Razak and to his familial ties – the two were brothers-in-law. Razak himself died of leukaemia three years later and Hussein ascended to the premiership. Although perceived as an honest and sincere politician with a distinguished pedigree (his father was UMNO founder Onn Jaafar), Hussein lacked a substantial support base of his own within UMNO, and thus also lacked an obvious choice of deputy.⁷ Hussein's initial choice was apparently the powerful but unpopular home minister Ghazali Shafie – a man with a reputation that put him somewhere between a Malaysian Joseph McCarthy and J. Edgar Hoover. Ghazali, however, lacked a senior post within UMNO, and Hussein was thus given an ultimatum by the party's three elected vice presidents that he must choose one of them. The three were Ghafar Baba, Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah and Mahathir Mohamad. Hussein selected

⁷ Hussein's father Onn Jaafar had left UMNO in the 1950s after a failed attempt to transform it into a multiracial party. Hussein, with a more chauvinistic ideological bent than his father, had assiduously resisted entering UMNO until the equally pro-Malay Razak replaced the more consociational Tunku Abdul Rahman.

Mahathir, who was politically closest to him, but also the most junior of the three. Ghafar promptly resigned from the cabinet and left frontline politics until the 1980s; Razaleigh was similarly disenchanted, though he retained his cabinet portfolio.⁸

In 1980, after his health deteriorated with heart troubles of his own, Hussein announced that he would be stepping down as prime minister, to be replaced by Mahathir. The transition of leadership from Hussein to Mahathir took place in 1981 at the UMNO general assembly to select the party leaders who became, *de facto*, the government. In the context of an ordered and anointed transition from Hussein to Mahathir, there was never likely to be any challenge to Mahathir's position, but a contest did emerge for the deputy presidency of UMNO, and thus the position of deputy prime minister. The two contenders were Musa Hitam, one of the 'young Turks' who had briefly been expelled from the government along with Mahathir, and Razaleigh. The contest was the first election for the deputy presidency, and with both candidates popular within the party, Mahathir remained officially neutral about who his preferred deputy would be. It has been suggested, however, that Hussein's public support for Musa was the swaying factor which gave him a decisive but less than over-whelming victory

⁸ It has been alleged that Ghazali made use of his influence as Home Minister over the secret police ('Special Branch') to try and discredit Mahathir with purported link to the Singapore Communist underground. Syed Husin Ali, a professor and leader of the PSRM who was detained under the ISA for six years during the 1970s, alleged that special branch officers attempted to coerce him into admitting to being a 'middleman' between Mahathir (and Musa) and the Singapore communist underground. See Syed Husin Ali, *Two Faces: Detention without trial*, Petaling Jaya, INSAN, 1996.

over Razaleigh.⁹ Undaunted, Razaleigh again challenged Musa at the next party elections, in 1984. The contest was bitter and expensive, marking the real entry of money politics into the party. As we have seen, the NEP years had brought about a transformation of UMNO membership, with small businessmen increasingly forming its office bearers. For many of these businessmen, involvement in UMNO was an investment the same as any other, and one of the principle sources of return on this investment was factional patronage.¹⁰ In 1984, Razaleigh, a successful businessman who had helmed the state oil company Petronas before its nationalisation, was able to dispense considerably personal patronage to his supporters. In contrast, Musa, a career politician who had been an assistant minister in Tunku Abdul Rahman's cabinet, was a relative pauper in UMNO's top ranks.

Despite Razaleigh's financial advantage, however, Musa won the contest again by a slightly increased margin, in part due to the fact that this time around Mahathir was openly supportive of him.¹¹ In the aftermath of his victory, Musa privately demanded that Mahathir remove Razaleigh from his post as the powerful UMNO treasurer and from his ministerial position. Mahathir half

⁹ Gordon P. Means, *Malaysian Politics: The Second Generation*, Singapore, Oxford University Press, 1991, p. 82.

¹⁰ One former UMNO office bearer I interviewed during fieldwork, who had been active in the party for more than a decade before leaving to join KEADILAN in 1999, was able to give me a breakdown of how much he (claimed to have) spent on buying his nomination to various posts and delegations, and explained his departure from UMNO as partly due to his support for Anwar, but also due to the party's failure to provide him with a 'big project', despite his investment.

¹¹ Also contesting was Harun Idris, a charismatic vice president who had briefly been imprisoned on corruption charges in the 1970s, before receiving a royal pardon. Harun surprised many, however, with his lack of support, garnering only a handful of votes.

complied, sacking Razaleigh from his party post, but keeping him in the cabinet, moving him from the Finance Ministry to Trade and Industry Secretary.¹² This move apparently disenchanted Musa even further, however, as he claimed that Razaleigh's new position would allow him even greater control of patronage networks.

The protraction of the factional struggle between Musa and Razaleigh had important implications in that it caused the dispute to spill over into a deep factional divide within UMNO, and even beyond into Malay society at all levels.

As one commentator put it:

Before this any such division was only felt at the top but this time it went down to the grass roots... *Orang Musa* ('Musa's man') and *orang Razaleigh* ('Razaleigh's man') were not only labels but often became the 'key phrases' which opened or terminated a business or any other discussion, guaranteed or denied an individual getting a contract or a scholarship, and expedited or delayed an application for a job, a licence, or even the transfer of a teacher from an *ulu* ('remote') to an urban school and vice versa.¹³

Recognition of Razaleigh's continuing command of a powerful faction within the party, as well as his regional popularity as a member of the royal family in Kelantan, may have prompted Mahathir to keep him in the cabinet against Musa's wishes. The decision, however, foreshadowed a slowly deteriorating

¹² 'Rift at the top.' *Asiaweek*, 16 March 1986.

¹³ Shamsul A.B., 'The "battle royal": The UMNO elections of 1987', in Mohammed Ayoob and Ng Chee Yuen (eds.), *Southeast Asian Affairs 1988*, Singapore, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1988, pp. 172-3.

relationship between Mahathir and Musa. By mid-1985, Mahathir was forced into making repeated public denials that a rift was developing between the two.¹⁴

At this stage, factionalism within UMNO was aggravated by the economic collapse of the mid-1980s. In 1985, the market price for all Malaysia's main exports – petroleum, palm oil, rubber, sawlogs, tin and cocoa – collapsed. The economic downturn was particularly felt by the Malay business class, where the effects of the recession were heightened by the *ersatz* nature of much Malay capital – based to a large extent on government patronage through the NEP and an associated flurry of mergers and acquisitions by new Malay conglomerates.¹⁵ By 1986, the UMNO-dominated government was finding it difficult to deliver 'development plums' to its rural Malay constituency.¹⁶ Small Malay businessmen, used to the frequent handout of development projects and preferential licenses, found their livelihoods severely affected both by the economic downturn and the concomitant contraction in government patronage. In such conditions, those businessmen who were also UMNO members started to pressurise their respective political patrons for further largesse, in turn heightening factionalism in the upper echelons of the party.¹⁷

After Musa left the country to perform the *haj* (Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca) in February 1986, Mahathir was left making another denial of a split between the

¹⁴ 'All's well at the top.' *Asiaweek*, 9 August 1985.

¹⁵ Kunio Yoshihara, *The Rise of Ersatz Capitalism in South-East Asia*, Singapore, Oxford University Press, 1993.

¹⁶ 'Godfather party runs short of Islamic plums.' *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 2 January 1986.

¹⁷ For a fuller exposition of this argument, see Case, *Elites and Regimes in Malaysia*.

two – only later to find that Musa had submitted a letter of resignation before departing. Musa initially resigned both from the government and from the deputy presidency of UMNO, but retracted the latter resignation, keeping his party post. According to his letter of resignation, Musa was disenchanted with the internal politics of UMNO and the rise of money politics in particular, though other sources within the party claimed that he was simply impatient to take over the premiership from Mahathir.¹⁸ Whatever his reasons, it was the first public signal that internal UMNO factionalism was about to break out onto the national political agenda. The factionalist dimension of the dispute – rather than policy differences – was highlighted when Mahathir, under attack from within UMNO for his mishandling of the situation, produced the 1984 letter from Musa demanding Razaleigh's expulsion from his posts.¹⁹

After Musa's resignation, it was clear that some form of challenge to Mahathir's leadership was likely at the impending 1987 UMNO party elections. Initially, it was assumed that Musa would challenge Mahathir for the party presidency, speculation which was apparently confirmed by the emergence of what appeared to be a proxy battle between the two for control of UMNO Youth in November 1986, in which Mahathir's protégé Anwar Ibrahim soundly beat a relatively unknown Musa ally, Syed Hamid Albar.²⁰ Similarly, in the Women's wing (Wanita UMNO), a Mahathir ally won the leadership, although the deputy

¹⁸ 'Musa's resignation shock.' *Asiaweek*, 9 March 1986.

¹⁹ 'Rift at the top.' *Asiaweek*, 16 March 1986.

²⁰ 'First salvos in the battle of '87.', *Asiaweek*, 28 September 1986. Syed Hamid was from Musa's support base in the southern state of Johor. Two other contenders had stepped aside and given their support to Syed Hamid.

slot went to a Musa supporter.²¹ As the main party elections approached, however, a surprise realignment of factions took place when Razaleigh and Musa – the bitter foes of 1981 and 1984 – joined together to challenge, respectively, Mahathir and Ghafar Baba, who had replaced Musa as deputy prime minister, for the top two posts in the party.²² These two pairings of candidates for the top posts soon broadened into unofficial slates of candidates: Mahathir's Team A and Razaleigh's Team B.

When the party election was held in April 1987, the results demonstrated the deep divisions in the party. Mahathir and Ghafar both won, but by the smallest of margins: Mahathir beat Razaleigh by less than three per cent of the votes cast; Ghafar's winning margin over Musa was even smaller and indeed less than the number of spoilt ballots. On the next rung down, two of the three elected vice presidencies went to Team A candidates, the other to Team B.²³ Team A candidates also won fifteen of the twenty-five seats available on the party's top decision-making body, the Supreme Council. As president-elect, however, Mahathir was entitled to appoint another ten council members, thus tightening his control over the party's hierarchy, despite his own wafer-thin majority.

Divisions within the party were further cemented when Mahathir, breaking with the Malay cultural tradition of reconciliation, dismissed three ministers and four deputy ministers who had openly supported Razaleigh and Musa; Razaleigh

²¹ 'A sideshow.' *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 02 October 1986

²² 'Campaigning for the top.' *Asiaweek*, 8 March 1987. Technically, Musa was defending his post and Ghafar was the challenger, as Musa had not resigned from the deputy presidency of UMNO.

²³ 'The price of victory.' *Asiaweek*, 03 May 1987. The two Mahathir allies were Wan Mokhtar Ahmad and Anwar Ibrahim; the Musa supporter was Abdullah Ahmad Badawi.

himself had already resigned his government post, as did one of his staunchest allies, foreign minister Rais Yatim.²⁴ Even senior civil servants suspected of supporting Team B found themselves transferred out of powerful positions; bank loans were also recalled, resulting in a number of bankruptcies.²⁵ In response, Razaleigh's supporters launched a court action to nullify the election results, threatening to prolong the crisis. Even after the party elections, it was thus clear that the deep divides within the party, which had spilled over into Malay society as a whole, were unlikely to be resolved speedily.

Factionalism in UMNO, then, was a long-standing phenomenon but previously of limited impact on national politics. What raised it to the level of crisis in 1987 was the broad structural transformation of particularly Malay society under the NEP, which had increased exponentially UMNO's role as a vehicle for the disbursement of patronage, and the economic collapse of 1985, which created pressures within this patronage system – essentially the same developments that gave rise to the increased societal mobilisation of the mid-1980s, as we saw in the previous chapter. The UMNO split, which created the political opportunity for an intensification of this societal challenge, was thus caused by the same broad set of factors that drove this challenge itself.

Factionalism in other BN parties

The UMNO split was the most important factor in creating the political opportunity for increased societal mobilisation in the late 1980s, but UMNO was not the only BN party to be suffering from internal factionalism and jockeying

²⁴ 'Mahathir cracks the whip.' *Asiaweek*, 10 May 1987

²⁵ Hari Singh, 'Political change in Malaysia: The role of Semangat 46', *Asian Survey*, 31:8 (1991), pp. 712-28.

for power in the mid 1980s, all of which contributed to emerging political space for contentious mobilisation. The Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) had been wrought by a very public and increasingly convoluted factional struggle since the early years of the decade. Essentially, the dispute revolved around two leaders – Neo Yee Pan and Tan Koon Swan. In 1983, the popular MCA president Lee San Choon abruptly retired from office, shortly after ousting his elected deputy, Richard Ho, and replacing him with his own protégé, Neo.²⁶ Neo was not popular within the party, however, and was soon challenged by Tan Koon Swan and others, who accused him of creating ‘phantom’ party members to boost his standing.²⁷ Neo responded by expelling Tan and thirteen of his supporters from the party.²⁸ Under an UMNO-brokered deal, Tan and his faction were readmitted into the party a year later, after agreeing not to challenge Neo and his supporters at the next party polls.²⁹ Neo, for his part, agreed to clean up the party membership rolls. The truce foundered, however, on accusations that Neo had not been straightforward in implementing his side of the deal. As the crisis deepened, the Neo faction split, with many of his erstwhile supporters distancing themselves from his confrontational and intransigent approach.³⁰

²⁶ The reasons behind Lee’s sudden resignation have never been made clear, given his broad popularity both within the party and the Chinese community more generally. Various rumours of scandal circulated, and it was even suggested that he was forced out by UMNO, which was becoming concerned by his popularity, and his apparent appeal to the entire Chinese community. Case, *Elites and Regimes in Malaysia*, p. 166n.

²⁷ ‘Political poltergeists.’ *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 8 March 1984.

²⁸ ‘Expulsion, not exorcism.’ *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 29 March 1984.

²⁹ ‘Vitriol and fisticuffs.’ *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 22 November 1984.

³⁰ ‘A shock sacking.’ *Asiaweek*, 30 August 1985.

Just as the UMNO split was a clash of personalities driven by structural forces, so the MCA dispute was intensified by the politics of patronage. As we saw in chapter four, the MCA had in the 1970s consolidated its own patronage networks in the establishment of Multi-Purpose Holdings Berhad (MPHB). Tan's popularity within the party was largely a result of his apparently successful running of MPHB, of which he was managing director. The dispute came to a head at the November 1985 party elections, where Tan officially challenged Neo for the party presidency. The delegates voted overwhelmingly for Tan, and the party split appeared settled. Shortly after, however, the impact of the economic slowdown intervened in an unexpected way. Just days after Tan won the presidency, Pan Electric – a major Singapore-based corporate conglomerate of which he was a director – went into bankruptcy amidst allegations of share price manipulation, prompting a collapse on both the Singapore and the Malaysian stock exchanges.³¹ Tan was arrested in Singapore on charges of Criminal Breach of Trust, though later released on bail in an apparent arrangement with the Malaysian government, which wanted Tan to lead the MCA in the 1986 general election. Shortly after the election, in which the MCA performed disastrously, Tan was imprisoned in Singapore and relinquished his party post to his deputy, Ling Leong Sik. Ling, a staunch supporter of Tan during the crisis, picked another Tan stalwart, Lee Kim Sai, as his deputy.

Factional squabbles in regionally-based BN component parties also heightened the regime crisis of the mid-1980s. In 1984, a three-way leadership tussle emerged in the other major Chinese party in the BN coalition, the Penang-based GERAKAN (*Gerakan Rakyat Malaysia*, or The People's Movement Party of

³¹ 'Unravelling Pan El.' *Asiaweek*, 20 December 1985.

Malaysia). One of the contenders, Michael Chen, had defected to GERAKAN from the MCA after losing his 1979 leadership bid. Chen had a strong factional base within the party, primarily made up of other MCA defectors.³² After losing narrowly to the incumbent leader Lim Keng Yaik, Chen was openly courted by embattled MCA president Neo, clearly in the hope that should he return to the MCA as a Neo ally, he would bring many of his supporters back with him, thus strengthening Neo's position. In the event, however, the publicity surrounding Chen's vacillations did his credibility serious harm, and he decided the stay put in GERAKAN, defecting back to the MCA four years later in 1988, despite having won a GERAKAN vice-presidency post in the meantime.³³

In the East Malaysian state of Sabah, the dominant party BERJAYA (*Bersatu Rakyat Jelkuta Sabah*, or Sabah People's Union) suffered a factional split, which ultimately brought about the party's downfall in the state assembly. The BERJAYA split was important as it demonstrated clearly the link between patronage and ethnicity. Formed as a multiracial party in the 1970s, many of Sabah's native Christian Kadazandusun tribes, the largest ethnic group in the state, became increasingly concerned with the stridently pro-Islamic policies pursued by BERJAYA's president and Sabah chief minister, Harris Salleh. State government-backed development projects were often unofficially reserved for Muslims, and there were instances of entire villages converting to Islam to obtain projects in their area. These concerns were vocalised by the senior Kadazandusun in the party, Joseph Pairin Kitingan. Harris eventually expelled Pairin from the party and from the state government, whereupon Pairin formed

³² 'Political Graveyard.' *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 13 December 1984

³³ 'Cracks in Gerakan.' *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 19 January 1989

his own party, PBS (*Parti Bersatu Sabah*, or the United Sabah Party), which won a slim victory in the 1985 state elections, and consolidated this hold in fresh elections the following year.³⁴

In Sarawak, fragmentation of ethnic political identities and party factionalism spilled out into inter-party conflict.³⁵ The first of these was in the Sarawak National Party (SNAP). SNAP's membership was overwhelmingly from the Dayak tribes, but its leadership Chinese. After a failed attempt to take control of the party, a group of Dayak leaders left SNAP to form a breakaway party, the PBDS (*Parti Bansa Dayak Sarawak*, or Sarawak Dayak Party). The PBDS sought membership of the BN, but was blocked by SNAP.³⁶ The Federal BN leadership was, however, keen to admit PBDS, whose leaders, including party president Leo Moggie, were generally popular with the Dayak community. A bizarre compromise was thus worked out whereby the party was admitted into the coalition at the federal level, but remained outside of the BN administration in Sarawak; Leo Moggie was given a Federal ministership, an apparent promotion which also brought him to Kuala Lumpur, where he could be kept on a closer rein.³⁷

³⁴ For a detailed analysis of the rise of the PBS, see Francis Loh Kok Wah, 'Modernisation, cultural revival and counter-hegemony: The Kadazans of Sabah in the 1980s', in Joel S. Kahn and Francis Loh Kok Wah (eds.), *Fragmented Vision: Culture and politics in contemporary Malaysia*, Honolulu, University of Hawaii Press, 1992, pp. 225-53.

³⁵ In Sarawak, as in Sabah at the time, none of the major peninsular parties contested. State politics thus had an inevitably local dimension.

³⁶ Any party within the BN has the authority to veto the entry of another party into the coalition.

³⁷ A similar strategy had been used in dealing with Sabah's secession-minded Chief Minister of the early 1970s, Tun Mustapha Harun, who was offered the federal defence portfolio if he stood down from his state post. Harun refused, apparently demanding a price no less than the deputy primeministership and subsequently lost the 1976 state elections when the federal

Intra-BN tensions were further aggravated in the state when a feud between the chief minister Abdul Taib Mahmud and his predecessor and uncle Abdul Rahman Yakub developed into a political crisis, with BN parties facing off against each other. In 1981, Taib had replaced Rahman as chief minister and president of the dominant party in Sarawak, PBB (*Parti Pesaka Bumiputera Bersatu*, or United Bumiputera Party), the latter being 'promoted' to the largely ceremonial position of state governor (*yang di-pertua Negeri*). Rahman, however, had continued trying to influence policy and a large number of state appointees remained loyal to him. After Rahman managed to cajole a majority of BN state assembly members, including Leo Moggie, into calling for Taib's resignation, Taib promptly dissolved the state legislature and called fresh elections, which were held in April 1987. The highly divisive election saw BN parties running candidates against each other, resulting in a narrow win for the parties loyal to Taib.³⁸

Thus far, then, we have seen that the social transformations of the 1970s and 1980s resulted in increased factionalism within BN component parties, virtually across the board.³⁹ As we have seen, the political dependency of the new middle class has often been identified as a principle factor in its apparent reluctance to push for democratisation. The flip side of this dependency,

government threw its weight behind BERJAYA. See Robert O. Tilman, 'Mustapha's Sabah, 1968-1975: The Tun steps down', *Asian Survey*, 16:6 (1976), pp. 495-509.

³⁸ See Chin Ung-Ho, *Chinese Politics in Sarawak: A study of the Sarawak United People's Party*, Kuala Lumpur, Oxford University Press, 1997, especially pp. 177-229. Over the following years, a number of defections increased Taib's grip on the assembly.

³⁹ The major exception here was the Malaysian Indian Congress, which was, however, to suffer its own factional split in 1989.

however, was that political patrons had to satisfy this demand to ensure its compliance.

The explicitly ethnic delimitations of the regime meant that this quest for patronage in turn took on an ethnic dimension. Thus, we have seen that where factionalism emerged in the more multiethnic parties of East Malaysia, these splits tended to fall along ethnic lines. This was not a simple, one-directional top-down process, however. In Sabah, for instance, the ethnically divisive development policies pursued by the BERJAYA administration brought about a popular Kadazandusun revivalism, which subsequently intensified the factional pressures within the party.

INTRA-PARTY CONFLICT: THE UMNO-MCA SPLIT

This interplay of development, patronage, ethnicity and mobilisation was played out on the national level in the deteriorating relationship between the two largest parties in the BN, UMNO and the MCA. Against the backdrop of the societal trends identified in the previous chapter, differences between the two parties led to a cycle of increasingly strident ethnic claims and social mobilisation under their aegis. These developments came to a head with the October 1987 'Operation Lalang' crackdown, which decisively altered the trajectory of opposition to the regime.

Relations between UMNO and the MCA were decidedly chilly through much of the 1980s, principally due to the MCA split, which was seen as a threat to the coalition's political dominance.⁴⁰ In 1984, Musa Hitam even suggested that the MCA should consider 'opting out' of the coalition temporarily until its internal

⁴⁰ 'Vitriol and fisticuffs.' *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 22 November 1984.

problems were solved.⁴¹ At the same time, PAS approached the MCA to 'explain its aims', an indication that senior PAS members felt that tensions between UMNO and the MCA were high enough that PAS might be able to tempt the MCA out of the BN.⁴² The resolution of the MCA split with Tan's victory did little to improve relations, as a series of disagreements kept the parties apart. The poor performance of the MCA at the 1986 general election was a major contributory factor to the continuation of poor relations; the MCA was seen in UMNO as not having pulled its weight in the coalition, and comparisons were made to the 1969 general election, when a similarly poor performance by the party had cost the Alliance its parliamentary dominance.⁴³ The MCA, on the other hand, was torn between the need to mend relations with its senior partner and the need to repair its image in the eyes of the Chinese community. In November 1986, the Selangor branch of the MCA, which was headed by the national deputy president and Labour Minister Lee Kim Sai, thus passed a resolution calling for the abolition of *bumiputera* status for the Malays and the East Malaysian natives. The resolution provoked an immediate backlash from UMNO members, who interpreted it as a demand for the end of the cherished Malay 'special rights'. Forty-six UMNO MPs wrote to Mahathir, asking him to sack Lee, who himself offered to resign. Whilst the rift was quickly patched over in public – the MCA withdrew the resolution and the Sultan of Selangor publicly reprimanded Lee and warned him not to question Malay special rights – many within UMNO remained unappeased, and it contributed to deteriorating relations between the

⁴¹ 'Shape up or ship out.' *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 27 December 1984

⁴² 'PAS wants to explain its aims to MCA.' *New Straits Times*, 15 October 1984. Interviews with PAS activists, April-November 2001.

⁴³ Interviews, UMNO activists, April-November 2001.

parties, most notably in the virtual demonisation of Lee that was to arise later in 1987.⁴⁴

Ethnic tensions within the BN were heightened in 1986 when the Penang branch of UMNO, in response to the poor performance and internal chaos of the Chinese parties in the coalition, requested the prime minister to appoint a Malay chief minister in the Chinese majority state. In response, GERAKAN – whose leader Lim Chong Eu was the incumbent chief minister – demanded extra seats in the next election and threatened to withdraw from the BN.⁴⁵ Whilst the dispute was quickly patched over with the maintenance of the status quo, it was nonetheless another sign of the ethnic fragility of the regime, and may have contributed to GERAKAN's poor performance in the 1986 election.

The economic recession, which had fed factionalism within UMNO, also contributed indirectly to UMNO-MCA tensions. As we saw in the last chapter, the recession had brought about the collapse of a number of 'deposit-taking cooperatives' (DTCs), which functioned as a kind of collective investment fund, taking savings deposits from often poorer Chinese and investing them. With the economic recession, many of the cooperatives collapsed. Shortly after the 1986 general election, the central bank froze the assets of twenty-four cooperatives, which had collected between them over five hundred million ringgit from almost six hundred thousand depositors. Originally promising returns of up to fourteen percent, the cooperatives' assets had been virtually wiped out in the property market crash and through gross mismanagement – many of the

⁴⁴ 'Stirring up a "hornet's nest".' *Asiaweek*, 23 November 1986.

⁴⁵ Chung Kek Yoong, *Mahathir Administration*, Petaling Jaya, Pelanduk Publications, 1987, p. 80.

cooperatives had lent money to their own directors on very soft terms. As the government moved to wind up the cooperatives, depositors were faced with the prospect of receiving back barely one fifth of their investment. The government ruled out a rescue package, citing the poor economic climate.⁴⁶ Faced with the loss of their life savings, depositors held furious demonstrations around the country, even storming the home of the chairman of one of the cooperatives, and staging a number of 'sit-ins' at the headquarters of others.⁴⁷ Many depositors held the MCA responsible for their predicament – most of the cooperatives had institutional links with the party, many of their office-bearers were also high-ranking MCA officials. Demonstrations were thus also held outside the MCA headquarters, and demands were made that the MCA persuade the government to subsidise a ringgit-for-ringgit refund.⁴⁸ The government's refusal to back such a plan was seen by some as another case of ethnic discrimination – in the 1970s, the government had bailed out Bank Rakyat, a cooperative bank with mainly Malay investors and had also rescued Bank Bumiputera from almost RM1 billion losses in the Hong Kong property market.⁴⁹

Cognisant of its already weak electoral position following the 1986 general election and facing this groundswell of popular anger directed at the party, the MCA was forced to act – and be seen to act – to resolve the depositors' woes. At the height of its internal crisis, the MCA had been threatened with expulsion from

⁴⁶ "“Mismanagement, corruption or both”.' *Asiaweek*, 1 February 1987.

⁴⁷ 'Depositors show their anger.' *New Straits Times*, 4 January 1987; '21 held over co-op demo', 'Depositors stage “sit-in” at co-op head office.' *New Straits Times*, 7 January 1987

⁴⁸ 'Co-op depositors protest outside Wisma MCA.' *New Straits Times*, 17 November 1986.

⁴⁹ Interview, MCA activists, April-November 2001.

the BN. In May 1987, it was the MCA's turn to threaten to leave the coalition, should the government refuse to institute its ringgit-for-ringgit rescue package. UMNO, still reeling from the Razaleigh-Mahathir showdown the previous month, could ill-afford to lose its major coalition party, and acceded to the plan. The issue, however, left the parties even further estranged than before; during the negotiations, UMNO Youth suggested that the MCA make good on its threat and leave the BN.⁵⁰ Once again, it was Lee Kim Sai – the main player in the MCA's proposals – who received the most condemnation, with several UMNO Youth leaders calling for his dismissal from the post of Labour Minister.⁵¹

By mid-1987, then, the regime appeared at its most vulnerable since 1969. The UMNO party elections and the ensuing court cases had thrown the highest echelons of political power in the country into uncertainty. Whilst the MCA split appeared to be resolved by 1986, the long feud had done much to damage the party's standing in the Chinese community, and the fallout of the recession – most notably the collapse of the cooperatives – intensified this dissatisfaction. Relations between the two senior parties in the BN were at an all-time low.

Whilst the difficulties faced by the BN in the first half of 1987 were primarily internal and elite-centred, it was the mobilisation of social forces that forced an ever-growing wedge between the differing factions and parties. This was most visible in the cooperatives protests, but had also been the case with respect to the UMNO factionalism, which was intensified by bottom-up pressure in patron-client links. In addition, the weakened position of all the major BN parties and

⁵⁰ 'Staying on the inside.' *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 9 July 1987; 'Cooperative venture.' *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 16 July 1987.

⁵¹ 'Playing to the gallery.' *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 23 July 1987.

the government as a whole widened considerably the political opportunity for social mobilisation to press popular claims and demands on the regime, claims which were themselves intensified by the economic recession. This dialectic cycle of regime weakness and social mobilisation escalated exponentially in the latter half of 1987, as the continuing power struggle in UMNO threatened to split the party in two and the MCA strove to regain its lost standing in the Chinese community. As the cycle progressed, party strategy and social mobilisation became increasingly ethnically chauvinistic and social tensions rose to the point of threatening widespread communal clashes.⁵²

Language issues – a political flashpoint since the days of the Malayan Union plan in the 1950s – proved to be the spark point for the escalation of protest. The first round of protests came in August, when Universiti Malaya instituted a ruling limiting the use of Mandarin, Tamil and English in the teaching of elective subjects. The decision provoked demonstrations from non-Malay students, who interpreted the ruling as an attempt by the administration to boost the academic performance of the Malays compared to the other ethnic groups.⁵³ The ever-belligerent UMNO Youth soon waded into the controversy, criticising the demonstrators but doing nothing to prevent counter-demonstrations by students supportive of the university's move.⁵⁴ As the protests continued, police

⁵² Such a model of cyclically-increasing chauvinism or 'ethnic outbidding' was proposed in the late 1960s as a general model of democratic instability in ethnically divided countries. The theory as formulated then, however, was made in reference to the politics of elections, rather than social mobilisation more generally. See Alvin Rabushka and Kenneth A. Shepsle, *Politics in Plural Societies: A theory of democratic instability*, Columbus, Merrill, 1972.

⁵³ '50 demonstrate against ruling on elective courses.' *New Straits Times*, 2 August 1987.

⁵⁴ 'Demonstrations not the answer: UMNO Youth.' *New Straits Times*, 4 August 1987.

were forced to keep the contending groups of demonstrators apart.⁵⁵ By October, the DAP had become involved in the protests and the police were making numerous arrests.⁵⁶ The politicisation of these demonstrations, coming shortly after the UMNO showdown, contrasted markedly with the relative quiet following similar demonstrations by Chinese students at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia over perceived discrimination.⁵⁷ That the 1987 demonstrations escalated into a political storm is clearly demonstrative of the shifting opportunity structures for protest mobilisation.

The Universiti Malaya uproar was soon overshadowed, however, by a national level dispute, also concerning language and education, when the Education Minister Anwar Ibrahim announced the promotion of around ninety teachers who were not educated in Chinese-language schools to senior positions in government-supported Chinese-language primary schools. The promotions caused a storm of protest from the Chinese community, which has traditionally placed a strong value on its vernacular education system. The promotions were seen as an attempt to 'change the character of the Chinese schools', and perhaps ultimately pave the way for their disestablishment.⁵⁸ Although Anwar quickly backed down over the appointments, Chinese opposition parties and

⁵⁵ 'Demonstrators nearly clash.' *New Straits Times*, 18 August 1987.

⁵⁶ '11 held in DAP demo at Universiti Malaya.' *New Straits Times*, 10 October 1987.

⁵⁷ 'UKM gives students ultimatum'. *New Straits Times*, 14 August 1986.

⁵⁸ Tan Liok Ee, 'Chinese schools in Malaysia: A case of cultural resilience,' in Lee Kam Hing and Tan Chee-Beng (eds.), *The Chinese in Malaysia*, Kuala Lumpur, Oxford University Press, 2000, p. 244. Chinese schools have long been subtly undermined in the national education system, and the Chinese community has tended to view any changes to the system as a move towards disestablishment. For a fuller study of education in the Chinese community, see Tan Liok Ee, *The Politics of Chinese Education in Malaysia*, Kuala Lumpur, Oxford University Press, 1996.

educationalist groups continued to protest, demanding the instant withdrawal of the appointees. Again, the Chinese parties in the BN were clearly pressurised by the protests into adopting a more chauvinistic position, for fear of losing ground to the DAP. In a sensational turn, MCA and GERAKAN members, led by Lee Kam Sai, thus joined a protest rally with the DAP and other Chinese-based opposition parties, calling for a boycott of the schools involved.⁵⁹ The boycott saw over thirty thousand children kept away from school by their parents.⁶⁰

The cycle of protest was intensified by a series of counter-demonstrations organised by various groups with UMNO. On the same day as the MCA-DAP joint rally, some five hundred UMNO members also held a demonstration, but the primary target of their anger was their coalition partner the MCA, rather than the DAP; demonstrators burnt MCA flags and posters.⁶¹ Subsequently, on October 17, UMNO Youth held a rally at a disused stadium in Kampung Baru, a large Malay district in Kuala Lumpur. The rally, attended by some six thousand people, was highly chauvinistic, and the target of the protesters wrath was again the MCA rather than the DAP. Banners called for the resignation and of Lee Kim Sai, and urged the MCA to 'go to Hell' (*pergi Jahanam*). Other banners expressed broader and often violent anti-Chinese sentiments: 'May 13 has begun', a reference to the ethnic riots of 1969, and 'Soak [the kris] in Chinese blood'.⁶² The UMNO Youth president, Najib Tun Razak, addressed the crowd in

⁵⁹ 'Five parties support "boycott classes" move.' *New Straits Times*, 12 October 1987.

⁶⁰ 'Get them back to school.' *New Straits Times*, 16 October 1987

⁶¹ 'UMNO members hold protest.' *New Straits Times*, 12 October 1987.

⁶² Government of Malaysia, *Towards Preserving National Security*, Kertas Perintah 14, 1988: 17. The *kris* is a ceremonial Malay dagger, which is also emblazoned on UMNO's party flag.

more moderate language, but still called for Lee's resignation and demanded that the MCA acquiesce to government policy, or else leave the BN.⁶³

By the end of October 1987, then, ethnic tensions in the country were reaching critical levels. As news spread of freak shooting incident when an army sergeant ran *amok* killing one Chinese and wounding another Chinese and a Malay in the Chow Kit area of Kuala Lumpur, the centre of the 1969 riots, many people rushed to stockpile food, fearing the outbreak of rioting. Increasing public attention was focussed on a mass rally planned for 1 November to celebrate UMNO's fortieth year, postponed since 1986 (the actual anniversary) and relocated from Johor (UMNO's birthplace) to Kuala Lumpur. Up to a half million Malays were expected to join the rally, in what was seen by many as a show of strength by Mahathir against the UMNO dissidents.⁶⁴ With ethnic tensions running high, however, it was feared that the rally would prove to be the spark point for fresh riots. In such a context, there was little doubt that the government needed to take action to calm sentiments and prevent an escalation of conflict. The form this response took, however, was far beyond what many expected.

REPRESSION AND RESPONSE: OPERATION LALANG

In the previous chapter, it was noted that the regime's response to the emergence of a middle class-based sphere of civil society was primarily discursive rather than coercive. That policy changed in October 1987. Faced with an incendiary ethnic situation, the regime cracked down not only on the

⁶³ 'Taking it to the brink.' *Asiaweek*, 30 October 1987.

⁶⁴ 'A state of shock.' *Asiaweek*, 6 November 1987

(perceived) immediate instigators of the conflict, but also on other challengers to the state, including the middle class-led civil society.

On 27 and 28 October 1987, over one hundred people were arrested and detained without trial under the Internal Security Act (ISA), in what was known as Operation Lalang.⁶⁵ The detainees came from a broad spectrum of political parties and social activist groups. Nine DAP MPs, including the party's two top leaders Lim Kit Siang and Karpal Singh, and many other party workers were detained, as were fifteen party leaders from PAS and two from the small Malay-based PSRM (*Parti Sosialis Rakyat Malaysia*, or Malaysian People's Socialist Party). Four trade unionists were amongst those arrested; many other detainees came from NGOs, including ALIRAN president Chandra Muzaffar and CAP activist Meenakshi Raman. In Sarawak, two prominent anti-logging activists were arrested.

The dragnet was not limited to the opposition and social activists, however. Also detained were a number of BN politicians from the MCA and GERAKAN, and even UMNO. Those detained from the Chinese parties were mostly from the youth wings, and those who had been more vocal in criticising the government over the Chinese teachers issue. Even MCA deputy president Lee Kim Sai was himself apparently on the list of those to be detained, and escaped arrest only by promptly leaving the country for 'indefinite leave' in Australia.⁶⁶ The arrests also reverberated in the unresolved UMNO split – the three UMNO leaders who

⁶⁵ Official figures put the total number of arrests at 106, but other estimates suggest more were detained. Lalang is the name of a type of weed in Malay.

⁶⁶ 'A state of shock.' *Asiaweek*, 6 November 1987.

were detained were all supporters of Razaleigh.⁶⁷ In addition to the detentions, a nationwide ban on public rallies and *ceramah* was instituted, including the UMNO rally scheduled for 1 November. A number of national newspapers and periodical were suspended, including the MCA-owned mass circulation *Star*, which had gained a reputation for its relatively liberal attitude and willingness to give column inches to critical social groups.⁶⁸ Amendments to tighten the Printing Presses and Publications Act and the Internal Security Act were also rushed through parliament. The ISA amendments were arguably the apotheosis of the BN regime's abuse of the parliamentary process. In March 1988, Karpal Singh obtained his release from the ISA through a successful High Court habeas corpus writ on grounds of illegal detention, essentially due to non-compliance by the police and Home Ministry of the strict procedures of arrest under the ISA. Although Karpal was rearrested leaving the courthouse, the regime was eager to avoid another such embarrassment and, with a virtually identical writ served by Lim Kit Siang due to be heard on 13 July, pushed retroactive amendments to the law through parliament to prevent such appeals. The amendments received their second reading on 12 July, and a compliant judge postponed Lim's case by two days, thus allowing the regime time to get royal assent. The amendments were gazetted at 12.01am on 15 July, and handed to the judge at 8.45am, just in time to deny Lim his writ. On 14 July, Deputy Home Minister Megat Junid stated

⁶⁷ 'A climate of fear.' *Asiaweek*, 13 November 1987.

⁶⁸ See Zaharom Nain, 'The structure of the media industry: Implications for democracy', in Francis Loh Kok Wah and Khoo Boo Teik (eds.), *Democracy in Malaysia: Discourses and practices*, Richmond, Curzon, 2002, pp. 111-37.

‘The amendments have nothing to do with anyone. It is not because we want to victimise Lim Kit Siang... The changes are necessary... That is all.’⁶⁹

Tunku Abdul Rahman, Malaysia’s first prime minister and Razaleigh supporter in the UMNO tussle, decried the operation as undemocratic and signalling the transformation of the country into a police state.⁷⁰ In an affidavit to support Chandra Muzaffar’s *habeas corpus* writ, he further stated that ‘my cabinet colleagues and I gave a solemn promise to parliament and the nation that the immense powers given to the government under the ISA would never be used to stifle legitimate opposition and silence lawful dissent’. Similar comments were made by Mahathir’s immediate predecessor, Tun Hussein Onn.⁷¹

The Operation Lalang crackdown was the widest use of the regime’s repressive machinery since the 1969 ethnic riots and has also been compared to the 1967 crackdown on the Left in Penang.⁷² As we saw in previous chapters, repression has historically met with little resistance in Malaysia, and has been an effective tool for the regime. Whereas previous rounds of repression were focussed on leftwing groups and unions, however, Operation Lalang was a broader attack on civil society as a whole. Various reasons have been suggested for the severity of the crackdown, but it seems clear that the regime – and more specifically the Mahathir faction within UMNO – recognised the need to pacify the potentially explosive social tensions at the time, but also took the opportunity to repress and

⁶⁹ Democratic Action Party, *The Real Reason*, Petaling Jaya, Democratic Action Party, 1988, pp. 84-98.

⁷⁰ ‘A state of shock.’ *Asiaweek*, 6 November 1987.

⁷¹ ‘Dismissing the writs.’ *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 3 December 1987.

⁷² Simon Tan, ‘The rise of state authoritarianism in Malaysia’, *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars*, 22:3 (1990), pp. 32-42.

intimidate its opponents.⁷³ In particular, the regime accepted that the planned UMNO rally had to be cancelled or postponed and the arrests were made concurrently to save face. Said Lee Lam Thye, the most senior DAP leader left unarrested, 'the prime minister was attempting to make the DAP a whipping boy or scapegoat to justify [his] decision to call off the UMNO mammoth rally'.⁷⁴ In addition, the DAP claimed that the arrests were designed to prevent the party highlighting a number of government scandals, including the allocation of a major privatisation project to an UMNO-owned company, a decision which Lim was challenging in the courts at the time. Interestingly, the party also claimed that the regime also sought to cripple the DAP's increasing success in attracting Malay support, especially by penetrating FELDA schemes, as we saw in the last chapter.⁷⁵

In a revealing interview with *Asiaweek* magazine shortly after the operation, Mahathir placed the blame for the arrests firmly on both the MCA and the DAP, and their attempts to 'show that they are better defenders of the Chinese' than each other. Of the social activists detained, he claimed that they were serving as 'front' organisations for the DAP: 'We know that ALIRAN backed the DAP during

⁷³ The influence of the Singaporean regime has also been detected by some commentators, who note the strong institutional and historical ties between the Malaysian and the Singaporean Special Branches. Some of the charges preferred against the detainees, particularly the allegations of a Christian-communist conspiracy, bore remarkable resemblance to the charges used in Singapore when Lee Kuan Yew's regime cracked down on social opposition in April and May 1987. See Jomo K.S., 'Race, religion and repression: "National security" and the insecurity of the regime', in Committee Against Repression in the Pacific and Asia (CARPA), *Tangled Web: Dissent, deterrence and the 27 October 1987 crackdown in Malaysia*, Haymarket, CARPA, 1988, pp. 1-27.

⁷⁴ 'The eclipse of the opposition.' *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 12 November 1987.

⁷⁵ Lim Kit Siang's first submission to the ISA Advisory Board, 4 April 1988. Reproduced in Democratic Action Party, *The Real Reason*.

the [1986] elections'. In fact, ALIRAN had not actively supported any party in the election, only calling for the BN to be denied its two-thirds majority.⁷⁶ Indeed, the organisation had specifically rejected any collaboration with an electoral pact arranged by PAS and several of the smaller opposition parties on the grounds that, as a civil society group, it should not indulge in party politics.

In March 1988, the government produced its official justification of the arrests in a White Paper entitled *Towards Preserving National Security*. The paper presented five reasons for the crackdown:

- The 'exploitation of sensitive issues', including the *Bukit Cina* controversy and the Chinese education furore;
- 'The Christianisation of Malays and the exploitation of the Christianisation issue';
- The 'manipulation of the Islamic religion' by 'deviationist' groups;
- 'Activities of the Marxist group'; and
- 'The continuing involvement of the Communist Party of Malaya'.⁷⁷

The latter four groups accounted for only a handful of the arrests, mostly little known activists involved in small religious groups or secret societies. The White Paper was widely dismissed as a thin political subterfuge; it was accused of telling half truths or distortions, and concealing the real reason for the crackdown – to stifle dissent and silence critics. In the words of ALIRAN, 'the

⁷⁶ Interview, P. Ramakrishnan, ALIRAN president, George Town, October 2001.

⁷⁷ Government of Malaysia, *Towards Preserving National Security*, Kertas Perintah 14, 1988.

White Paper criticises those who cry out that the linen is dirty, but fails to chastise those who dirty the linen... It is biased, it conceals, it distorts'.⁷⁸

Although many of those arrested were released within the initial sixty day detention period,⁷⁹ the crackdown had a lasting impact upon social mobilisation and civil society. Social mobilisation in the country was brought to a virtual halt; the protest activity that had escalated over the past five years stopped completely and, with the exception of the massive plantation strikes in January and February 1990, did not return to its previous levels until the outburst of *reformasi* in 1998. Even the most pro-regime commentators of the time accepted that a 'climate of fear' had descended on civil society in the wake of Operation Lalang.⁸⁰

For the forty detainees sent to the Kamunting Camp, however, incarceration provided an unlikely period of political networking and confidence building. The 1990 decision by a group of prominent but previously apolitical civil rights activists to join the DAP and, in some cases, stand for election has been attributed to 'long discussions' between the detained activists and DAP parliamentarians in the detention camp.⁸¹ One of the group, Kua Kia Soong, has noted:

⁷⁸ 'Whitewash!', *Aliran Monthly*, 8(3), March 1988.

⁷⁹ Under the terms of the Internal Security Act, police personnel have the power to detain individuals for up to sixty days on suspicion of being a threat to national security, after which the home minister must sign a (renewable) two year order for the detention to continue.

⁸⁰ Hasan Haji Hamzah, *Mahathir: Great Malaysian Hero*, Kuala Lumpur, Media Printext, 1990, p. 57.

⁸¹ Interview, Lim Kit Siang, DAP national chairman, George Town, June 2001. Not all of those who joined the party were former Operation Lalang detainees, however.

We can say that if Operation Lalang had not happened in 1987, our entry into the DAP would not have happened. My incarceration with the other DAP leaders at Kamunting allowed us to get acquainted.⁸²

Outside of detention, a support group for the ISA detainees was formed, which ultimately gave rise to the human rights organisation SUARAM (*Suara Rakyat Malaysia* – Malaysian People's Voice), also fronted by Kua Kia Soong.

Whereas other movements appear to have been demobilised by the events of 1987, the labour organisations were also more resistant. Whilst the Operation Lalang crackdown may have dissuaded them from further illegal demonstrations, it also signalled a shift to increased official strike activity. This pattern is well demonstrated by a protracted dispute by plantation workers seeking monthly, rather than daily wages. Backing these claims, they had held a number of pickets and illegal strikes during the mid-1980s, failing to reach any settlement.⁸³ After 1987, however, they stopped these activities, instead holding one huge – but legal – strike in 1990, which saw hundreds of thousands of workdays lost over a four day period.⁸⁴ This change in strategy by the labour movement once again highlights the demobilising impact of repression in 1987. The movement's resistance and the actual increase in overall strike activity after 1987, however, may be explained by the fact that, in the wake of 1987, legal

⁸² Kua Kia Soong, *Inside the DAP 1990-95*, Petaling Jaya, PB, 1996, p. 4.

⁸³ '45,000 plantation workers down tool.' *New Straits Times*, 8 April 1986; 'Estate workers picket over wage dispute.' *New Straits Times*, 29 January 1987.

⁸⁴ E.g. '65,000 plantation workers go on strike.' *Straits Times*, 1 February 1990.

strikes were arguably the only – certainly the safest – form of collective action left as a mobilisational option.

POLITICAL OPPOSITION AND CIVIL SOCIETY AFTER OPERATION LALANG: FORGING A COALITION

Thus far, then, we have seen that the Operation Lalang repression effectively stifled the previous expansion of civil society at a moment when the political opportunity for mobilisation was otherwise widening with the intense internal conflicts of the BN. At the same time, however, the deepening schisms within the BN, and within UMNO in particular, left an opening for more meaningful political participation than was possible previously. The combination of these two factors effectively *redirected* opposition politics from social protests to the politics of elections and parties. Thus was formed an admittedly uneasy, but nonetheless impressive, coalition of civil society groups, opposition political parties and former regime elites.

The failure to resolve the UMNO split brought about a substantial opening in the political regime in Malaysia as the challenger 'Team B' faction sought to wrest power from the Mahathir faction. Ironically, the depth and duration of the political crisis is arguably at least partially attributable to Mahathir himself and, in particular, his 'winner takes all' attitude in the UMNO elections. After his narrow victory in the elections, Mahathir chose to purge the government of Razaleigh and his supporters, who responded by filing a court action to nullify the UMNO elections. The court action was based upon allegations that illegally established UMNO branches had sent delegates to the party assembly, thus invalidating the poll results. In response, the defendants – Mahathir's faction – claimed that the appellants, who did not include Razaleigh or Musa themselves,

had no *locus standi* in the case. On the last day of the trial, however, Mahathir's lawyers entered another 'kamikaze' defence, arguing that if the relevant branches were deemed illegal, then, according to the Societies Act, the whole party was illegal. The judge concurred and, in a seismic ruling in February 1988, ruled UMNO illegal.⁸⁵

Following the decision, both factions scrambled to form a new party. At stake were two issues: the name UMNO, which still carried great weight in the Malay community, and the vast corporate assets of the party, including newspapers and a television station. An initial attempt by former prime minister Tunku Abdul Rahman, a Razaleigh supporter, to register a new party called UMNO Malaysia was rejected by the Registrar of Societies as premature, as the old UMNO had not yet been officially deregistered. Shortly afterwards, Mahathir was successful in registering a party called UMNO (Baru) and later pushed through parliament amendments to the Societies Act to ensure that the old party's assets were transferred to UMNO (Baru).⁸⁶ After a number of unsuccessful attempts to challenge the formation of UMNO (Baru) in court, Razaleigh and his supporters crossed to the opposition benches and, in 1989 with a general election approaching, formed a new party of their own: *Semangat '46* (Spirit of '46 – a

⁸⁵ 'Challenge of the elders.' *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 18 February 1988; 'UMNO no longer exists.' *Asiaweek*, 19 February 1988.

⁸⁶ 'A grand master move.' *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 3 March 1988. As many noted at the time, the Registrar of Societies is a civil servant answerable to the Home Minister, a post also held by Mahathir. Mahathir thus had an obvious advantage in knowing exactly when the old UMNO was to be deregistered.

reference to the year of UMNO's founding).⁸⁷ *Semangat* subsequently forged two separate electoral coalitions. One, the APU (*Angkatan Perpaduan Ummah*, or Islamic Unity Movement), linked *Semangat* with PAS and two smaller Islamic parties. The other agreement, the *Gagasan Rakyat Malaysia* (GAGASAN – Malaysian People's Coalition), joined the party with the DAP and the smaller PSRM.

Before the formation of *Semangat* '46, Razaleigh and the other UMNO dissidents faced their first electoral test when Shahrir Abdul Samad, one of the pro-Razaleigh ministers sacked after the UMNO election, resigned his seat to force a by-election in September 1988. Shahrir stood as an independent in a three way fight against his replacement BN candidate and a candidate from the PSRM. Shahrir's surprise and overwhelming win boosted opposition to Mahathir's UMNO, but the election gave out contradictory signals in terms of the potential for opposition collaboration. The DAP had campaigned for Shahrir, delivering him valuable Chinese votes, but political commentators at the time concluded that a long-term coalition between Razaleigh and the DAP seemed 'unlikely'. The decision of the PSRM to field a candidate – who came a distant third in votes – also demonstrated the general mistrust of Razaleigh's group amongst opposition parties.⁸⁸ Indeed, some observers at the time thought a Razaleigh-MCA pact a more likely scenario than Razaleigh-DAP.⁸⁹ The MCA was at the time at its nadir of support, and its relations with UMNO were extremely rocky.

⁸⁷ 'Mine, yours or ours?' *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 14 April 1988; 'No go for the Tunku.' *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 21 April 1988; 'Mahathir rival Razaleigh registers new party.' *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 15 June 1989.

⁸⁸ 'Princely opposition.' *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 29 September 1988.

⁸⁹ 'The gathering storm.' *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 13 October 1988.

Speculation was thus rife that if Razaleigh was able to tempt the MCA out of the BN other parties would follow, and Razaleigh could in effect carry out an internal coup, replacing UMNO with his own dissident party in a new *Barisan*.

In the event, however, the MCA remained loyal to the BN and Razaleigh's newly formed *Semangat '46* was forced to look elsewhere for allies. Despite its grassroots collaboration with DAP in a series of by-elections, it was with PAS that *Semangat* first made a formal pact in April 1989, which created the APU.⁹⁰ In many respects, the alliance seemed a strange one. Both were Malay parties and both had their main base of support in the state of Kelantan. In as much, they were more natural competitors than collaborators, a problem which would haunt the coalition in the future. Moreover, there was some considerable bad blood between many activists in the two parties. PAS had controlled the Kelantan state assembly from Independence until 1978, and it was Razaleigh, who was then UMNO's Kelantan chief, who was credited with wresting control of the assembly away from PAS. Nonetheless, with Razaleigh's personal popularity and PAS' grassroot networks, there was little doubt that the two parties would dominate Kelantan as a Malay power base, if they could work together.

The APU was strengthened in June 1989 by the defection of the *Barisan Jamaah Islamiah SeMalaysia* (BERJASA, or Pan-Malaysian Islamic Reform Front), a small BN component formed in 1980 from PAS dissidents.⁹¹ Although BERJASA was electorally insignificant, its departure from the BN was seen as a demonstration of the growing momentum for change in the Malay heartlands.

⁹⁰ 'A royal snub.' *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 13 April 1989.

⁹¹ 'Rally round Razaliegh.' *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 8 June 1989.

The *Semangat*-led opposition front took its full shape in 1990, with the formation of the GAGASAN coalition with the DAP and PSRM. It was in the context of its collaboration with *Semangat '46* that DAP leader Lim Kit Siang began articulating his concept of Malaysia as a 'two coalition system of democracy'. Recognising that the prospect of one multiethnic party forming a government in Malaysia was a long way off, Lim argued instead that the country could attain a more meaningful level of democracy by emulating the Western model of two-party democracy, but with two multiethnic coalitions instead of two monolithic parties. Yet if Lim saw the DAP's collaboration with *Semangat* and the GAGASAN as the cornerstone of a new opposition politics, it was clear that he did not envisage closer cooperation with PAS. Indeed, the party went to great lengths to distance itself from PAS, to the extent of threatening disciplinary action against any of its member who shared a stage with PAS.⁹² Nonetheless, the formation of a joint front through *Semangat* was unprecedented, and represented a genuine opening in the political system. In the words of a *Far Eastern Economic Review* article of the time:

For the first time, the national electorate – instead of just...
UMNO delegates – will, by choosing between the two coalition
leaders, in effect choose the country's next prime minister.⁹³

Within the space of two years, then, the opportunity structure for oppositional activity in Malaysia underwent a major transformation. New avenues for political participation opened up, whilst societal avenues were closed down. This had an important effect on the way the crisis played out. Almost without

⁹² 'Ceramah: DAP to act against those inviting PAS.' *New Straits Times*, 13 April 1990.

⁹³ 'Order of battle.' *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 4 October, 1990.

exception, civil society groups dropped their social mobilisation, and grasped the political opening. This meant, in effect, allying themselves with the emerging opposition coalitions. Symptomatic of this trends was the MTUC's traditional May Day rally in 1989, which was for the first time addressed by speakers from PAS and the DAP, as well as representatives of ALIRAN and the Bar Council. This coalition of forces clearly irked the government, which threatened to ban politicians from future MTUC rallies.⁹⁴ As already mentioned, a number of prominent activists, including Operation Lalang detainees, also threw themselves wholeheartedly into the opposition front, clearly perceiving it as the best chance for real change in the country. Among these was Dr Kua Kia Soong, who stood as a candidate for the DAP in Petaling Jaya in 1990 and won handsomely.

In many cases, however, the engagement was less than enthusiastic, but nonetheless represented a considerable change from former positions. In the run up to the 1990 general election, for instance, ALIRAN distributed a 'Manifesto for Human Rights', signed by over thirty NGOs and trade unions, and 'endorsed' by *Semangat*, PAS, PSRM and the DAP.⁹⁵ ALIRAN also praised Razaleigh for his 'strategy of openness'.⁹⁶ In contrast, ALIRAN had scorned all contact with a previous pact between PAS and three smaller parties in the 1986 general election. It had argued that, as an NGO, it must remain above party politics.⁹⁷ The tenuousness of this rapprochement between civil society and the *Semangat*-

⁹⁴ 'KL may bar politicians from future May Day rallies.' *Straits Times* (Singapore), 4 May 1989.

⁹⁵ Aliran *et al*, *Manifesto For Human Rights*, Penang: Aliran, 1990.

⁹⁶ 'The Razaleigh Strategy.' *Aliran Monthly*, 10(8), October 1988.

⁹⁷ *Aliran Monthly*, 6(5); 'Where Aliran went wrong in rejecting electoral pact.' *New Straits Times*, 20 September, 1986.

led opposition was well illustrated, however, by the disparity between this 'Manifesto for Human Rights' and *Semangat's* own manifesto, *Save Malaysia*. Whilst the civil society manifesto, 'endorsed' by *Semangat*, called for the complete revocation of a number of Draconian laws, *Semangat's* own manifesto promised only to revoke certain recent amendments.⁹⁸ ALIRAN president Chandra Muzaffar also reportedly refused an invitation from Razaleigh to stand for *Semangat* in the 1990 election.⁹⁹

The *Semangat* opposition front had more success aligning itself with the labour movement, most notably with the MTUC. After a long and public debate, the MTUC announced in 1988 that it was officially dropping its constitutionally apolitical stance and entering the political fray, declaring that 'the question of whether or not MTUC should involve itself in politics does not arise at all, simply because no labour organisation can ever divorce itself from politics'.¹⁰⁰ In an attempt to keep an at least nominally bipartisan stance, however, the congress stated that it would never 'surrender its independence to any political party'.¹⁰¹ Instead, it would draw up a political agenda, and any political party which signed up would receive the MTUC's full backing at the general election. Despite this, however, it was clear where the organisation's sympathies lay. Its secretary-general, Dr V. David, had been a long standing MP for the DAP. In 1990, the MTUC president Zainal Rampak, joined the newly formed *Semangat '46*, and declared his intention to stand for parliament.¹⁰² Ahmad Nor, the MTUC

⁹⁸ *Semangat '46, Save Malaysia*, 1990.

⁹⁹ 'Marina's letter.' *Malaysiakini*, 13 January 2000.

¹⁰⁰ Malaysian Trades Union Congress, *General Report 1990*, 1990, pg. 34.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, pg. 36.

¹⁰² 'Zainal Rampak tells why he's re-entering politics.' *New Straits Times*, 2 May 1990.

vice-president, had also been involved with the small Social Democratic Party (SDP) and in the abortive unionist party, *Parti Nasionalis Malaysia* (NASMA - Nationalist Party of Malaysia), before switching to *Semangat '46*.

The decision by the MTUC to enter the political fray was not unanimously supported by its member unions, and the large National Union of Bank Employees (NUBE) pulled out of the MTUC in protest, forming its own alternative union congress, the Malaysian Labour Organisation (MLO).¹⁰³ The MLO attracted fifteen breakaway unions, representing over 140,000 out of the MTUC's 600,000 affiliated members.¹⁰⁴ CUEPACS was also less enthusiastic in its relations with the *Semangat* opposition. As we saw in the last chapter, CUEPACS was traditionally more supportive of the government than the MTUC, but a number of long running pay disputes in the mid 1980s had soured relations somewhat. Whilst CUEPACS officials did not become as active in the opposition front as their MTUC counterparts, however, it was one of the principle signatories of ALIRAN's 'Manifesto for Human Rights'.

By the time of the 1990 general election, then, an uneasy but broad coalition of opposition political parties and civil society groups was ranged against the BN regime, itself weakened by protracted inter- and intra-party conflicts. The level of optimism among some opposition groups that the BN might finally be unseated was demonstrated just days before the election, when the PBS withdrew from the BN and threw its weight behind GAGASAN.

¹⁰³ 'Bank workers union sets up rival labour federation.' *Straits Times*, 28 May 1989.

¹⁰⁴ 'KL unions set up rival body.' *Business Times* (Singapore), 13 June 1989.

THE 1990 GENERAL ELECTION

We have seen, then, that the trajectory of regime fracture, social mobilisation and repression in the latter half of the 1980s effectively redirected oppositional politics towards focussing on the upcoming general election, which was eventually called on 4 October 1990 and held two weeks later, under recent changes to the election laws to shorten the campaign period, justified – ironically enough, as we shall see – as preventing the exploitation of ethnic sentiments in the campaign.

By the time Mahathir called the election, economic and political conditions were turning to favour the BN again. The economy had recovered from the mid-80s recession and was performing well again. The repercussions of Operation Lalang also reshaped the political contest through the stifling of public debate through the continued detention of civil society and opposition activists. Lim Kit Siang in particular had been effective in uncovering and publicising a number of financial scandals involving the government and the BN coalition. In April 1989, Lim was one of the last two of the Operation Lalang detainees to be released.¹⁰⁵ In addition, the cancellation of the permits of several magazines and the six-month suspension of the *Star* newspaper under Operation Lalang had forced greater self-censorship upon the already generally compliant media. The coalition had also rebounded from its surprise defeat in the Johor Bahru by-election, winning five out of the subsequent six by-elections until August 1989, in some cases even improving its majority.¹⁰⁶ Nonetheless, the formation of two-interlinked coalitions of all the major opposition parties backed by a

¹⁰⁵ 'Malaysia frees detained politicians.' *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 27 April 1989. The other was Lim's son and fellow DAP MP, Lim Guan Eng, who was released the same day.

¹⁰⁶ 'Eroding Malay support.' *Aliran Monthly*, 9(8), August 1989.

significant sector of civil society constituted a significant challenge to the BN regime at the elections.

The focus of civil society groups as well as the political opposition on the election was remarkable in two respects. Firstly, despite the undoubted crisis of legitimacy facing the BN regime, the fearsome state machinery at its disposal meant that there was never any realistic chance of it losing; civil society was backing a lame horse. Secondly, and more importantly, elections in Malaysia are, as we have already seen, inherently ethnic affairs. After a decade of campaigning to expand the nonethnic sphere of civil society, it may thus seem strange that these same organisations threw themselves into electoral politics with such gusto. Only if we take into consideration the trajectories of contention elucidated in this chapter can we explain this as a necessary move for a civil society eager to capitalise on the regime's problems after societal avenues of contention had been closed down.

In the event, both the government and the opposition steered remarkably clear of overtly ethnic issues in the early days of the campaign, although the underlying structures of electoral politics remained inherently ethnicised. The mid-campaign defection of the PBS into the opposition fold, however, was significant not only in electoral terms, but also in the tenor of the campaign. The BN regime leapt on the PBS' move, upping the ethnic gambit by claiming, in contradiction of its own quasi-consociationalist stance, that it demonstrated Razaleigh's lack of commitment to the Malays. Playing on the mainly Christian constituency of the PBS and its leaders, 'Razaleigh was projected as having "sold out" the interests of the Muslim community' and as having been 'used' by the

Christian PBS.¹⁰⁷ Most notorious here was the aftermath of Razaleigh's visit to Sabah to welcome the PBS into the opposition fold. As part of his trip, Razaleigh was photographed wearing a *tengkolok* (traditional Kadazan headgear), which carried a cross pattern. Although the cross on the headgear was not in any way a religious symbol, the regime-controlled media presented this as evidence that Razaleigh would 'sell out' the Malays to the Christian Kadazans of Sabah. The UMNO-owned *Utusan Malaysia* newspaper, for instance, emblazoned its front cover with the image, with the headline 'Many people angry at Razaleigh wearing a *tengkolok* with a cross'.¹⁰⁸ The image was also repeatedly broadcast on state-controlled television. After the election, the youth wing of GERAKAN, one of the more multiethnic BN component parties, publicly criticised the UMNO leadership for such tactics,¹⁰⁹ but the electoral damage to Razaleigh was already done.

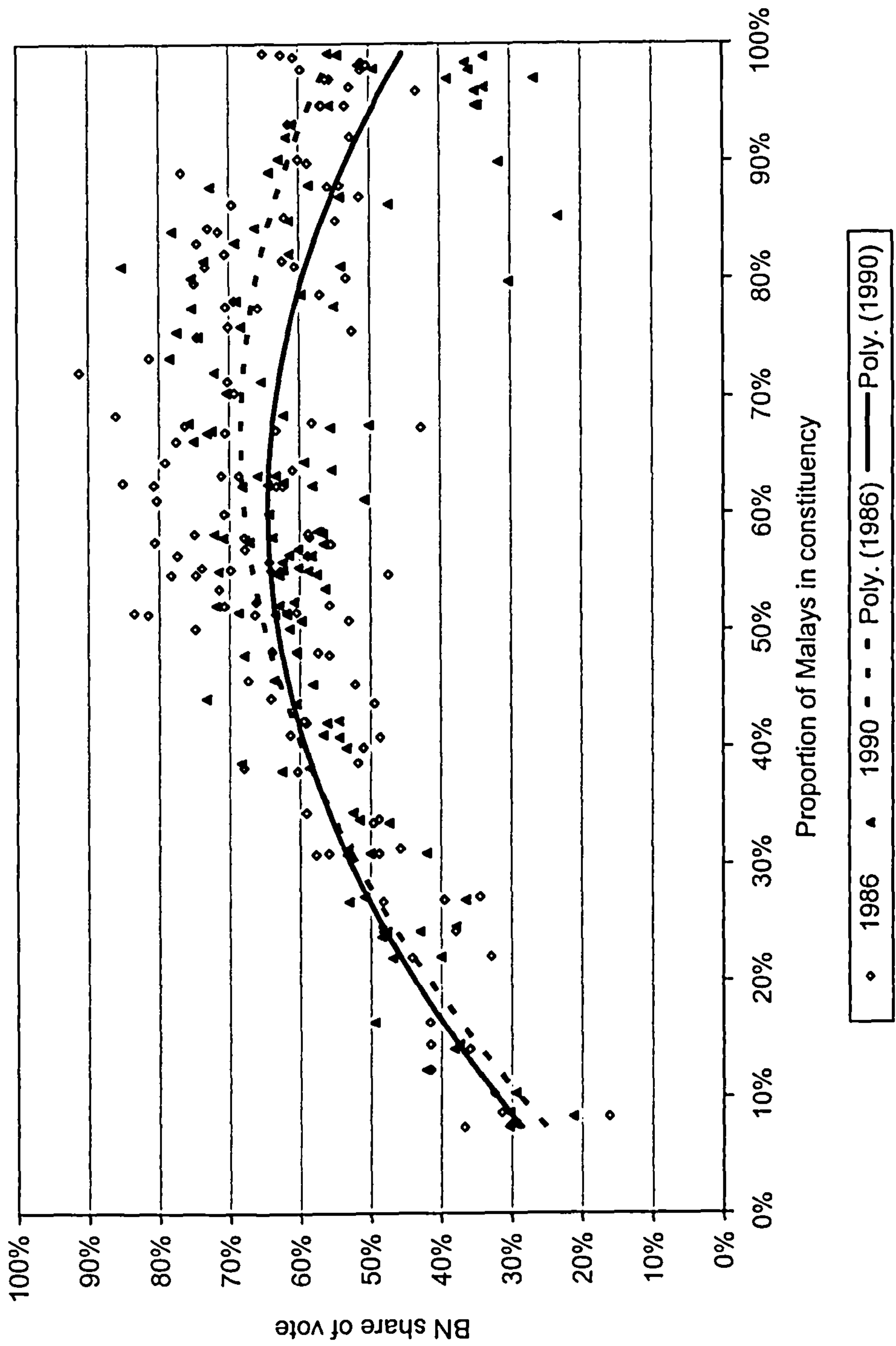
The results of the elections demonstrated the degree to which voting, and in particular voting shifts, had fallen along ethnic lines. As expected, the BN won the federal election with a reduced majority, although maintaining its two-thirds dominance; at the state level, the BN lost control of the Kelantan and Sabah assemblies, but kept other crucial assemblies, notably Penang, where the DAP had focussed its attention (see table 6.1). As in previous elections, the BN had done best in ethnically mixed seats, tending to lose support to PAS in the overwhelmingly Malay seats, and to the DAP in the strongly non-Malay seats. The shift in this trend in 1990 was remarkable (see figure 6.1).

¹⁰⁷Khong Kim Hoong, *Malaysia's General Election 1990: Continuity, change and ethnic politics*, Singapore, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1991, p. 6.

¹⁰⁸'Orang ramai marah Razaleigh pakai tengkolok bersalib'. *Utusan Malaysia*, 19 October 1990.

¹⁰⁹Khong, *Malaysia's General Election 1990*, p. 7.

Figure 6.1: Share of vote won in West Malaysian constituencies by BN against proportion of Malays in constituency, 1986 and 1990



Crisis and Response I, 1987-1990

Table 6.1: Proportionate breakdown of seats won at federal and state levels, 1982, 1986 and 1990

	Federal			State		
	1982	1986	1990	1982	1986	1990
BN	85.7	83.6	70.6	90.1	85.2	72.1
Opposition	9.1	14.1	27.2	9.6	14.8	27.6
<i>DAP</i>	5.8	13.6	11.1	3.8	10.5	12.8
<i>PAS</i>	3.2	0.6	3.9	5.8	4.3	9.4
<i>S46</i>	-	-	4.4	-	-	5.4
<i>Other</i>	-	-	10.0	-	-	-
Independents	5.2	2.3	2.2	0.3	0.0	0.3

Notes: In 1986, the PBS contested as part of the BN;
State elections were not held concurrently in Sabah and Sarawak.

Support for the BN in Malay-minority seats was virtually unchanged from 1986; the trend away from the BN was instead concentrated in the Malay-majority seats, with a greater swing the greater the proportion of Malay voters. In part this performance can be explained by the fact that the DAP was in 1986 already enjoying unusually high levels of support, but the result also clearly demonstrated that elections remained ethnically divisive events. Most notable here were the five Malay-minority seats which the BN had in 1986 won with less than half the votes on a split opposition – in 1990, the opposition front, represented by the DAP, managed to convert only one of these into a victory (see table 6.2).

Table 6.2: 1990 election results in Malay-minority seats with BN split vote victory in 1986

	Beruas		Lumut		Telok Intan		Klang		Bakri	
	1986	1990	1986	1990	1986	1990	1986	1990	1986	1990
Election results (% of votes accepted)										
BN	48.8	51.6	48.6	56.2	49.6	53.2	47.9	42.9	49.4	54.5
DAP	44.7	48.4	44.0	43.8	44.9	46.8	46.6	57.1	45.8	45.5
PAS	6.5	-	7.4	-	5.5	-	4.4	-	4.8	-
Ethnic composition (% of registered voters)										
Malay	33.9		40.9		33.6		23.8		43.8	
Chinese	53.3		46.5		45.4		58.6		54.3	
Indian	12.8		12.3		20.8		16.5		1.8	
Other	-		0.3		0.2		1.1		-	

Notes: Figures in bold indicate winning party.

CONCLUSIONS

A question often asked of the 1987 ethnic disputes is whether they were 'manufactured' by UMNO to detract attention away from its internal problems and provide an excuse for the incremental authoritarianism of Operation Lalang and its aftermath. Critics point out, for instance, that Anwar's decision to promote the non-Mandarin educated administrators was always likely to provoke a backlash from the Chinese community and thus may have been calculated to do just that. Given the already tense ethnic atmosphere at the time, his decision was thus at best ill-timed, at worst deliberately provocative. In the context of the arguments being made in this, however, such lines of reasoning miss the point. The point is that UMNO and the MCA – and to a lesser extent other parties including the DAP and GERAKAN – were caught in an escalating cycle of social mobilisation, regime fracture and ethnicisation. Student protests before the UMNO split were not politicised, either by the government or the opposition; similar protests following the split were appropriated by all sides as mobilisational instruments. Similarly, Anwar's decision to promote non-Mandarin speaking school administrators may have been confrontational, but the DAP's reaction was surely disproportionate – a charge that was indeed levelled against the party by ALIRAN, one of the few organisations that retained more balanced perspective at the time. In as much, if UMNO did 'manufacture' the crisis of October 1987, it was only because it was itself locked into a cycle of 'ethnic outbidding'.

The years 1987-1990 saw a dramatic shift in the broader contours of Malaysian politics. On the one hand, the UMNO split and the formation of the opposition front for the 1990 general election represented an undisputed opening in the

political system. For the first time since independence, a conceivable political alternative to the BN emerged. On the other hand, however, the crackdown of October 1987 was a fundamental shift in the opposite direction for civil society. Until Operation Lalang, the Mahathir administration had been pursuing a more liberal policy than its predecessors, in terms of political repression. Numbers detained without trial under the Internal Security Act had fallen considerably. The October crackdown reversed this trend abruptly; it not only had the immediate effect of removing prominent oppositionists from activity, it also demonstrated an increased propensity for repression by the regime.

CHAPTER SEVEN

STATE ASCENDANT:

STATE AND CIVIL SOCIETY, 1990-1998

Thus far, the empirical chapters of this thesis have focussed attention on the development of civil society and social movements and their impact on the trajectory of a regime crisis. In the model of state-society relations developed earlier, however, we saw that the state itself is an important actor in shaping and defining civil society and social movements. This chapter thus turns the focus of attention to the state itself, in a period of Malaysia's political development in which the state undertook a concerted and systematic project to reshape civil society, from after the resolution of the UMNO crisis and the 1990 general election until the outbreak of the *reformasi* movement in 1998.

The *Barisan Nasional* regime has long been recognised as having developed an effective and varied arsenal of strategies for dealing with opposition. In examining party politics from independence until the early 1980s, for instance, Barraclough argues that the regime developed a fourfold approach to the 'management' of opposition: competition, absorption, regulation and coercion.¹ Camroux notes a similar array of tactics – accommodation, co-optation and confrontation – employed in the face of the Islamic resurgence of the 1970s and 80s.² Similarly, Jesudason characterises Malaysia as a 'syncretic state', whose longevity is a result of its ability to incorporate and assimilate a variety of often

¹ Simon Barraclough, 'Political opposition and its management in West Malaysia', PhD Thesis, University of Queensland, Australia, 1984(a).

² David Camroux, 'State responses to Islamic resurgence in Malaysia: Accommodation, co-optation and confrontation', *Asian Survey*, 36:9 (1996), pp. 852-69. See also Laurent Metzger, *Strategie Islamique en Malaisie (1975-1995)*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 1996.

contradictory social and ideological forces.³ During the 1990s, these strategies were deployed in an attempt to reshape civil society in a discursive mould more conducive to the regime's hegemonic stance. At the same time, the regime's hegemonic discourse itself was shifting, from one that emphasised ethnicity and consociationalism, to a discourse of developmentalism. This shift was predicated on the emerging class structure that had driven the expansion of civil society in the 1980s.

For most groups within civil society, the early years of the 1990s were a period of recovery after the clampdown of the late 1980s. At the same time, the BN regime was enjoying period of political ascendancy, buoyed by a resurgent economy - between 1988 and 1996, Gross National Product growth averaged over ten per cent per annum, and never fell below nine per cent. In the 1990 general election, the BN had polled its lowest proportion of the popular vote since the ill-fated 1969 election and had lost control of two states to opposition parties. By the mid-1990s, its electoral popularity had recovered to record levels, and in April 1995 the BN won its most decisive ever general election victory, taking almost two thirds of the popular vote and all but thirty of the 192 Federal Parliament seats. The only major disappointment for the government in the election results was its failure to re-take the Kelantan state assembly. It was in this context of political resurgence that the BN undertook a radical, though often understated, transformation of its discursive orientation and relations with civil society.

³ James V. Jesudason, 'The syncretic state and the structuring of oppositional politics in Malaysia', in Garry Rodan (ed.), *Political Oppositions in Industrialising Asia*, London, Routledge, 1996, pp. 128-60.

CLASS TRANSFORMATION AND THE DECLINING POLITICAL SALIENCE OF ETHNICITY

Government policy during the period 1970–1990 had been dominated by the regime's efforts to remould the economy towards greater Malay and *bumiputera* participation, principally through the 1971-promulgated New Economic Policy (NEP). The redistributive policies of the NEP, combined with twenty years of almost continuously high economic growth brought about a significant transformation in Malaysia's class make-up (see tables 7.1-7.4). In 1990, the NEP had fallen short of its targets in a number of respects: *bumiputera* equity ownership lagged lower than had been envisaged, and the income divide between Malays and non-Malays persisted, although considerably reduced. Nonetheless, substantial progress had been made towards its goals, in particular with the creation of a large and burgeoning Malay middle class.⁴ By 1990, *bumiputeras* accounted for almost thirty per cent of the registered professionals in the country, a vast improvement on the less than five per cent of 1970. From being predominantly 'own account workers' – *padi* (wet rice) farmers, hawkers (petty traders) – and unpaid family workers in 1970, Malays were, by 1990, overwhelmingly salaried employees. Under NEP tutelage and government patronage, the 1980s also saw the emergence of a powerful Malay capitalist class.⁵ Corporate and political figures such as Daim Zainuddin, Halim Saad and

⁴ For a comprehensive review of the successes and failures of the NEP, see K. S. Jomo, 'Whither Malaysia's New Economic Policy?', *Pacific Affairs*, 63:4 (1990), pp. 469-99.

⁵ There is much debate about how far this capitalist class is politically dependent for its advance. For contrasting views, see Edmund Terence Gomez and Jomo Kwame Sundaram, *Malaysia's Political Economy: Politics, patronage and profit*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996; and Peter Searle, *The Riddle of Malaysian Capitalism: Rent-seekers or real capitalists?* Honolulu, University of Hawai'i Press, 1999.

Tajudin Ramli emerged with billions of ringgit in equity ownership, much of it often under trusteeship for UMNO.

Table 7.1: *Bumiputera* proportion of workforce by occupational category, 1970, 1980 and 1990⁶

Sector	1970	1980	1990
Professional and technical	47.2	53.7	60.5
Administrative and managerial	22.4	28.6	28.7
Clerical workers	33.4	52.3	52.4
Sales	23.9	31.1	29.9
Production workers	31.3	45.5	43.6
Services workers	42.9	55.4	57.8
Agricultural workers	68.7	73.5	69.1
Total	51.4	56.6	52.9

Table 7.2: Mean household income by ethnic group, 1970 and 1990⁷

	1970		1990		Average annual increase
	Mean monthly income (RM)	Ratio to <i>bumi-putera</i>	Mean monthly income (RM)	Ratio to <i>bumi-putera</i>	
<i>Bumiputera</i>	177	-	940	-	8.7%
Chinese	399	2.25	1631	1.74	7.3%
Indian	310	1.75	1209	1.69	7.0%

Table 7.3: Employment status by ethnic group, 1970, 1980 and 1991 (percentages)⁸

	Malays			All Groups		
	1970	1980	1991	1970	1980	1991
Employer	-	2.6	2.2	-	4.0	3.1
Own account worker	42.2	32.9	24.1	33.8	27.4	24.2
Unpaid family worker	22.0	9.2	2.9	17.0	7.3	4.1
Employee	35.8	55.2	70.9	49.1	61.4	68.6

⁶ Source: *Third Malaysia Plan*: p. 82, table 4-15; *Third Outline Perspective Plan*: p. 104, table 4-5. Figures for 1970 refer to Malays only, excluding non-Malay *bumiputera*.

⁷ Source: Calculated from Searle, *The Riddle of Malaysian Capitalism*, p. 34 and *Seventh Malaysia Plan*, p. 90, table 3-6.

⁸ Source: Adapted from Jomo Kwame Sundaram 'A Malaysian middle class?: Some preliminary analytical considerations', in Jomo Kwame Sundaram (ed.), *Rethinking Malaysia: Malaysian Studies I*, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysian Social Science Association, 1999, p. 134, table 6.2. The 1970 Census did not distinguish between 'Employer' and 'Own account worker'.

Table 7.4: Ownership of share capital (%), 1970 and 1990⁹

	1970	1990
<i>Bumiputera</i>	2.4	19.3
Individuals and institutions	1.6	14.2
Trust agencies	0.8	5.1
<i>Non-bumiputera</i>	28.3	46.8
Chinese	27.2	45.5
Indian	1.1	1.0
Others	-	0.3
Nominee companies	6.0	8.5
Foreigners	63.4	25.4

Following the emergence of this larger and more ethnically mixed middle class, the 1990s witnessed a subsequent decrease in the ‘discourse of ethnicism’ practiced by the *Barisan Nasional* regime. The 1990s saw a dilution of the Malay chauvinism that had characterised government policy since 1970, as epitomised by the New Economic Policy, the National Culture Policy and the National Language Policy.¹⁰ Whilst the government was clear in maintaining its official position of Malay dominance (*ketuanan Melayu*), it also introduced more liberal cultural policies for the non-Malays. Important here was the introduction of provisions for English to be allowed as the medium of instruction in state universities and the expansion of the private tertiary education, which was also often conducted in English and catered primarily for Chinese.¹¹ Also important were a range of smaller changes that indicated a

⁹ Source: Adapted from Gomez and Jomo, *Malaysia's Political Economy*, p. 168.

¹⁰ The National Culture Policy and the National Language Policy were supposed to be the social counterparts to the NEP. Whereas the NEP allowed room for non-Malay economic growth, however, the Culture and Language policies were much more stridently Malay chauvinism. Of the National Culture Policy, Means argues that ‘Malay language and culture were taken as being appropriate for all citizens’. Gordon P. Means, *Malaysian Politics: The second generation*, Singapore, Oxford University Press, 1991, p. 133.

¹¹ Francis Loh Kok Wah, ‘Developmentalism and the limits of democratic discourse’, in Francis Loh Kok Wah and Khoo Boo Teik (eds.), *Democracy in Malaysia: Discourses and practices*, Richmond, Curzon, 2002, pp. 19-50.

renewed ethnic liberalisation, such as the proliferation of Indian ‘Bollywood’ movies and Hong Kong serials shown on state television.

In place of an ethnically-centred political discourse, the regime attempted to forge a new hegemony based on its ability to deliver economic development. Representative of this new hegemonic project was Mahathir’s ‘Vision 2020’: a set of nine ‘central strategic challenges’ for Malaysia to become a fully developed nation by the year 2020. The ‘Vision’, and its associated rhetorical paraphernalia, promulgated both a developmentalist ideology and a message of greater ethnic tolerance. As Hilley puts it, Vision 2020 ‘projects challenging messages of economic cooperation, ethnic integration and communal partnership and signifiers of a more *inclusive* nationalism’.¹² Central to the Vision 2020 programme is the creation of a *bangsa Malaysia* (‘Malaysian nation’). Whereas three decades previously, Singaporean leader Lee Kuan Yew was castigated by UMNO for proposing a ‘Malaysian Malaysia’, the Vision emphasis on the formation of a *bangsa Malaysia* went a step further in appropriating the Malay language to talk of inclusiveness:

Chinese political observers were particularly struck by the unprecedented usage of the term Bangsa Malaysia. Malay leaders previously had employed the word bangsa within a chauvinistic Malay nationalist context... By widening the word’s connotation to embrace non-Malay membership, Mahathir

¹² John Hilley, *Malaysia: Mahathirism, Hegemony and the New Opposition*, London, Zed Books, 2001, p. 19; emphasis original.

appeared to be breaking from the convention of Malay nationalist exclusivity.¹³

REMOULDING CIVIL SOCIETY

Parallel to its reconfiguring of the state, the BN regime sought to impose its new hegemonic vision upon civil society. At the forefront of this attempt to remould civil society was Anwar Ibrahim, the Finance Minister and, from 1993, Deputy Prime Minister. With his background as a social activist and his widely respected Islamic erudition, Anwar cut a convincing figure as a voice for civil society within the regime. The close intellectual relationship with Chandra Muzaffar he had developed since the Societies Act protests and maintained in his government career added to this. Anwar's vision of a normative civil society, or *masyarakat madani*, was at once liberal and Islamic. He held out the promise of greater liberalisation in the political sphere, 'where the growth of civil organizations is not suppressed, where dissent is not stifled'.¹⁴ Yet he nonetheless asserted that 'the proper and legitimate assertion of one's individual rights must go hand in hand with the recognition of private duties towards the good of society'. Furthermore, the 'foremost [challenge for civil society] is the creation and preservation of social order'.¹⁵ In language strongly reminiscent of Mahathir's own defence of Malaysia's democratic record, he also argued that

¹³ Heng Pek Koon, 'Chinese Responses to Malay Hegemony (1957-1996)', in Zawawi Ibrahim (ed.), *Cultural Contestations: Mediating identity in a changing Malaysian society*, London, ASEAN Academic Press, 1998, p. 73.

¹⁴ Anwar Ibrahim, *The Asian Renaissance*, Singapore, Times Books International, 1996, p. 51.

¹⁵ Anwar Ibrahim, 'Democracy and the challenges to civil society', speech in Bangkok, 20 September 1994. Downloaded from <<http://www.smpke.jpm.my/>> on 15 July 2000.

‘democracy should not be an end unto itself, but merely the means by which we can ensure humane governance’.¹⁶

The limits of how far the government was willing to go in seeking a rapprochement with civil society is well demonstrated by its response to three NGO conferences organised during the mid 1990s. The first was a conference on ‘Rethinking Human Rights’, organised by the Just World Trust (JUST) in December 1994. JUST was formed in 1991 by former ALIRAN president Chandra Muzaffar, primarily as an attempt to create a Malaysian-based NGO with an internationalist perspective.¹⁷ The conference attracted around three hundred participants, including many eminent scholars and campaigners from around the world, but most startling from the local perspective were the invitations, extended and accepted, to Mahathir and Anwar to attend and address the conference. A number of other NGOs and human rights organisations – most notably SUARAM – voiced concern at the conference and the participation of Mahathir and Anwar.¹⁸ It was argued that whatever Mahathir’s contribution to fighting Western dominance on the international level, his participation in such a conference on Malaysian soil would be widely seen within the country as an endorsement by JUST of Mahathir’s domestic human rights practices.¹⁹ This was

¹⁶ Anwar, *The Asian Renaissance*, p. 50; compare Mahathir Mohamad, *The Malaysian System of Government*, Kuala Lumpur, Prime Minister's Office, 1995.

¹⁷ Interview, Chandra Muzaffar, Petaling Jaya, March 2001. Chandra said of his resignation from ALIRAN and move to form JUST that it was the result of a gradual realisation that the world system presented a greater threat to the well-being of Malaysians than the actions of the domestic government. The Just World Trust was later re-named the International Movement for a Just World.

¹⁸ ‘Watershed of sorts for human rights movement.’ *New Sunday Times*, 11 December 1994.

¹⁹ Interview, SUARAM activist, October 2001.

certainly the perception that was promoted by many of the government-controlled newspapers, which emblazoned photographs of Mahathir and Chandra shaking hands on their front pages.

The government was considerably less accommodating two years later, however, when an international group of NGOs including JUST organised the Second Asia Pacific Conference on East Timor (APCET II), to be held in Kuala Lumpur in November 1996. The conference was to discuss Indonesia's continuing occupation and brutal oppression of the former Portuguese colony and was thus similar to the 1994 JUST conference in that it focussed primarily on international affairs. Whereas the 1994 conference had been embraced by the regime, however, this latter meeting was vociferously condemned. Mahathir lambasted the conference as irresponsible, and claimed that it threatened Malaysia's relations with Indonesia.²⁰ Less than a week before it was due to open, the Ministry of Home Affairs announced that the conference had been banned.²¹ When the organisers attempted to go ahead with the conference anyway, a contingent of UMNO Youth members stormed the venue to break up the conference. In the ensuing fracas, over sixty people were arrested, mostly from the NGOs.²²

A further demonstration of the government's continued willingness to employ its repressive machinery to stifle civil society came the following month,

²⁰ 'APCET II: PM bidas penganjur ingkar.' *Berita Harian*, 11 November 1996.

²¹ 'Jemaah Menteri sokong KDN.' *Berita Harian*, 8 November 1996.

²² 'Persidangan APCET II dihentikan.' *Berita Mingguan*, 10 November 1996. The government initially tried to lay the blame for the scuffle with the NGOs. In the end it was four UMNO

December 1996, when a group of local NGOs attempted to organise a public forum to discuss police brutality, after a spate of deaths in police custody and rising concern over the number of suspects who died in ‘shootouts’. The forum came under strong criticism from the government, which accused the NGOs of trying to incite hatred against the security forces, and was finally cancelled after the Home Ministry threatened to detain its organisers under the ISA.²³

The juxtaposition of these three civil society gatherings is instructive in that it demonstrates quite clearly the developing relationship between the government and civil society in the 1990s. On the one hand, some groups within civil society sought to engage with the government more constructively than they had done previously, and the government responded in kind. The 1994 JUST conference was indicative of such a process, but by no means the only instance. As will be argued below, a number of organisations within the environmentalist movement and the women’s movement also began engaging with the regime during this period. On the other hand, however, the regime was quick to confront civil society when it perceived the country’s, or its own, interests to be at stake. In as much, it is worth noting that even Anwar – the supposedly liberal face of the BN – spoke out stridently against the APCET II meeting, implicitly

Youth members who were charged with rioting, however, and all the NGO participants were released. Interviews with conference participants, August 2001.

²³ ‘Batal sidang kutuk polis.’ *Berita Mingguan*, 15 December 1996.

endorsing the Indonesian annexation of the territory by stating that the problems in East Timor were ‘the internal affair of Indonesia’.²⁴

We have seen, then, that the 1990s saw the BN regime attempt to remould civil society and its relations therewith. In presenting a more liberal face to civil society, the regime went as far as to claim on a number of occasions throughout the decade that it was in the process of reviewing – though not abolishing – the ISA, the *bête noir* of human rights organisations, to make it ‘easier for detainees to appeal against their arrest’.²⁵ Despite such moves, however, the regime continued to regulate and repress civil society and social movements. The extent and form of such regulation varied across sectors and movements, depending on the political alignment and discursive thrust of the organisations involved. To demonstrate this, we now turn to a more detailed discussion of state responses to specific movements during the 1990s.

CONFRONTATION AND ACCOMMODATION: ENVIRONMENTALISM AND DEVELOPMENT

In chapter five, we saw that environmentalism had emerged in the 1980s as a strong force within civil society, and a potential source of popular mobilisation. As most of the enduring issues of major environmental concerns were geographically restricted to the East Malaysian state of Sarawak, however, they had had relatively little impact upon the broader contours of Malaysian politics.

²⁴ ‘Govt No to meeting on East Timor.’ *Business Times*, 8 November 1996. Needless to say, the same logic was not applied to Israel’s annexation of Palestinian territory, which was frequently and vehemently criticised.

This changed in 1990s, as international criticism of Malaysia's environmental record forced the issue onto the national agenda. Criticism by international environmentalist groups of Malaysia's policies on the protection of its rainforests had been growing since the 1980s, but 1991 saw this escalate into a sustained campaign against the Malaysian government. Having low levels of external debt and international aid receipts, Malaysia was less susceptible to 'green conditionalities' – the usual methods of political leverage used by international NGOs involving pressurising donor countries to withdraw aid and loans until environmental protection measures are enacted and enforced.²⁶ A more publicity-oriented campaign against Malaysia was thus seen as a potentially more productive approach. Demonstrations were held at Malaysian consulates and related industrial sites in many cities around the world – including The Hague, London, Nantes, Toronto, Sydney and New York – to protest Malaysia's continued logging of tropical hardwood.²⁷ In July 1991, a group of foreign environmentalists, led by organisers from the radical Earth First organisation, brought the protests to Malaysian soil by storming a logging barge in Sarawak and chaining themselves to cranes and other equipment.²⁸

²⁵ 'Rais confident provisions will be reviewed.' *New Straits Times*, 15 October 1998. The promise to review the law was made as early as 1993: 'ISA to stay but provisions may be reviewed, says Ong.' *New Straits Times*, 9 December 1993.

²⁶ Bernard Eccleston, 'Does North-South collaboration enhance NGO influence of deforestation policies in Malaysia and Indonesia?', in David Potter (ed.), *NGOs and Environmental Policies: Asia and Africa*, London, Frank Cass, 1996(a), pp. 66-89; Bernard Eccleston, 'NGOs and competing representations of deforestation as an environmental issue in Malaysia', in Potter, *NGOs and Environmental Policies*, pp. 116-42.

²⁷ 'Anti-tropical timber campaign intensifies.' *Business Times*, 20 August 1991; 'Protest demo at Malaysian Consulate.' *New Straits Times*, 23 August 1991.

²⁸ 'Environmentalists launch global war on Malaysia.' *Business Times*, 16 August 1991.

as being in the pockets of foreigners.³³ They were accused of cashing in on the international anti-logging movement to raise funds, but not distributing any of those funds to the communities affected by logging.³⁴ Unsurprisingly, the NGOs' response that the funds were used to campaign for the communities' rights rather than for distribution were not reported in the government-controlled media.³⁵

Despite its aggressive rhetoric, however, the government took some steps to address environmental concerns. Prior to the Rio Summit, the Environmental Protection Society of Malaysia (EPSM) had called for better ties between NGOs and the government.³⁶ At the summit itself, local NGOs were broadly supportive of Mahathir's criticisms of Western hypocrisy over the environment, following which Mahathir was reported as stating that 'NGOs are no longer our enemy', sentiments echoed by the prominent environmentalist Gurmit Singh.³⁷ The government also instigated a number of legislative changes to address some of the environmentalists' concern, in particular clamping down on illegal logging.³⁸ In 1993, it increased 50-fold the fines for illegal timber logging.³⁹ It also announced rigorous implementation of the previously widely-ignored requirement for an independent Environmental Impact Assessment on any new

³³ 'SAM rapped for "sabotage".' *New Straits Times*, 19 July 1990.

³⁴ 'Penan fund rip-off.' *New Straits Times*, 1 November 1993; 'Account for collections, NGOs told.' *New Straits Times*, 11 November 1993.

³⁵ Interview, SAM activists, April–November 2001.

³⁶ 'Better ties sought.' *New Sunday Times*, 23 June 1991.

³⁷ 'Hitting the whistleblowers.' *Asiaweek*, 12 January 1996; 'Local NGOs did well against all odds, says environmentalist.' *New Straits Times*, 18 January 1995.

³⁸ 'Malaysia's war.' *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 4 June 1992.

logging project. Laws relating to pollution were also tightened, with increased penalties for violations.⁴⁰

The regime's resilience to environmentalist demands can be explained on a number of levels. Firstly, these demands often touched on areas of deeply vested interest for the regime and its associated business cliques. The issuance of logging permits is an important source of political patronage for state governments. Similarly, the Bakun Dam project has involved companies linked to government ministers, as well as favoured businessmen such as Tajudin Ramli and Ting Pek Khiing. In as much, it is worth noting that the decision to clamp down on illegal logging may also have been connected with a 1992 confrontation between the government and the royalty over the latter's extensive and lucrative business interests, which, along with the playboy lifestyle of many royals, were the source of much public chagrin. The government controlled press was certainly quick to highlight a number of incidences of illegal logging by companies with royal connections.⁴¹ Secondly, on a more general level, the environmental movement challenged the hegemonic foundations of the state, with its increasing dependence upon a developmentalist discourse. The environmental movement challenged the underlying assumption that 'development' was, in all places and at all times, a good thing. It was for this reason that the regime embarked on such a vituperative rhetorical argument with the movement, even as it gave some concessions – the regime could afford to make a few concessions, but could not afford to lose the discursive argument.

³⁹“50-fold rise in fines still insufficient to curb illegal logging”. *Business Times*, 6 August 1993.

ACCOMMODATION AND COERCION: ISLAM AND CIVIL SOCIETY

In confronting environmentalist movements, the regime developed a discourse of fiery rhetoric and threats of coercion combined with understated concessions to undercut the thrust of the movement. Because of the politically sensitive nature of Islam, the government was typically more circumspect in dealing with Islamic movements. Moreover, whereas the environmentalist movement was constituted by small, professional NGOs, Islamic organisations tended to be mass membership and thus a more tricky target for coercive dominance. Historically, for instance, the government had not acted directly against ABIM in the 1970s, despite its key role in the student unrest of 1974–75. Whilst ABIM leaders were detained under the ISA, the government did not move to disband or outlaw the organisation itself. Only in the late 1970s, as ABIM as an organisation began to align itself more explicitly with PAS, did the government move to restrict ABIM through the proposed amendments to the Societies Act.⁴² In the event, however, a confrontation with ABIM was avoided through the co-optation of its leader, Anwar Ibrahim, into UMNO. Rather than employ an overarching discursive attack on ‘civil Islam’, the regime thus varied its strategies from organisation to organisation, attempting to manipulate them both to bolster its own support and Islamic credentials, and to undercut support for its main Islamic political rival, PAS.

⁴⁰ ‘Jail, stiffer fines plan for violating environ laws.’ *New Straits Times*, 13 January 1994.

⁴¹ ‘Clearcut mandate.’ *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 28 October 1993.

⁴² Fred R. von der Mehden, ‘The political and social challenge of the Islamic revival in Malaysia and Indonesia’, *The Muslim World*, 76:3/4 (1996), pp. 219–33.

Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia (ABIM)

In the early 1990s, ABIM appeared to have been the most successful social cooptation that the BN government had achieved. From representing perhaps the greatest challenge to the regime in the 1970s, ABIM had become decreasingly critical and strident, pursuing instead an official policy of political neutrality and moderation (*kesederhanaan*). As already noted, this about-face was largely a result of Anwar's entry into UMNO. In many respects, however, at least apparent political neutrality was a necessary position for the organisation. Aside from Anwar, other former ABIM office-holders had reached prominent positions in both UMNO and PAS; by the mid-1990s, a number of BN Ministers and one state Chief Minister were former ABIM activists and two consecutive PAS presidents – Fadzil Noor and Hadi Awang – were ABIM alumni.⁴³ The rank-and-file members of ABIM also had considerable overlap with both parties. In such circumstances, political partisanship of the behalf of the leaders may have risked splitting the movement. ABIM avoided political controversy by focusing its attention on international affairs, calling for justice for oppressed Muslim communities from Palestine to Bosnia and Chechnya. Its donation drives raised millions of ringgit for war victims in Bosnia, and it was also instrumental in bringing hundreds of Bosnian orphans to Malaysia for adoption – a role for which it gained special dispensation from the government.⁴⁴ Perhaps following

⁴³ As of writing, Hadi is only acting president of PAS, following Fadzil's sudden death in May 2002, but he is unlikely to be challenged for the leadership at the next general assembly. Prior to Fadzil's death, Hadi was his deputy meaning that in 1998, before Anwar was sacked, three of the four top offices in Malay-based political parties were held by ex-ABIM activists.

⁴⁴ e.g. 'ABIM berjaya pungut derma RM3 juta.' *Berita Harian*, 6 April 1994; 'Hanya ABIM dibenar bawa anak Bosnia.' *Berita Harian*, 23 September 1992.

the example of *Darul Arqam* (see below), ABIM concentrated its domestic attention on business ventures and building a network of Islamic schools.⁴⁵

Despite its official political neutrality, however, it was clear that ABIM was developing closer relations with the government. ABIM leadership often spoke in glowing terms of government policies, and even justified their own activities on grounds being ‘in line with’ (*selaras*) government policy.⁴⁶ In contrast, the organisation expressed reservation over PAS’ plans to implement *hudud* laws in Kelantan, following instead the government’s line that, whilst implementation of *hudud* was desirable in the long run, the contemporary situation in Malaysia was not conducive.⁴⁷ ABIM was rewarded with the use of government-controlled facilities, and the patronage of ministers at some of its functions.⁴⁸

The new accommodation between ABIM and the government left many people feeling uneasy by the rapid rise of ABIM members through UMNO ranks and the concomitant perception that the current and former ABIM leadership – including Anwar – intended to ‘ABIMise’ (*mengABIMkan*) UMNO.⁴⁹ These fears were played upon by those who opposed Anwar’s rapid rise through the party. When Anwar stood for the deputy presidency of UMNO in 1993, for instance, a poison

⁴⁵ ‘ABIM ventures into property business.’ *Business Times*, 31 August 1991; ‘ABIM shifts focus, plans aggressive business ventures.’ *New Straits Times*, 3 February 1992; ‘ABIM plans to set up secondary school network.’ *New Straits Times*, 9 February 1993.

⁴⁶ ‘ABIM mahu lebih tumpuan wujud peluang niaga.’ *Harian Minggu*, 11 July 1991; ‘ABIM anjur seminar Islam.’ *Berita Harian*, 3 August 1991.

⁴⁷ ‘ABIM cautions Kelantan on hudud laws.’ *New Straits Times*, 6 May 1992; ‘Be patient, says ABIM.’ *New Straits Times*, 5 March 1994.

⁴⁸ ‘Exhibition on ABIM activities.’ *New Straits Times*, 15 August 1991; ‘ABIM gains recognition for its work.’ *New Straits Times*, 16 August 1991.

⁴⁹ ‘ABIM tidal berniat mengabimkan UMNO.’ *Berita Mingguan*, 12 March 1995.

pen letter (*surat layang*) was circulated, purportedly signed by the current president of ABIM, asking all ABIM members in UMNO to vote for Anwar.⁵⁰ Ironically, these allegations, refuted at the time, were resuscitated by the government in 1998 as another justification for Anwar's expulsion.⁵¹ As will be seen in the next chapter, ABIM was one of the first social organisations to come out in open support of Anwar after his dismissal.

The importance of the 'ABIMisation' issue is not so much the veracity or not of the allegations, but that it clearly demonstrates the fears *within* UMNO that former and current ABIM members formed a substantial and cohesive faction within the party. As has already been shown, UMNO is beset with factional divisions and alliances, but most of these factions have been relatively fluid, as demonstrated by Musa's prolonged prevarication over whether to support Mahathir or Razaleigh after the formation of UMNO(Baru). The ABIM faction within UMNO, however, was of unquestioning loyalty to Anwar – 'Anwar's Boys', as they came to be known. For them, loyalty to Anwar transcended loyalty to UMNO. After Anwar's dismissal, many within the ABIM faction were amongst the founding members of Keadilan – a situation which, ironically, produced problems for the new party in 2001 when ABIM members attempted to 'mengABIMkan' Keadilan.

⁵⁰ 'ABIM nafi isi surat layang.' *Berita Harian*, 8 September 1993. ABIM denied the letter's validity.

⁵¹ 'Rais dedah Anwar guna ikatan musnahkan UMNO.' *Berita Harian*, 28 September 1999; see also report of an UMNO ceramah at <http://members.tripod.com/~mahazalimd/270999zb.html>. Anwar's intention to 'ABIMise UMNO' was one of the 'Fifty Reasons' in Khalid Jafri's book.

The relationship between ABIM and the government – and UMNO in particular – thus demonstrates the potential shortcomings for the state of a policy of cooptation in dealing with mass-based civil society organisations. Whilst the entry of Anwar into UMNO in 1982 may well have neutralised the significant threat ABIM posed at the time, it had the effect of creating a solid faction within the party, which contributed to Anwar's rapid rise through the party hierarchy. In coopting Anwar, UMNO also had to assimilate his myriad of followers. But in doing so, the party ran the risk of a 'reverse takeover bid'.

Darul Arqam

The government's attitude towards the *Darul Arqam* movement is illustrative of its variable strategy towards civil society groups, and its continued willingness to use repressive measures even against Islamic groups, when its perceived interests are at risk. The *Darul Arqam* movement was formed in 1968 by Ashaari Muhammad, a religious teacher and former PAS activist, and twelve of his followers. The original aim of the movement, like many other *dakwah* groups formed at the time, was to revitalise the Islamic community through the adherence to individual piety.⁵² Along with other *dakwah* groups such as ABIM, Darul Arqam also experienced its first surge in popularity during the mid-1970s, quickly spreading to neighbouring countries, establishing a substantial presence in Indonesia and southern Thailand. At the time, PAS had been coopted into the *Barisan Nasional* regime, leaving groups like Arqam as the main outlet for anti-establishment Muslim youths. Where Arqam differed from other groups, however, was the immediacy of its commitment to an Islamic society or way of

⁵² Muhammad Syukri Salleh, *An Islamic Approach to Rural Development: The Arqam way*, London: Asoib International, 1992, p. 84.

life (*ad dīn*), before the realisation of an Islamic State. Ashaari was vocal in criticising other Islamic organisations such as PAS and ABIM for their slogan shouting and seminar holding, without practicing what they preached.⁵³ For its part, Arqam established a number of self-sufficient communities and embarked on a range of business ventures, which, by the time the movement was banned in 1994, exceeded four hundred business concerns in Malaysia alone and estimated aggregate assets of some RM300 million.⁵⁴

As an Islamic movement, *Darul Arqam* defies easy classification. This ambiguity was arguably the source of its popularity. The success of Arqam lay in its appeal to both modernising and conservative Islamic tendencies. With its semi-idolisation of Ashaari and the messianic message of its teachings (especially the *Aurad* – see below), it had the trappings of a classic millenarian cult. Yet rather than attacking police stations in the belief that they were impervious to bullets, as one such cult had done in 1980, *Arqam* members expressed their piety in the most mundane of tasks – bottling ketchup, slaughtering chickens, and other economic activities. Its espousal of modern information technology, together with its vast economic interests attracted those who felt that Islam and a modern way of life were not incompatible. Its communal living and attachment to more traditional elements of Islam, such as the practice of polygamy and eating from shared dishes, also gave the movement a strong conservative flavour.

⁵³ Jomo Kwame Sundaram and Ahmad Shabery Cheek, 'Malaysia's Islamic movements', in Joel S. Kahn and Francis Loh Kok Wah (eds.), *Fragmented Vision: Culture and politics in contemporary Malaysia*, Honolulu, University of Hawaii Press, 1992, pp. 79-106.

⁵⁴ 'Allah's bounty.' *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 1 September 1994.

During the early 1980s, Arqam was arguably the closest to the government of all the major *dakwah* movements in the country. In 1981, before assuming the post of Prime Minister, Mahathir described Arqam as the only authentic Islamic movement in the country. Throughout the early 1980s, Arqam had a close working relationship with several ministries involved with rural development, and had been offered the opportunity to take over a number of failed state projects.⁵⁵ In 1986, however, concerns were raised about Arqam's teaching, in particular its apparent idolisation of Ashaari and its publication of the book *Aurad Muhammadiyah*, which claimed that a prominent Malaysian cleric, who had died in the 1920s, was about to return as the *Imam Mahadi*, a kind of Muslim messiah. The Department of Islamic Affairs in the Prime Minister's Department declared that the book deviated from true Islamic teachings,⁵⁶ but no action was taken against the movement at the time – possibly because it remained a more pro-government organisation that detracted support from PAS and ABIM. The Arqam leadership maintained that it did not promote idolisation and that the belief in the *Aurad* was a matter of personal faith, and not obligatory within the order.⁵⁷

Concerns gained momentum in the early 1990s, after the neighbouring country of Brunei banned the movement in early 1991 for being a 'threat to religious harmony'.⁵⁸ Shortly afterward, the East Malaysian state of Sabah, then under

⁵⁵ Muhammad Syukri, *An Islamic Approach to Rural Development*.

⁵⁶ Jabatan Perdana Menteri [Prime Minister's Department], *Penjelasan Terhadap Buku Aurad Muhammadiyah Pegangan Darul Arqam* [Explanation of the book 'Aurad Muhammadiyah' by Darul Arqam], Kuala Lumpur, Bahagian Hal Ehwal Islam, Jabatan Perdana Menteri, 1986.

⁵⁷ 'Behind the Darul Arqam veil.' *New Straits Times*, 2 October 1991.

⁵⁸ 'Darul Arqam: Ban won't affect us.' *New Straits Times*, 15 February 1991.

the control of the mainly Christian opposition party PBS, implemented a similar ban.⁵⁹ At first, the federal government played down the sanctions against Arqam, stating that it had no intention of banning the movement as a whole or of detaining its leader.⁶⁰ The first substantial move against Arqam on the peninsula came from the PAS-led state government in Kelantan, which banned a proposed exposition by Arqam in September 1991, and shortly after extended the ban to cover all of Arqam's activities in the state.⁶¹ The federal government soon followed suit by curtailing Arqam activities, including withdrawing its journal publishing permits and banning its other publications, although it stopped short of an outright ban, stating that Arqam was free to pursue its economic activities.⁶² The final decision to outlaw the organisation came in 1994, after the government claimed it had evidence that Arqam was training an army in southern Thailand, an allegation that the Thai authorities denied.⁶³ A Royal Malaysian Navy officer, who had been an Arqam member, also claimed that Ashaari had ordered him to instigate a coup d'état in the country.⁶⁴ In August 1994, the National Fatwa Committee announced a complete ban on the organisation.⁶⁵ At the same time, Indonesia, Singapore and Brunei jointly

⁵⁹ 'Arqam, Tabligh tetap diharam.' *Berita Harian*, 1 March 1991.

⁶⁰ 'Megat Junid: No plan to arrest Arqam chief.' *New Straits Times*, 27 July 1991; 'No plan to ban Darul Arqam.' *New Straits Times*, 29 July 1991.

⁶¹ 'Kelantan bars Al-Arqam expo.' *New Straits Times*, 11 September 1991; 'It's a blanket ban on Al Arqam activities.' *New Straits Times*, 12 September 1991.

⁶² 'KDN permits for Arqam withdrawn.' *New Straits Times*, 17 September 1991; 'Arqam can carry on with its business activities.' *New Straits Times*, 19 September 1991. 'Arqam books banned, says PM.' *Business Times*, 5 October 1991.

⁶³ 'Threat from Al-Arqam "serious".' *New Straits Times*, 22 June 1994; 'No Al-Arqam army training.' *New Straits Times*, 29 June 1991.

⁶⁴ 'Ashaari ordered me to stage coup, says ex-RMN officer.' *New Straits Times*, 19 July 1994.

⁶⁵ 'Al Arqam banned.' *New Straits Times*, 6 August 1994.

announced that Ashaari had been banned from entering these countries.⁶⁶

Ashaari and a number of other Arqam leaders were later detained under the ISA.⁶⁷

It seems clear that the movement was tolerated for so long in part due to its considerable contribution to the economic development of the country, particularly in rural areas, but more importantly because of its critical stance towards PAS. Thus, despite being deemed 'deviant' as early as 1986, the movement was allowed to continue as it drew support away from PAS into an essentially non-political movement. By the mid-1990s, however, the movement presented sufficient threat for the government to move against it. Whether this was, as the government claimed, because it constituted a threat to Malaysia's national security or else a political threat to the BN regime is less clear. None of the government's allegations of militarism within the movement were ever supported by hard evidence. The government was, however, undoubtedly alarmed by the growth in support for Arqam amongst government servants; shortly before it was banned completely, the government announced a ban on Arqam activities within government departments.⁶⁸ After the 1990 general election, Arqam had also undertaken an ominous organisational restructuring that had seen its administrative districts redrawn along the lines of parliamentary constituencies. The perception that the regime banned the organisation on

⁶⁶ 'Three countries agree to ban Al Arqam leader.' *New Straits Times*, 5 August 1994.

⁶⁷ 'Ashaari detained under ISA.' *New Sunday Times*, 4 September 1994. For an account of the detention by one of the detainees, see Zabidi Mohamed, *Arqam: Tersungkur di pintu 'syurga'*, Kuala Lumpur, Zabidi Publications, 1998.

political rather than security grounds is given credence by comments made at the time by the minister of defence, Najib Tun Razak. Said Najib, ‘Obviously they [Arqam leaders] have a political agenda, kept secret all this while, to gain political power’.⁶⁹

ATTRITION: THE LABOUR MOVEMENT

The labour movement emerged from the 1990 general election politically resurgent but more divided than ever. The long running feud between the two main union umbrella bodies – the generally pro-regime Congress of Employees in the Public and Civil Services (CUEPACS) and the more confrontational Malaysian Trades Union Congress (MTUC) – was intensified by the MTUC’s open support for the opposition in the 1990 general election. The movement was further split by the emergence of the Malaysian Labour Organisation (MLO) as a rival to the MTUC. By 1997, however, the movement had reconciled many of its differences, with the merger of the MLO and the MTUC, and the MTUC’s concomitant shift towards a more pro-regime position. This shift in stance was in a large part due to the government’s successful handling of the movement.

The Malaysian Trades Union Congress

By the time of the 1990 general election, the MTUC had hitched its horses firmly to the opposition wagon, its three senior office bearers having stood for the opposition front, with mixed success. V. David, its secretary-general, and

⁶⁸ A survey of full-time Arqam activists in 1988 found that almost a quarter were former government servants, with another 5% from the armed forces and 10% teachers. See Muhammad Syukri, *An Islamic Approach to Rural Development*, p. 118.

Ahmad Nor, its vice-president, both won seats with the DAP. David was a long standing DAP MP, and Ahmad had stood in 1986 without success as an SDP candidate. In contrast, Zainal Rampak, the MTUC president, failed in his bid to win a seat on the *Semangat* ticket. He reaffirmed his support for *Semangat* in 1992, however, when he took up a post on the party's supreme council. The MTUC had earlier demonstrated its continuing support for the opposition when it declared openly for the DAP's deputy chairman, Karpal Singh, in a July 1991 by-election.⁷⁰

Aside from its parliamentary outings, the MTUC also became increasingly vocal in the early 1990s on two particular issues – the recruitment of foreign workers into the country and the government's refusal to withdraw a long standing ban on national-level unionisation for the electronics sector of the manufacturing industry. Malaysia's fast growing economy and rising living standards in the early 1990s had seen a labour shortage emerge in the labour intense, low paid sectors, particularly in construction and plantation work. This attracted an influx of foreign workers, particularly Indonesian and Filipino, many of whom were illegal – but semi-officially tolerated. The MTUC was concerned by the influx of foreign workers, and planned a series of demonstrations against them.⁷¹ It claimed that the arrival of foreign workers would affect the welfare of local workers, and that the government was 'not doing enough to attract local

⁶⁹ Quoted in Abdullahi A. An-Na'im, 'The cultural mediation of human rights: The Al-Arqam case in Malaysia', in Joanne R. Bauer and Daniel A. Bell (eds.), *The East Asian Challenge for Human Rights*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, p. 161.

⁷⁰ 'MTUC pledges support for Karpal Singh in polls.' *New Straits Times*, 20 July 1991.

⁷¹ 'Ghaffar raps the MTUC rallies plan.' *New Straits Times*, 23 September 1991.

workers’.⁷² The MTUC’s protest was dampened – in the most literal of ways – after a poor showing at its first rally in Kuala Lumpur, due to flash floods in the city.⁷³ Following subsequent reassurances from the government on the restrictions that would be applied to foreign workers, the MTUC called off the protest entirely.⁷⁴ Whilst the protest was short lived, then, it was important in that it signalled a continued confrontation between the government and the MTUC, epitomised by the emergence of a very public feud between Zainal and the Human Resources Minister, Lim Ah Lek.⁷⁵

The issue of the electronic workers union exploded spectacularly after Zainal made a speech at the 1992 International Labour Organisation (ILO) conference in Geneva in which he criticised the government for its failure to allow unionisation of the sector. The UMNO Youth leader, Najib Tun Razak, immediately called on the government to take action against Zainal.⁷⁶ Mahathir himself accused Zainal and David of ‘treachery’ and ‘undermining the country’s interest’, although apparently ruled out legal action, saying ‘they are guilty but not by violating the law. Had they broken the law, we would have taken action’.⁷⁷ Nonetheless, thinly veiled threats were made that the government was monitoring ‘leaders of various organisations who go abroad to tarnish the good

⁷² ‘MTUC defends decision.’ *New Straits Times*, 24 September 1991. For an extended discussion of the impact of migrant labour, see Amarjit Kaur, ‘Changing labour relations in Malaysia 1970s–1990s’, *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 73:1 (2000), pp. 1–16.

⁷³ ‘Workers rally postponed.’ *New Straits Times*, 12 October 1991.

⁷⁴ ‘MTUC calls off its protest rally.’ *New Straits Times*, 15 November 1991.

⁷⁵ ‘Lim warns MTUC.’ *Business Times*, 30 September 1991.

⁷⁶ ‘“Act against MTUC leaders”.’ *New Straits Times*, 3 July 1992.

⁷⁷ ‘Dr M: MTUC leaders guilty of treachery.’ *New Straits Times*, 11 July 1992.

name of the country', and 'would not hesitate to take action, including provisions under the Internal Security Act (ISA), if their actions were found to affect the country's stability and economy'.⁷⁸ The government defended its ban on a national union for electronics workers by citing foreign investors who had allegedly expressed unhappiness at the proposal.⁷⁹ This stand was quickly reversed, however, when the MTUC accused the government of being in the pocket of foreign multi-nationals.⁸⁰

A repeat performance by Zainal at the 1993 ILO meeting was soon followed by a concerted campaign to rein in the increasing dissent of the MTUC leadership.⁸¹ Shortly after the ILO meeting, the Director-General of Trade Unions, a government appointed civil servant with wide-ranging discretionary powers, issued a directive to Zainal to quit either his post on the *Semangat* supreme council or else his post as deputy secretary-general of the Transport Workers Union (TWU), which would also have forced his resignation from the MTUC.⁸² Zainal initially defended his right to hold both, but eventually resigned from the *Semangat* supreme council.⁸³ Subsequently, in October 1994, Zainal and three other MTUC officials were charged with Criminal Breach of Trust for alleged misuse of union funds.⁸⁴ They were subsequently joined by the MTUC president

⁷⁸ 'Tell-tale leaders under close watch.' *New Straits Times*, 27 July 1992.

⁷⁹ 'Some investors against nationwide union: Lim.' *Business Times*, 4 September 1992.

⁸⁰ 'MTUC distorting policy, says Lim.' *New Straits Times*, 14 September 1992.

⁸¹ 'Zainal sticks to original speech text.' *New Straits Times*, 16 June 1993.

⁸² 'Zainal likely to choose union over Semangat 46.' *New Straits Times*, 29 June 1993.

⁸³ 'MTUC chief Zainal gives up S46 post.' *New Straits Times*, 10 July 1993.

⁸⁴ 'Zainal among three to be charged with CBT.' *New Straits Times*, 15 October 1994. The charges related to their actions as office-bearers in the Transport Workers Union, rather than the MTUC itself.

V. David.⁸⁵ The fact that the sums involved were so small – RM5,000 in Zainal's case and RM15,000 in David's – and that the alleged offences had taken place in the 1980s led to much speculation that the trials were politically motivated.⁸⁶

As the threats and intimidation continued, the MTUC sought to reconcile itself with the government.⁸⁷ At the congress' 1994 May Day rally, Zainal announced that he had left *Semangat* to 'prove that the MTUC is apolitical' – a clear change from the congress' 1990 stance on the impossibility of apolitical unionism.⁸⁸ At the 1995 general election, the MTUC announced that it was not supporting any party, but left it up to members to vote for candidates who supported workers rights. By this time, Anwar had begun courting Zainal to woo him into UMNO.⁸⁹ Zainal had previously attributed the organisation's move towards reconciliation with the government as partially due to Anwar installation as Deputy Prime Minister.⁹⁰ As reconciliation continued, the court cases against Zainal and others were dismissed after the prosecution withdrew its charges.⁹¹ The following year, Zainal announced that he had joined UMNO, 'for the sake of the workers', apparently.⁹²

⁸⁵ 'Veteran unionist charged with CBT.' *Straits Times (Singapore)*, 28 October 1994.

⁸⁶ Interview, S. Somah Sundram, MTUC Central Committee, Subang Jaya, September 2001.

⁸⁷ 'MTUC hopes to foster closer ties with Govt.' *New Straits Times*, 01 January 1994.

⁸⁸ 'Zainal leaves S46 to mend fences with Government.' *New Straits Times*, 02 May 1994.

⁸⁹ 'MTUC sedia wujud hubungan harmoni.' *Berita Harian*, 18 May 1994.

⁹⁰ 'MTUC pilih kesederhanaan.' *Berita Mingguan*, 16 January 1994.

⁹¹ 'TWU officials in CBT case acquitted.' *New Straits Times*, 10 October 1996.

⁹² 'Zainal: I joined UMNO for the sake of workers.' *Business Times*, 11 October 1997.

The Congress of Unions of Employees in the Public and Civil Services

In contrast to the MTUC, CUEPACS remained more comfortable with the regime throughout the 1990s. In 1992, CUEPACS' new president, Mohamad Mat Jid, pledged that the organisation would continue to 'cooperate' with the government.⁹³ Mohamad was also the president of the strongly pro-regime Malaysia Labour Organisation (see below). The ties between CUEPACS and the government were underlined in 1993 when the Penang State CUEPACS chairman was elected chairman of an UMNO branch in Penang.⁹⁴ In 1995, tensions arose between CUEPACS and the government over CUEPACS' proposals for the civil service salary review, conducted every five years. Mahathir accused CUEPACS of 'unreasonable demands', which would bankrupt the government.⁹⁵ The government claimed that CUEPACS' proposal would cost it over RM12 billion and, in turn, set a limit of RM2 billion on any agreement.⁹⁶ After initially rejecting any such cap, CUEPACS' claim was eventually settled in February 1996, at a cost of just over RM2 billion.⁹⁷ Despite some harsh words from both sides, the wage claim negotiations were noticeably different from those of the mid 1980s, when CUEPACS had been led by Ahmad Nor. Never during the negotiations was even the prospect of strikes or pickets raised, in stark contrast to the extensive pickets of the 1980s.⁹⁸ CUEPACS also put up little resistance to the government's cap on any settlement, despite it being a fraction of their

⁹³ 'CUEPACS chief pledges to cooperate with Govt.' *Business Times*, 25 June 1992.

⁹⁴ 'NUTP sec leads UMNO branch.' *New Straits Times*, 12 July 1993.

⁹⁵ 'CUEPACS demands will bankrupt the Govt: PM.' *Business Times*, 14 July 1995.

⁹⁶ 'RM2bn ceiling for CUEPACS to work on.' *Business Times*, 7 October 1995.

⁹⁷ 'CUEPACS No to RM2bn limit for pay revision.' *Business Times*, 16 October 1995; 'CUEPACS accepts Govt's pay offer.' *Business Times*, 1 February 1996.

⁹⁸ 'Bravo CUEPACS and PSD.' *Business Times*, 2 February 1996.

original demands. The congress also agreed to drop its demands that some contentious aspects of the wage structure be re-examined.⁹⁹ During the height of the negotiations, CUEPACS resorted to flattery rather than confrontation; at its convention in January 1996, CUEPACS bestowed a special award of *Negarawan Teladan Berwawasan* (Visionary and Exemplary Statesman) upon Mahathir.¹⁰⁰ Similarly, CUEPACS arranged a rally in December 1995 to ‘express appreciation’ to the government for the role it was allowed to play in the negotiations.¹⁰¹ Following the resolution of the wage claims, CUEPACS moved to adopt an even more pro-regime stance. In October 1996, CUEPACS announced a change of policy towards greater cooperation with the government to ‘help national development’.¹⁰² In a clear indication of how it was to achieve this, the congress spoke out against an NGO forum on police brutality, claiming it ‘showed a lack of respect’ for the law.¹⁰³ The congress was immediately rewarded with a representative post on a trade mission to the United States, the first for a workers’ organisation.¹⁰⁴

The Malaysian Labour Organisation

As already noted, the MTUC’s decision in 1989 to enter the political fray spurred a number of its affiliates to form a break away union congress, the Malaysian Labour Organisation (MLO). By the early 1990s, the MLO had attracted fifteen unions, representing around 150,000 workers. The MLO was widely perceived as being more pro-government than the MTUC – its formation had, after all, been

⁹⁹ ‘CUEPACS accepts RM2bn offer for salary revision.’ *Business Times*, 4 November 1995.

¹⁰⁰ ‘CUEPACS honours Dr Mahathir with award.’ *New Straits Times*, 19 January 1996.

¹⁰¹ ‘More than 5,000 to attend CUEPACS gathering.’ *New Straits Times*, 18 December 1995.

¹⁰² ‘CUEPACS to help national development.’ *New Straits Times*, 30 October 1996.

¹⁰³ ‘CUEPACS is against NGO-organised forum.’ *Business Times*, 23 December 1996.

a response to the MTUC's support for the opposition during the UMNO crisis. The most influential of the MLO unions, its co-founder the National Union of Bank Employees (NUBE), openly favoured a 'good working relationship' with the government.¹⁰⁵ The MTUC, however, viewed the relationship between the government and the MLO as more insidious. David publicly accused the MLO of being a 'political arm of the *Barisan [Nasional]*', a claim vigorously denied by the regime.¹⁰⁶

The MLO certainly appeared often to support the government position over the interest of the workers. After its appointment to the National Labour Advisory Council (NLAC) the MLO stated that it would 'place national interest above others', a clear echo of the government's own line on the role of trade unions.¹⁰⁷ It also regularly lauded government policies that were opposed by the broader union movement.¹⁰⁸ The MLO also appeared much closer to employers than its counterparts. When a proposal was made to jail employers who failed to 'safeguard' their employees against fatal accidents, the MLO stood side-by-side with the Malaysian Employers Federation (MEF) in opposing the move, which was strongly welcomed by the MTUC.¹⁰⁹ K. Sanmugam, the MLO secretary-general, also called for trade unions to 'abandon confrontation' and 'seek ways to bring employees and employers closer together'.¹¹⁰ Most controversially, the

¹⁰⁴ 'Move to include CUEPACS rep in missions lauded.' *New Straits Times*, 5 November 1996.

¹⁰⁵ 'NUBE favours good rapport with Govt.' *Business Times (Malaysia)*, 02 May 1992.

¹⁰⁶ 'MTUC: MLO a political arm of Barisan.' *New Straits Times*, 26 February 1992; 'Lim: MLO has no connection with Govt.' *Business Times*, 21 December 1992

¹⁰⁷ 'MLO to place national interest above others.' *Business Times*, 8 August 1991.

¹⁰⁸ 'MLO: New pay scheme a model for private sector.' *New Straits Times*, 15 October 1991.

¹⁰⁹ 'Mixed reaction to jail employers idea.' *New Straits Times*, 13 March 1991.

¹¹⁰ 'Abandon harsh stance, says MLO official.' *New Straits Times*, 14 May 1993.

MLO became involved in the issue of the ban on a national union for electronics workers. Sanmugam questioned the importance of the ban, calling it ‘exaggerated’, and claiming that there were greater priorities facing the labour movement.¹¹¹ Sanmugam’s position was undoubtedly affected by the fact that all the attempts to register a national union had been under the MTUC’s auspices, whilst four of the in-house unions allowed by the regime in the sector had affiliated with the MLO.¹¹² Nonetheless, in speaking out on the issue that was one of the MTUC’s main grudges against the regime, Sanmugam was clearly marking the distance between the MLO and the MTUC, and the closeness of the MLO to the government.

Whether or not the MLO had a tacit alliance with the government, its consolidation as a major player in the labour movement in the early 1990s was clearly to the regime’s advantage, for two reasons. Firstly, as an organisation with a greater ideological convergence with the government, it would inevitably lead to easier dealings with the labour movement for the government. Secondly, the emergence of a challenger to the MTUC for the affiliation of private sector unions allowed the regime to intensify the kind of divisive tactics that it had so effectively pursued in the 1980s between the MTUC and CUEPACS. From 1991, the government began actively pushing the MLO as an alternative labour centre to the MTUC. As already noted, the MLO was appointed that year to the National Labour Advisory Council - a tripartite advisory body made up of representatives from the government, the unions and employers. The following year, the government gave the MLO a seat on the Employees Provident Fund advisory

¹¹¹ ‘Sanmugam: Electronics union issue exaggerated.’ *Business Times*, 5 October 1994.

board, angering the MTUC, which had previously had the monopoly of the labour representatives on the board.¹¹³ Finally, in 1993, MLO representatives actually replaced Zainal Rampak on the appellate board of the Social Security Organisation (SOCSO).¹¹⁴ In addition to promoting the MLO as a workers' representative in statutory bodies, the government sewed further animosity in the labour movement with its selection of union representatives for the annual ILO conference. In 1992, the government appointed the MLO as an adviser to the Malaysian delegation at the ILO conference – a move that again angered the MTUC, as it had not been consulted on the appointment.¹¹⁵ The next year, the government suggested that it may even select MLO representatives instead of the MTUC.¹¹⁶ Zainal and Sanmugam had previously engaged in a bitter public confrontation over whose organisation should be selected.¹¹⁷

Although the MTUC and the MLO had been rivals from the start, then, the government's calculated playing of the two organisations off one another ensured that tensions were not allowed to subside. By mid-1992, the two organisations were nearing all out war. The MTUC used its May Day rally to accuse the MLO leaders of being 'timid' in their defence of workers' rights, and

¹¹² '4 electronics unions formalise ties with MLO.' *Business Times*, 3 August 1992.

¹¹³ 'MLO vice-president Gurdev appointed to EPF Board.' *New Straits Times*, 5 November 1992.

¹¹⁴ 'Another blow to MTUC.' *Business Times*, 15 July 1993.

¹¹⁵ 'MTUC to lodge protest over MLO appointment.' *Business Times*, 9 May 1992.

¹¹⁶ 'MLO may be picked to attend labour conference.' *New Straits Times*, 8 April 1993.

¹¹⁷ 'MTUC, MLO in tussle to attend ILO.' *Business Times*, 30 March 1993.

exploiting the labour movement for their own benefit.¹¹⁸ The MLO responded by accusing David and Zainal of being ‘leaders without principles’.¹¹⁹

Just as the MLO began to consolidate its position in the labour movement, however, it was faced with its own internal problems. In March 1993, the succinctly-named Non-Metallic Mineral Products Manufacturing Employees’ Union pulled out of the MLO, claiming that the MLO had not followed its own constitution in the appointment of its executive committee.¹²⁰ Following a complaint to the Registrar of Societies, the MLO admitted that it had breached its own constitution, but appealed to the Registrar not to deregister it, as this would be ‘a big loss for the workers’.¹²¹ The Registrar agreed to overlook the errors, though whether she was more moved by the potential loss for the workers, or the potential loss of a government ally in the labour movement was not made public.¹²² In 1995, the MLO was further hit by the withdrawal of its largest member, the Subordinate Staff Union Council (MKTR – *Majlis Kakitangan Rendah*), taking with it 50,000 of the MLO’s 150,000 affiliate members.¹²³ This signalled the beginning of the end for the MLO, eventually ‘merging’ back into the MTUC in 1996.

This turnabout in the MLO’s fortunes, from upcoming government favourite in 1993 to ignominious ‘merger’ in 1996 can be understood as the result of two related developments. Firstly, as already noted, the MTUC had, since 1994,

¹¹⁸ ‘Union chiefs criticise each other.’ *New Straits Times*, 2 May 1992.

¹¹⁹ ‘Unions edge nearer a free-for-all.’ *Business Times*, 15 May 1992.

¹²⁰ ‘Major affiliate quits MLO, alleges breach of rules.’ *New Straits Times*, 11 March 1993.

¹²¹ ‘MLO apologises to registrar.’ *New Straits Times*, 11 May 1993.

¹²² ‘Registrar lets off MLO for violations.’ *New Straits Times*, 3 July 1993.

moved away from its confrontational stance towards the regime. This greater accommodation between the government and the MTUC lessened the government's need for the MLO as an ally in the labour movement. Secondly, the defection of a number of large unions away from the MLO in the 1980s weakened its position vis-à-vis the MTUC. Most important here was the withdrawal of the MKTR. Following the MTUC's attempted rapprochement with the government in 1994, ties between the MLO and the MTUC also began to improve. By the end of 1994, both Sanmugam and Zainal had voiced the possibility of a merger between the two erstwhile rivals, although this was quickly ruled out by the MLO.¹²⁴ By the middle of the year, the two organisations were working in tandem on a number of labour issues, and appeared considerably reconciled.¹²⁵ Merger talks were reactivated at the end of 1995, and the MLO agreed to 'merge' with the MTUC in February 1996.¹²⁶ Whilst both parties spoke of a 'merger', however, the reality was that the MLO was to be disbanded, and its affiliate unions were to rejoin the MTUC, which they did so in May 1996.¹²⁷

CONCLUSIONS

As the economy grew apace during the 1990s and the regime's political popularity returned, the BN moved towards a more liberal position. As a

¹²³ 'MLO loses biggest member.' *New Straits Times*, 28 August 1995.

¹²⁴ 'MTUC and MLO talk about merger.' *New Straits Times*, 23 December 1994; 'MLO rules out merger with MTUC.' *New Straits Times*, 3 January 1995.

¹²⁵ 'Rival labour unions working together.' *New Sunday Times*, 3 August 1995.

¹²⁶ 'MLO agrees to merge with MTUC.' *New Straits Times*, 14 February 1996.

¹²⁷ 'MLO set to merge with MTUC by May 1.' *Business Times*, 12 March 1996; '17 MLO affiliates return to MTUC fold.' *New Straits Times*, 2 May 1996.

constituent of this, the regime proffered a cautious olive branch to civil society. This change in stance was most linked to the arrival of Anwar as deputy prime minister who, as we have seen, was key to developing links with former government critics such as Chandra Muzaffar and Zainal Rampak. The regime also held out the prospect of broadening the political space for NGOs and civil society to operate; in 1994 the government announced its intention to review some provisions in the Internal Security Act, although ruling out a complete repeal.¹²⁸ Changes to other laws were also made to accommodate some civil society concerns; in addition to the environmentalist movement, the women's movement successfully lobbied for a number of changes to laws affecting women and domestic violence.¹²⁹ Of course, this liberalisation of civil society controls was neither instantaneous nor universal. In 1993, for instance, Amnesty International was denied a permit to set up a local branch.¹³⁰

Moreover, the government continue to harass organisations and individuals that it perceived to be a threat to its interests. For the most part, this took the form of 'soft' coercion and attrition – encouraging divisions, and threatening the use of its repressive apparatus. Zainal Rampak and his union colleagues were not alone in facing legal action after criticism of the regime. In a case that dragged on for over six years, women's labour activist Irene Fernandez was prosecuted for 'false reporting' after highlighting appalling conditions in immigration camps.¹³¹ A similar case was brought against DAP MP Lim Guan Eng, which

¹²⁸ 'Amendments to Internal Security Act in the pipeline.' *Business Times*, 26 May 1994.

¹²⁹ See Maznah Mohamad, 'At the centre and the periphery: The contribution of women's movements to democratization', in Loh and Khoo, *Democracy in Malaysia*, pp. 216–40.

¹³⁰ 'Amnesty's appeal rejected.' *Business Times*, 17 June 1993.

¹³¹ See SUARAM, *Malaysian Human Rights Report 2000*.

will be discussed further in the next chapter. *A Far Eastern Economic Review* journalist was also briefly jailed in 1997 after writing a critical article.¹³² The regime was also highly successful in employing tactics of attrition against political opponents, most notably the PBS state government in Sabah.¹³³

This chapter has examined the ways in which the Malaysian regime responded to the expansion of civil society and the broad challenge to its legitimacy in the 1980s. Within the context of the state-society model being advanced here, it demonstrates both the extent of state capacity to restrict and direct civil society, and the limit thereupon. Moreover, where organisation and movements drew their strength from entrenched cultural beliefs and identities – in the Malaysian case, notably, Islam – the state's ability to exert hegemonic control was considerably more contested than in other areas.

¹³² 'FEER journalist jailed for contempt.' *New Straits Times*, 5 September 1997.

¹³³ See Graham Brown, 'Restraining autonomy: The politics of Sabah during the Mahathir years', in Bridget Welsh (ed.), *Reflections: The Mahathir Years*, Washington DC, School of Advanced International Studies, Johns Hopkins University, 2004.

CHAPTER EIGHT

CRISIS AND RESPONSE II:

THE DYNAMICS OF REFORMASI, 1998-2001

Thus far, the empirical chapters of this thesis have examined the development of civil society and social movements in Malaysia in three broad periods, from the expansion of civil society in the early 1980s through the crisis of 1987–1990 to the state resurgence of the 1990s. This final empirical chapter deals with a second regime crisis, which dominated the Malaysian political scene from 1998 through 2001 – the ‘Anwar Ibrahim affair’ and the reformasi (reform) movement that it launched. Because of the dynamic interplay of state, civil society and social mobilisation that characterised the period, this latter crisis is particularly demonstrative of the theoretical arguments developed earlier. To demonstrate the robustness of these claims, this chapter takes a more explicitly comparative approach, using the previous UMNO crisis as its foil.

On 2 September 1998, Mahathir sacked his deputy and former protégé Anwar Ibrahim and expelled him from the government; the following day he was also expelled from UMNO. Amid accusations of sodomy and corruption – widely believed to be trumped up – Anwar was later arrested, tried and convicted to a total of fifteen years in prison. Anwar’s sacking provoked a sustained period of protest against the regime, seeing hundreds of thousands of mostly young, mostly male, mostly Malay protestors converging on the streets of Kuala Lumpur on a weekly basis. Eventually, this reformasi movement gave birth to a new political party, KEADILAN (*Parti Keadilan Nasional*, or National Justice Party) and a united opposition front, the BA (*Barisan Alternatif*, or Alternative Front) which contested the November 1999 general election.

Previous analyses of reformasi have tended to concentrate on its *effects* on the contours of Malaysian politics and have tended to view it as some kind of a watershed or turning point in Malaysia. Some studies, for instance, have explored its discursive value as a counterhegemonic challenge to the BN regime.¹ Alternatively, they have focussed attention on the 'reconfiguration' of Malaysian politics, in particular the changing understanding of Islam in the Malay polity.² Such studies that have analysed reformasi as a social movement have also been more concerned with the effects of reformasi on civil society, where it has been argued that the movement helped foster better 'norms' of interethnic collaboration.³

Whilst all these studies have contributed to an understanding of contemporary Malaysian politics, what is lacking is any thorough *structural* explanation of the origins and trajectory of the reformasi challenge. This chapter provides such an analysis within the theoretical framework developed throughout the thesis. It argues that the forces that created and shaped reformasi were predominantly the

¹ Farish A. Noor, 'Looking for Reformasi: The discursive dynamics of the reformasi movement and its prospects as a political project', *Indonesian and the Malay World*, 77 (1999), pp. 5-18; John Hilley, *Malaysia: Mahathirism, Hegemony and the New Opposition*, London, Zed Books, 2001.

² Virginia Matheson Hooker, 'Reconfiguring Malay and Islam in Contemporary Malaysia', *Rima*, 34:2 (2000) pp. 1-27; Mohamad Abu Bakar, 'Konservatisme dan konflik: Isu 'kafir mengkafir' dalam politik kepartian, 1955-2000', *Pemikir*, 21 (2000), pp. 121-59; Claudia Derichs, 'Competing politicians, competing visions: Mahathir Mohamad's Wawasan 2020 and Anwar Ibrahim's Asian Renaissance', in James Chin and Ho Khai Leong (eds.), *Mahathir's Administration: Performance and crisis and governance*, Singapore, Times Books International, 2001, pp. 188-214.

³ Meredith L. Weiss, 'What will become of reformasi? Ethnicity and changing political norms in Malaysia', *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, 21:2 (1999); Meredith L. Weiss, 'Overcoming race-based politics in Malaysia: Establishing norms for deeper multiethnic co-operation', in Chin and Leong, *Mahathir's Administration*, pp. 62-99.

same as those that have shaped Malaysian societal politics over the previous two decades, drawing close parallels with the crisis of 1987 in particular. In as much, it suggests that the reformasi movement – though undoubtedly a dramatic and important development – may not be the watershed it is widely perceived to be.

POLITICAL OPPORTUNITY I: THE MAHATHIR-ANWAR SPLIT

As discussed in chapter two, the political opportunity structure is one of the key concepts used in understanding why social movements emerge when they do. The theory suggests that changes in the institutionalised political system – formal or informal – provide the opportunity for social movements to arise. A wide variety of dynamic variables have been identified as potential ‘dimensions’ of such opportunities, of most relevance here being changes in the stability of elite alignments.

The trajectory of the reformasi movement was affected by a number of shifts in the political opportunity structure, including the use of repression to demobilise protest and the imminence of elections as an alternative channel for protest. The origin of the movement, however, lay firmly in the shifting elite alignments within the regime and, more specifically, within UMNO. In as much, it is important to note that the origins of the Mahathir-Anwar split was remarkably similar to that of the previous UMNO split in 1987 – party factionalism intensified by economic woes. Whereas the Razaleigh challenge to Mahathir’s leadership created a schism within the party, however, the vast majority of senior UMNO officials closed ranks behind Mahathir after he sacked Anwar.

The Mahathir-Anwar split that catalysed the reformasi movements was sudden and drastic in its denouement, but had its roots in long existing factionalism within UMNO. Anwar first came to prominence in the early 1970s, as the founding president of the *Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia* (ABIM – Islamic Youth Movement of Malaysia). He was instrumental in the student demonstrations in the mid 1970s, which eventually saw him detained without trial under the Internal Security Act (ISA). Towards the end of the 1970s, it became increasingly clear that Anwar was preparing to make the hop into party politics, and he was a regular speaker at PAS *ceramah*. PAS' deputy president at the time, Fadzil Noor, was an old ally of Anwar from ABIM and there was much speculation after a leadership crisis in 1978 that Fadzil had not run for the Presidency because he wanted to 'keep the seat warm' for Anwar.⁴ It was thus a great shock to his supporters and detractors alike when Anwar announced he was joining UMNO in 1982. His move was seen as a personal coup for Mahathir, who had been focussing on winning the support of young Malays since taking on the premiership one year previously. Throughout the 1980s, Anwar rose quickly through the cabinet and through the party, winning the presidency of the powerful UMNO Youth barely five months after joining the party.⁵ During the 1987 split, Anwar was one of the staunchest supporters of Mahathir and has been credited with winning the divisive UMNO election for him.⁶ In 1991, he was rewarded with the powerful finance ministry.

⁴ Interview, Raja Petra Raja Kamaruddin, Director Free Anwar Campaign, Bangsar, April 2001.

⁵ Gordon P. Means, *Malaysian Politics: The Second Generation*, Singapore, Oxford University Press, 1991, p. 100.

⁶ Interview, Chandra Muzaffar, Deputy President Keadilan, Petaling Jaya, March 2001.

Anwar finally took up his position as Mahathir's heir apparent when he assumed the deputy presidency of UMNO, and with it the post of deputy prime minister, at the party's general assembly in November 1993. His rise to the post appears, however, to have been not entirely with Mahathir's approval. Earlier in the year, Anwar had stated that he would not challenge the incumbent deputy president, Ghafar Baba.⁷ Mahathir subsequently made clear his own preference for the status quo by commenting that he had not given his 'blessings' to anyone to contest the deputy president's post.⁸ In August, however, Anwar changed his mind – apparently after many pleas from UMNO members – and agreed to accept nominations.⁹ He was almost immediately deluged with statements of support from UMNO officials, including his successor at UMNO Youth, Najib Tun Razak.¹⁰ As UMNO divisional nominations for the party elections came in, it was immediately clear that Anwar would win; within two weeks of announcing his candidacy Anwar had received eighty-seven division nominations compared with six for Ghafar.¹¹ Significantly, however, Mahathir's own UMNO division, which he headed, chose to remain neutral and sent in no nominations for any

⁷ 'Anwar: I am not challenging Ghafar for No 2 position.' *New Sunday Times*, 25 April 1993.

⁸ 'Anwar won't seek UMNO deputy president's post.' *Business Times*, 12 June 1993.

⁹ 'Anwar announces bid for UMNO deputy presidency.' *New Straits Times*, 24 August 1993.

¹⁰ 'Anwar gets full support from UMNO Youth.' *New Straits Times*, 25 August 1993; 'Malacca UMNO backs Anwar, three others.' *Business Times*, 30 August 1993. It has been suggested that Najib's loyalty to Anwar was in fact a follow-on from the previous crisis, when Anwar had bought Najib's support for Mahathir's 'Team A' faction by offering to vacate the UMNO Youth presidency for him. Interviews, UMNO activists, April-November 2001.

¹¹ 'Resounding support for Anwar.' *Business Times*, 13 September 1993. After his close shave in the 1987 UMNO party elections, Mahathir had re-engineered the party's voting system to give blocks votes to the divisions, which out-weighted the votes of the actual delegates at the general assembly. If Anwar received enough divisional nominations, he could thus win the election before the assembly started.

posts.¹² As the nominations piled up, Ghafar was forced to withdraw from the contest to avoid humiliation. Anwar thus took the deputyship unopposed at the general assembly. To complete the coup, Anwar supporters also won all three of the UMNO vice president posts, and the UMNO Youth leadership.

Anwar's victory was not necessarily the groundswell of grassroots support that it appeared, however. As the UMNO general assembly was approaching, rumours began circling of vote buying by Anwar's supporters.¹³ The rumours were played down until the assembly itself, whereupon the issue exploded spectacularly. The day before the assembly opened, Mahathir held a closed door session with the delegates, where he apparently lambasted the prevalence of money politics and sought to distance himself from Anwar's team.¹⁴ On the final day of the assembly, the issue surfaced again, with delegates calling for the 'blatant bribery' of party elections to be stopped before it ruined the party.¹⁵ Whatever means they had employed, however, Anwar and his supporters looked in firm control of UMNO after the elections. The clean sweep was also a clear sign to Mahathir that Anwar had ambitions on his post.

During the following years, Anwar tried to consolidate his grip on the party. Increasingly, he sought to take on Mahathir himself in proxy battles in UMNO divisional elections. As the 1995 UMNO general assembly approached, a number of Mahathir's staunchest allies fell in divisional elections to often

¹² 'Kubang Pasu stays neutral.' *Malay Mail*, 24 September 1993.

¹³ 'Nazri: No money politics involved.' *New Straits Times*, 23 October 1993.

¹⁴ 'All the Deputy President's men.' *Malaysian Business*, 16 November 1993.

¹⁵ 'Members want bribery stopped.' *Business Times*, 6 November 1993.

relatively unknown candidates associated with Anwar.¹⁶ With the triennial party elections again due in 1996, there was much speculation that Anwar was about to mount a challenge to Mahathir's leadership. A full-on battle between the two would, however, have been disastrous for the party; memories of the 1987 UMNO elections were still fresh in delegates' minds. To avoid such a collision, it appears that a tacit compromise was reached. A motion was passed at the 1995 assembly to prevent any challenge to either Mahathir or Anwar in the 1996 UMNO elections. Anwar would thus have to wait until 1999 should he wish to challenge Mahathir. In return, Mahathir publicly stated that he would 'soon' be handing over power to his deputy.¹⁷ In effect, a timetable for the transition of power from Mahathir to Anwar was thus set; Mahathir would hand over power before 1999, otherwise Anwar would challenge him for the party presidency.

Any hope that the rivalry between the two leaders would be placated by this compromise was dashed, however, at the 1996 UMNO elections. Whilst both Anwar and Mahathir stuck to the 'no contest rule' for the top two posts, proxy battles between the two emerged for all the major party posts. Attention was particularly focussed on the election for the head of the *Wanita* UMNO (UMNO Women) wing, which was headed by the widely unpopular but Mahathir-supported Rafidah Aziz.¹⁸ Another proxy battle was brewing in the Youth wing, where Zahid Hamidi, an Anwar supporter, challenged the Mahathir loyalist Rahim Thamby Chik. With Mahathir's personal support for Rafidah

¹⁶ E.g. 'Sanusi loses chief's post by 12 votes.' *New Straits Times*, 30 September 1995.

¹⁷ 'Surely the time will come, soon, for a new leader to head the party.' *Asiaweek*, 8 December 1995.

¹⁸ 'The prime minister's menu.' *Asiaweek*, 2 August 1996.

and Rahim well known, however, their pro-Anwar challengers were considered unlikely to win.¹⁹

The election results were a mixed bag for Anwar. His candidates won in both the Youth and Wanita wings, but the decidedly anti-Anwar Abdullah Ahmad Badawi took one of the vice presidencies. Mahathir quickly turned the tables on Anwar by readmitting Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah – his own former archrival – into UMNO shortly after the assembly. Razaleigh remained widely popular both within and beyond UMNO, and thus represented a potential threat to Anwar's position as heir apparent.²⁰

As 1997 begun, then, the Anwar-Mahathir factionalism was more apparent than ever. A direct challenge by Anwar on Mahathir's leadership was unlikely, however. As Mahathir's appointed successor anyway, Anwar had little to gain and much to lose from such a challenge. Rather, he appeared to be jousting with Mahathir over *when* the latter should retire, whilst simultaneously ensuring a firm grip on the party to ensure his succession to an undisputed leadership position. Despite his apparent unassailability, Anwar had many enemies within UMNO, from those old hands aggrieved at his meteoric rise through the ranks to others who disapproved of his reliance on money politics.

It was in this context that Mahathir appointed Anwar as acting prime minister when he went on a two month 'working holiday' from May 1997, widely seen

¹⁹ 'Straight from the heart.' *Asiaweek*, 25 October 1996.

²⁰ 'Challenge to Anwar?' *Asiaweek*, 15 November 1996.

as a 'test' by Mahathir of Anwar's suitability for the premiership.²¹ Anwar's brief tenure at the helm only served to emphasise the differences between himself and Mahathir, however. Firstly, Anwar immediately undertook a concerted anti-corruption drive, which did not exclude individuals close to Mahathir. Secondly, the financial crisis in Thailand, which broke during this period, brought into the open fundamental policy differences between the two. Anwar began his fight against corruption with the arrest of a senior UMNO politician on corruption charges, claiming that he was sending a 'clear signal' on corruption.²² All state executive councillors were also ordered to declare their assets to the Anti-Corruption Agency (ACA). A deputy minister was sacked and suspended from the party along with another UMNO politician over allegations of missing money from party coffers.²³ After Anwar referred a number of officials within his own finance ministry to the ACA, other ministries and government agencies signed up to Anwar's 'all out war on corruption', vowing to root out corruption in their midst.²⁴ Anwar even earned the praise of opposition leader Lim Kit Siang for his proposals to strengthen the otherwise compliant ACA.²⁵

Mahathir himself had often talked the talk of anti-corruption, but Anwar's apparent willingness to walk the walk as well unnerved many within the

²¹ 'Anwar to be acting Prime Minister.' *New Straits Times*, 9 May 1997. Popular parallels have been drawn here with Musa Hitam's period as acting Prime Minister in the mid-1980s and with Abdullah Ahmad Badawi's similar tenure in 2003. Critics see this as Mahathir's way of 'testing' his deputies, both in terms of capacity and loyalty.

²² 'Abu Zahar: Arrest shows serious view taken of graft.' *New Straits Times*, 2 June 1997; 'Clear signal on corruption.' *New Straits Times*, 4 June 1997.

²³ 'UMNO suspends Siti Zainab, Habshah.' *Business Times*, 6 June 1997.

²⁴ 'ACA should be thorough in probe.' *New Sunday Times*, 15 June 1997; 'Customs gets tough in fighting graft, says Anwar.' *New Straits Times*, 11 July 1997.

²⁵ 'DAP lauds move to give ACA more power.' *New Straits Times*, 10 June 1997.

government, never more so that when he ordered the ACA to continue its probe in the Perwaja Steel scandal.²⁶ Perwaja was a state-owned steel manufacturer that had run into problems in 1988. At the time, a close associate of Mahathir was put in charge of the company, tasked with turning it around. By 1995, however, the company was in an even worse state, with RM1 billion in accumulated losses and over RM2 billion in debts. Accusations of managerial irregularities and inflated profits based on insurance claims forced the government to hand the matter over to the ACA.²⁷ The ACA was, however, notoriously lax in its investigation of government-linked cases, and Anwar's intervention was thus a clear signal of his intent to crackdown on corruption. Crucially, it was also a signal to Mahathir that Anwar would not protect his family and associates' business interests after his retirement.

The main event of Anwar's stewardship came towards the end. On 2 July, the Thai government allowed the baht to float, having previously been pegged to a basket of currencies. The instant collapse of the baht caught the attention of currency speculators, who brought similar pressure to bear on other regional currencies. Anwar's handling of the immediate crisis – refusing to use national funds to support the ringgit – earned him widespread plaudits, and for a while it looked as if Malaysia would escape the 'Asian Contagion'. As the ringgit slowly slid to one third of its previous dollar value of the next few months, however, very public differences between the two leaders emerged on how to deal with the crisis. Whilst Anwar favoured seeking IMF assistance, a programme of economic austerity and government cutbacks, Mahathir was seen

²⁶ 'Perwaja Steel probe still on.' *New Straits Times*, 24 May 1997.

²⁷ 'High-risk rivalry.' *Asiaweek*, 18 April 1997.

as preferring a 'business as usual' attitude. Of particular contention were the so-called 'mega projects', such as the RM14 billion Bakun dam project. Anwar had long since been known for his disquiet over Mahathir's penchant for such projects, and economic pressures intensified this.²⁸

Mahathir appears to have decided to move against his deputy immediately upon his return to the country at the end of July. Barely had he touched down in the airport than had he quietly rebuked the verve of Anwar's anti-corruption drive, assuring that he would not let it turn into a 'witch hunt'. He also implicitly criticised Anwar's handling of a dispute between two contractors involved in the construction of the Bakun dam.²⁹ A few weeks later, a cabinet reshuffle did Anwar no favours, with Anwar supporters being passed over in favour of other. Most notably, Zahid Hamidi, the UMNO Youth leader, was refused a ministerial post, despite the convention that the Youth leaders were made ministers. It was also around this time that rumours of sexual misconduct and homosexuality started spreading about Anwar, charges that were eventually to be used in his ouster. Although Mahathir initially dismissed the rumours as *fitnah* (slander), he also instructed Anwar not to pursue the matter legally.³⁰

In the following months, Anwar found himself increasingly isolated in the finance ministry. Mahathir himself took control of much of the response to the economic crisis, although Anwar apparently won a victory with the postponement of many of the mega projects in the 1998 Budget.³¹ A visit to

²⁸ 'Is all well near the top?' *Asiaweek*, 29 August 1997.

²⁹ 'PM: Bakun dispute can be resolved.' *New Straits Times*, 23 July 1997.

³⁰ 'Sex allegation: Anwar won't pursue matter.' *New Straits Times*, 26 August 1997.

³¹ 'Mahathir shifts into reverse.' *Asiaweek*, 19 December 1997.

Malaysia by IMF managing director Michel Camdessus at Anwar's behest apparently infuriated Mahathir, who saw it as a white neo-colonialist telling him how to run his country.³² When Mahathir then announced the creation of a National Economic Action Council (NEAC) tasked with developing and implementing an economic rescue package (dubbed 'an IMF package without the IMF'), Anwar was left out. Instead, former finance minister and one of Mahathir's closest confidants, Daim Zainuddin was brought out of political retirement to head the council.³³

The first half of 1998 saw a series of financial bailouts of government linked companies, apparently orchestrated by Mahathir and Daim without Anwar. Most important here was the use of the state oil company, *Petronas*, to rescue the floundering shipping empire of Mahathir's son, Mirzan Mahathir.³⁴ In an interview with *Asiaweek* magazine, Mahathir denied any connection with the deal, saying 'I have nothing to do with my son... It is not my fault that he is in business'.³⁵ Anwar publicly demonstrated his concern over the deal by calling for an independent valuation to ensure a fair price and 'to clear any misconception that the Government had interfered and influenced the proposed deal'.³⁶ Once again, it was clear that Anwar would not protect the Mahathir family business empire should he come to power.

As the June 1998 UMNO assembly approached, the perennial rumours resurfaced that Anwar would challenge Mahathir. Although party elections were not due

³² Interview, Raja Petra.

³³ 'Daim appointed NEAC executive director.' *New Sunday Times*, 21 December 1997.

³⁴ 'Bank on MISC's shareholding structure.' *New Straits Times*, 13 March 1998.

³⁵ 'Mounting pressure.' *Asiaweek*, 27 March 1998.

³⁶ 'Anwar: Appoint independent shipping valuer.' *New Straits Times*, 21 March 1998.

until the next year, Anwar could still challenge indirectly. Mahathir himself was known to favour an extension of the party's self-imposed 1995 'no contest' ruling to prevent a challenge in 1999; if Anwar and his supporters could persuade the assembly to reject such a proposal, it would leave Mahathir extremely vulnerable.³⁷ The air of confrontation thickened when Zahid Hamidi, the pro-Anwar UMNO Youth chief, called for 'greater resolve and transparency' in the government's business dealings, indicating that the Youth wing would be taking a strong stand against corruption – meaning Mahathir and Daim – in the upcoming assembly.³⁸ Zahid also implicitly scorned Mahathir's 'no contest' position and challenged his own pro-Mahathir deputy by openly calling for a contest for his own post in 1999.³⁹ A day before the general assembly opened, Zahid used the most direct language yet, calling for the end of nepotism and cronyism within the government.⁴⁰ A showdown appeared imminent.

The showdown never came, however. Two factors effectively stymied any planned challenge by Anwar and his supporters. Firstly, an anonymous book was published entitled *50 dalil mengapa Anwar tidak boleh jadi PM* ('Fifty reasons why Anwar cannot become Prime Minister'), which repeated many of the allegations that had been circulated the previous years, and added a few of its own. Anwar denied all the allegations, and obtained a court order against the publisher.⁴¹ The timing of the publication, however, was damaging to Anwar, as was the fact that the book mysteriously found its way into all the delegate

³⁷ 'Little room at the top.' *Asiaweek*, 19 June 1998.

³⁸ 'UMNO Youth calls for greater resolve and transparency.' *New Straits Times*, 11 May 1998.

³⁹ 'Ahmad Zahid reiterates his stand.' *New Straits Times*, 20 May 1998.

⁴⁰ 'Zahid: Nepotism, cronyism must stop.' *New Straits Times*, 19 June 1998.

⁴¹ 'Book on Anwar: Injunction obtained .' *New Straits Times*, 18 June 1998.

bags at the UMNO assembly.⁴² The second factor that ensured the stillbirth of any challenge was Mahathir's own performance. In a rousing speech, he turned the tables on his critics by claiming that *all* Malays were his cronies, because all Malays had benefited from government policies. 'Due to accusations of cronyism', he rallied, 'the Government is not able to assist anyone, especially during this economic downturn'.⁴³ In a theatrical *coup de grace*, Mahathir released an exhaustive list of all those Malays who had benefited from government patronage. Not only was Zahid Hamidi himself on the list, so was Anwar's father.⁴⁴

The assembly passed, Mahathir wasted no time in orchestrating his final assault on Anwar. Daim Zainuddin was elevated to the cabinet as Special Functions Minister with responsibility for economic recovery, a post that further isolated Anwar.⁴⁵ A spate of 'resignations' of those close to Anwar ensued. First to go were two Malay newspaper editors and the head of operations at TV3, all close to Anwar.⁴⁶ The governor of the central bank and his assistant were also victims of the purge, 'resigning' a few days before Anwar was sacked.⁴⁷ At the same time, the rumours of sexual impropriety intensified, and were given semi-official recognition. Mahathir, for instance, refused to ban the '50 Reasons' book until the completion of police investigations, implying that there may be

⁴² Interview, Raja Petra.

⁴³ Translation of Mahathir's speech to the UMNO general assembly, *New Straits Times*, 20 June 1998.

⁴⁴ *Asiaweek*, 03 July 1998. The full list is available online at <http://www.asiaweek.com/asiaweek/98/0703/nat_3_list.html>.

⁴⁵ 'Daim returns to the Cabinet.' *New Straits Times*, 25 June 1998.

⁴⁶ 'Intelligence.' *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 30 July 1998.

⁴⁷ 'Bank Negara governor and deputy resign, assistant takes charge.' *New Straits Times*, 29 August 1998.

some truth after all.⁴⁸ Apparently seeking to stave off the inevitable, Anwar announced that he would not challenge Mahathir for the UMNO presidency the following year.⁴⁹ Finally, on 2 September, Mahathir told Anwar to resign or be sacked. Anwar refused to resign; Mahathir sacked him.

The changes in the political opportunity structure that gave rise to the reformasi movement were thus remarkably similar to those that led to the 1987 UMNO split and the emergence of the *Semangat* opposition fronts. Indeed, some of the smaller details are tellingly similar; shortly before the 1987 UMNO assembly, a book appeared denigrating Musa Hitam in a way remarkably similar to the '50 Reasons'. Whatever the similarities in the origins of the splits, however, they differed greatly in trajectory. Razaleigh's challenge was played out on a number of stages, but all of the within the normal institutional bounds of Malaysian politics – first in the UMNO general assembly, then in the courts, and finally in a general election. In contrast, the Anwar challenge exploded into a mass social movement that appeared for a long time to be contesting the very parameters of the political in Malaysia.

CYCLES OF CONTENTION: THE *REFORMASI* DEMONSTRATIONS

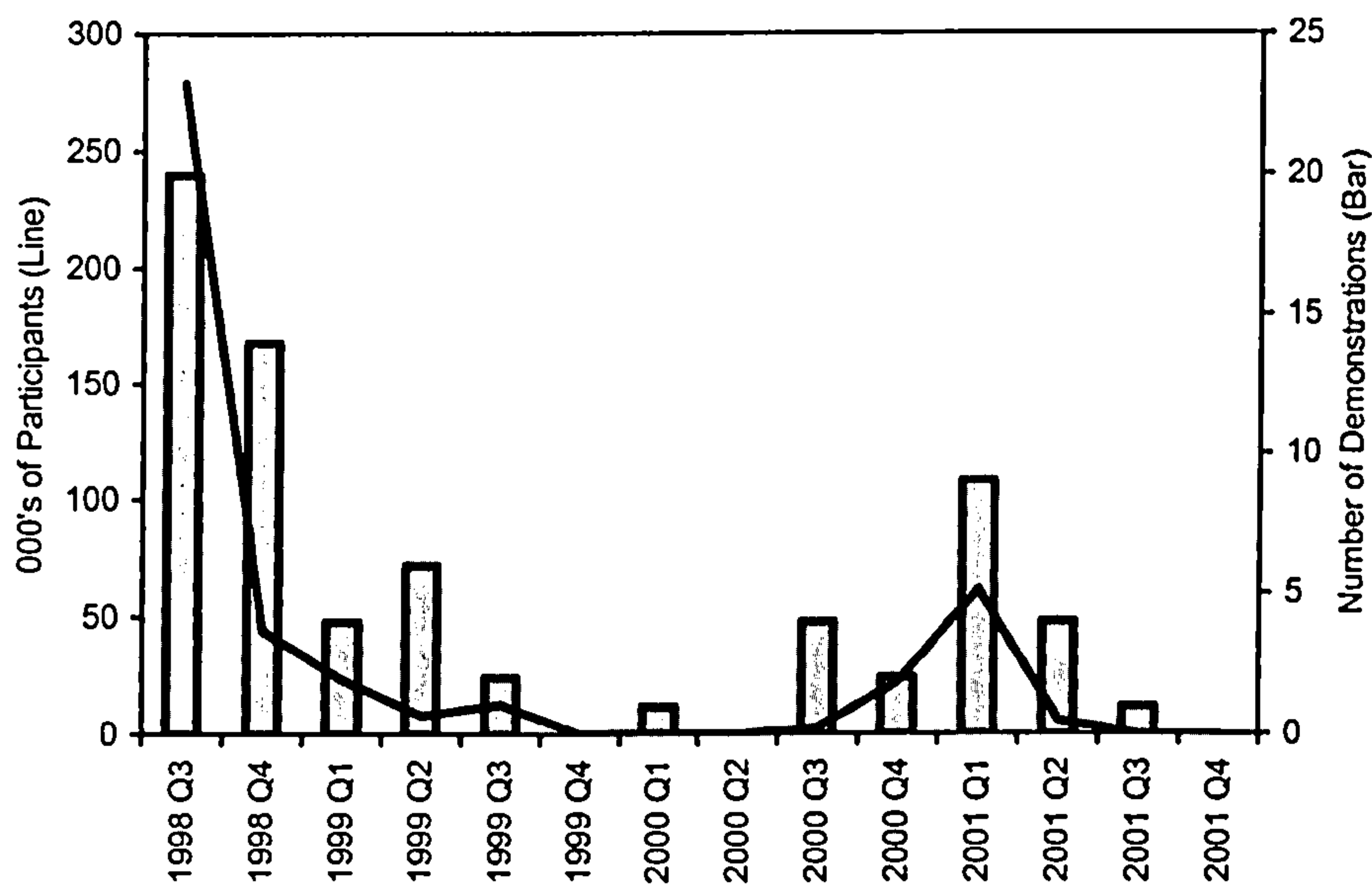
The reformasi movement saw two distinct periods of collective protest against the BN regime (see figure 8.1) consistent with the changing dynamics of the movement. The first wave of protest was sparked by Anwar's sacking in September 1998 and saw heightened protest activity until the end of 1998, with intermittent protests continuing into 1999. Sporadic demonstrations continued

⁴⁸ 'Decision on book after study of police findings.' *New Straits Times*, 7 August 1998.

⁴⁹ 'Wide support for Anwar's decision not to contest UMNO poll.' *New Straits Times*, 13 August 1998.

throughout 1999 and 2000, but these protests lacked any real sense of purpose or coherence. The second wave of more integrated protests picked up in August 2000, after Anwar’s second conviction, and continued with increasing intensity, until abruptly brought to a halt by a crackdown in April 2001.

Figure 8.1: Reported reformasi protest participation and incidence by quarter, 1998 Q2 – 2001 Q4



The initial explosion of reformasi in September 1998 saw an outpouring of anti-government protestors onto the streets, such as had never been seen in Malaysia before, with total participation in the hundreds of thousands. Witnesses and participants in these protests report an almost identical profile: that at every protest, the crowds were overwhelmingly young Malay men, but that sizeable numbers of men and women of all ages from all races were present.⁵⁰

⁵⁰Participant interviews and observation during fieldwork. For an eye-witness account of the demonstrations, see Sabri Zain, *Face Off: A reformasi diary, 1998-99*, Singapore, Options, 2000. One noticeable exception was a small rally at the royal palace, where most of the demonstrators were women of all races, a fact that drew considerable ire from the regime, which accused opposition groups of manipulation. Government controlled newspapers

During the first week after his dismissal, Anwar addressed rallies every evening outside his house in a Kuala Lumpur suburb. Initially attracting around a thousand participants, the numbers soon swelled to ten thousand or more.⁵¹ After several delays, Anwar then launched a 'roadshow' to press his demands for reformasi, speaking at rallies around the country, which were attended by tens of thousands of supporters each time. He also led a number of rallies in central Kuala Lumpur, culminating in a huge demonstration in front of the world media at the opening ceremony of the 1998 Commonwealth Games. The same evening, he was arrested in a commando-style raid on his house.

After the arrest, weekly demonstrations by thousands of protestors continued throughout the next two months, finally dying out towards the end of November. Mostly concentrated in Kuala Lumpur, a few smaller demonstrations occurred in other areas, notably in Johor Bahru and Kuantan.⁵² The large demonstrations evolved into a weekly pattern, taking place on Saturdays along Jalan Tunku Abdul Rahman, Kuala Lumpur's main shopping thoroughfare. As Anwar's trial progressed, the weekly demonstrations dropped off, but sporadic demonstrations took place outside the courthouse. Anwar's first conviction in April 1999 set off four days of violent protests, which marked the end of this first wave of protest.

During the latter half of 2000, reformasi-related protest activity picked up considerably, peaking in the first quarter of 2001, before dropping off abruptly

subsequently alleged that the women were prostitutes hired by NGOs. See 'NGOs "hired prostitutes to join rally".' *Straits Times*, 14 October 1998.

⁵¹ '10,000 turn up at Anwar residence as reform movement gathers steam.' *Business Times* (Singapore), 9 September 1998.

⁵² 'Johor mosques told to report rallies.' *Straits Times*, 30 September 1998.

in April. This second wave of reformasi demonstrations was significantly different from the original demonstrations in that the rallies were more organised and spread around the country. The profile of the demonstrations remained the same, however – overwhelmingly young Malay men. The reformasi protests were reignited in August 2000 with Anwar's second conviction, this time on charges of 'unnatural sexual intercourse' (sodomy). The trial had ended in July 2000, and 4 August was set as the date when the judgment would be passed. *Reformasi* activists planned a mass rally, which fizzled out to a few hundred demonstrators after the verdict date was abruptly changed.⁵³ The release of the less than surprising – and less than convincing – guilty verdict a few days later provoked four days of demonstrations, first outside the High Court in Kuala Lumpur, and then at Sungai Buloh, just outside Kuala Lumpur, where Anwar was imprisoned.⁵⁴

After the BA's surprise victory in the Lunas by-election in November 2000, a decision was made by the KEADILAN leadership to maintain the increased pressure on the regime through the remobilisation of protest demonstrations.⁵⁵ This decision was not unanimously supported, however. Some important figures within KEADILAN – notably its deputy president Chandra Muzaffar – had publicly expressed reservations about both the acceptability of street protests as a means of political change. He also questioned their efficacy, pointing to the fact that the BA had performed best in areas where there were few street protests in 1998, and had been disappointed with its performance in Kuala Lumpur, the

⁵³ 'Seven held for illegal gathering.' *New Straits Times*, 5 August 2000.

⁵⁴ 'Eight held.' *Daily Express*, 9 August 2000; 'Third day of Anwar protests.' *BBC Interactive*, 13 August 2000; 'Peaceful gathering at Sungai Buloh.' *New Straits Times*, 14 August 2000.

⁵⁵ Interviews, Raja Petra & Chandra.

heart of the protests.⁵⁶ Nik Aziz, PAS' influential *mursyidul 'am* (spiritual advisor) and chief minister of Kelantan, has also been on record as disapproving of demonstrations.⁵⁷ It was thus decided that the resurrection of the protest campaign would be held under the auspices of Keadilan Youth – a tactic similar to that employed by UMNO, which uses its youth branch to pursue its more aggressive agenda. This had the dual advantage of distancing the Keadilan leadership from the campaign, whilst simultaneously bringing it closer to the potential participants who, as we have seen, were overwhelmingly young Malays.

From November 2000 until April 2001, a series of mass *ceramah* and demonstrations was organised by the youth wing of Keadilan, led by its president, Mohamad Ezam Mohamad Nor, Anwar's former political secretary and increasingly the *de facto* leader of the 'protest wing' of the reformasi movement, as opposed to its political manifestation in Keadilan. In March, the protest campaign was given the theme *Gerakan menyelamatkan wang rakyat* ('Campaign to safeguard the people's money'), and sought to build upon concern over a series of dubious business deals involving the government. It was to culminate with a mass 'Black 14' rally on the second anniversary of Anwar's conviction for corruption on April 14.

In contrast to the initial explosion of reformasi protests, this second wave was well organised and designed to exert maximum pressure on the regime. The frontline of the new phase was the northern Malay-dominated state of Kedah – Mahathir's own state, and site of the Lunas by-election. The BA had made

⁵⁶ Interview, Chandra.

⁵⁷ 'Parti Islam comes out against street protests.' *Straits Times*, 14 April 2001.

significant electoral inroads in Kedah in the 1999 general election – it had won eight out of the fifteen federal seats in the state, although the BN had retained control of the state assembly. The Lunas by-election had reinvigorated the idea that the BA could take Kedah at the next election, and the reformasi protests clearly sought to build on this.

Whilst the protests replicated the earlier phase in that they were dominated by Malays, the organisers continued to present a multiethnic agenda, particularly in its focus on the government's financial dealings. In December 2000, the government had renationalised Malaysian Airline Systems, the ailing national airline, after having sold a substantial stake to Tajudin Ramli, a close business confidant of Finance Minister Daim Zainuddin, in 1997. In buying back Tajudin's stake, however, the government paid well over double the market value of the shares, provoking claims of a bailout. In February 2001, further concern was raised by the market floatation of Time dotCom, part of the sprawling and debt-laden business empire of Halim Saad, another Daim associate. Market analysts had viewed the offer price for the shares as vastly overrated, and the offering was seventy-five per cent undersubscribed. The unsold shares were bought up by public pension funds and other government institutions, which had underwritten the flotation. On the first day of trading, the shares lost almost a third of their value, registering an overnight 'paper' loss of some RM300 million by the pension funds.

The decision to emphasise financial matters in the protest campaign was clearly aimed at attracting the support of the Chinese, who are traditionally viewed as more money-minded than the Malays and Indians. Within the BA, it was the

Chinese-based DAP that had been most active in publicising and criticising the dubious financial dealings of the government. This period also saw a number of other Chinese issues emerge (see below), which led to hopes that the Chinese would become more involved in the reformasi movement.⁵⁸

International developments also spurred the resurgence of reformasi. In January, massive demonstrations in Manila forced the ouster of Philippine president Joseph Estrada after his Senate impeachment on charges of corruption collapsed along partisan lines.⁵⁹ Reformasi leaders denied that the decision to focus on financial corruption was influenced by events in the Philippines and indeed some within the movement perceived Estrada's fall as the loss of a potential ally, given his outspoken support for Anwar when he was first jailed.⁶⁰ Despite this, however, it was clear that the 'People Power II' revolution had added to the general sense of renewed expectation among reformasi activists.⁶¹

As the planned 'Black 14' demonstration to mark the second anniversary of Anwar's first conviction approached, however, the atmosphere darkened. An ethnic riot which broke out in an impoverished area on the outskirts of Kuala Lumpur heightened tensions and the government was quick to draw a parallel between this and the opposition demonstrations. After a Malay newspaper reported that Ezam had stated that Keadilan Youth would hold daily

⁵⁸ Interview, Lim Kit Siang, DAP National Chairman, George Town, November 2001.

⁵⁹ 'After the Gloria Euphoria.' *Asiaweek*, 2 February 2001.

⁶⁰ Interview, Raja Petra.

⁶¹ Interviews with reformasi demonstrators, April 2001.

demonstrations to bring down the government, he was charged with sedition.⁶² Just days before the 'Black 14' demonstration, ten of the principle organisers – including Ezam – were detained without trial under the ISA. This brought an abrupt halt to the second wave of mobilisation. The 'Black 14' demonstration went ahead as planned, but far fewer took part than expected, probably due to government warnings of severe action taken to be taken against demonstrators, warnings made credible by the ISA detentions.⁶³

The similarities and differences between these two cycles of contention in the reformasi movement are important as they point us to the emerging dynamics of the movement. During both waves of protest, organisers and key individuals sought to articulate multiethnic and nonethnic themes, but the protests remained dominated by Malays. The greater organisation and more precise message of the latter demonstrations were reflective of its integration as a political project under the multiethnic *Barisan Alternatif*, but it was also clear that popular mobilisation of reformasi remained overwhelmingly Malay. To understand this divergent trajectory, we need to turn to the mobilising structures which shaped the emerging movement and its political counterpart.

MOBILISING STRUCTURES

Theorists of social movements have highlighted the extent to which mobilising structures are integral in determining the emergence and spread of a protest movement. McAdam, McCarthy and Zald define mobilising structures as 'collective vehicles, informal as well as formal, through which people mobilize

⁶² 'Ezam charged with uttering seditious words.' *New Straits Times*, 14 March 2001. The arrest provoked widespread derision because the only evidence – the newspaper report – was hearsay.

⁶³ 'Thousands of Anwar supporters defy police ban to stage protest.' AFP, 14 April 2001.

and engage in collective action'.⁶⁴ In the case of reformasi, the movement emerged in the context of a number of mobilising structures, which drew the movement in contradictory directions. On the one hand, the deep involvement of civil society groups in the movement helped foster a multiethnic dimension to reformasi. On the other hand, the extensive use of an 'Islamic infrastructure' tied the movement closely to a more Malay-based agenda.

Multiethnic Structures: Civil Society Coalitions

In addition to provoking the worst civil unrest since the riot of 1969, the Anwar crisis also encouraged a period of coalition building within civil society such as had not been seen since the opposition to legislative changes in the 1980s discussed in chapter three. Immediately after Anwar's dismissal, individuals and groups from across political, social and ethnic divides began expressing concern at his treatment, and the potential instability it may have caused. Opposition leader Lim Kit Siang called for an emergency sitting of parliament to discuss Anwar's accusations of corruption and conspiracy in the government.⁶⁵ Human rights organisation SUARAM and the Malaysian Trades Union Congress (MTUC) also expressed concern over the government's

⁶⁴ Doug McAdam, John D. McCarthy and Mayer N. Zald, 'Introduction: Opportunities, mobilizing structures, and framing processes - towards a synthetic, comparative perspective on social movements', in Doug McAdam, John D. McCarthy and Mayer N. Zald (eds.), *Comparative Perspectives on Social Movements: Political opportunities, mobilizing structures and cultural framings*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996, p. 3.

⁶⁵ 'DAP calls for emergency Parliament for a motion of confidence in Mahathir as Prime Minister as the most effective way to address the deepening twin political and economic crises.' DAP media statement, 3 August 1998. Downloaded from <<http://www.malaysia.net/dap/sg1278.htm>>.

actions.⁶⁶ Consistent with the on-going division in the labour movement, however, the Congress of Unions of Employees in the Public and Civil Services (CUEPACS) asked its members to 'stay away from politics'.⁶⁷ Unsurprisingly, one of the most vociferous organisations in supporting Anwar was ABIM, which called his dismissal a 'national disaster'.⁶⁸ Together with three other Muslim organisations, ABIM declared that it would launch a 'reformation movement' to highlight the 'injustices' done to Anwar.⁶⁹ Surprisingly, however, PAS' religious leader Nik Aziz was more cautious, saying that PAS was 'not attracted' to Anwar's reform drive.⁷⁰

Initially, Anwar himself appeared to be keeping his options open – declaring his innocence of all charges and his belief in a conspiracy against him, but also stating that he would not be joining the opposition, and that he 'still believed in UMNO'.⁷¹ At the same time, however, he made a concerted effort to find civil society allies beyond his core Islamic appeal. Within days of his dismissal, he had met with Hindu and Christian organisations, and with representatives of women's groups.⁷² This move bore fruit when a Christian NGO, the Society for Christian Reflection, announced its intention to join ABIM's reform movement.⁷³ He also met with non-Malay opposition party leaders such as Lim Kit Siang and

⁶⁶ 'M'sian NGOs accuse Dr M of disregard for people.' *Business Times* (Singapore), 5 September 1998.

⁶⁷ 'CUEPACS: Stay away from politics.' *New Sunday Times*, 6 September 1998.

⁶⁸ 'Muslim body stands up for Anwar.' *Business Times* (Singapore), 5 September 1998.

⁶⁹ 'Four groups launch 'reformation movement'.' *New Straits Times*, 7 September 1998.

⁷⁰ 'PAS snubs call for reform movement.' *Straits Times*, 7 September 1998.

⁷¹ 'Anwar to go on roadshow.' *New Straits Times*, 8 September 1998.

⁷² 'Campaign to gather public support gathers pace.' *Business Times* (Singapore), 7 September 1998.

⁷³ 'Three NGOs plan to join movement.' *New Straits Times*, 8 September 1998.

Syed Husin Ali, leader of the Malay-based but avowedly secular *Parti Rakyat Malaysia* (PRM – Malaysian People's Party).⁷⁴ Significantly, the 'Permatang Pauh Declaration', with which Anwar launched his reform drive, also contained no mention of Islamic goals, although it was couched in terms of 'the Quranic injunction which urges striving towards betterment'. Instead, it focussed on areas that were obviously of concern to all opposition groups, whether Islamic or secular, calling for social and economic justice, and an end to corruption.⁷⁵

The reformasi movement first found organizational form in a number of often overlapping coalitions across civil society groups and opposition political parties. The most active of these was the *Gerakan Keadilan Rakyat Malaysia* (GERAK – Malaysian People's Justice Movement). GERAK was founded by the three major opposition parties, PAS, DAP and PRM, and a number of civil society organisations, including Anwar's old *alma mater*, ABIM, and JIM (*Jamaah Islah Malaysia* – Malaysian Islamic Reform Society). Predominantly informed by Islamic values, Fadzil Noor, President of PAS, was selected as GERAK's chairman. Despite its obvious relation to the events of Anwar's sacking, GERAK sought to distance itself from claims that it was formed to 'champion' Anwar.⁷⁶ Its stated goal was to 'work together against the erosion of freedom and the rule of law'.⁷⁷ In particular, it made its objectives the repeal of the ISA and the establishment of an independent judiciary in the country. A number of the mass rallies organised around the country were under the auspices of GERAK.

⁷⁴ 'Supporters of ex-DPM continue visiting his house.' *New Straits Times*, 5 September 1998.

⁷⁵ 'The full text of the Permatang Pauh Declaration is available online at a number of websites, including <<http://www.geocities.com/CapitolHill/Congress/3832/frame/Declare.htm>>.

⁷⁶ 'A further sign GERAK is unsure of its directions.' *New Straits Times*, 12 October, 1998.

⁷⁷ 'Opposition parties, NGOs launch GERAK.' *Business Times* (Malaysia), 28 September 1998.

Comprising many of the same organisations, another coalition called the *Gagasan Demokrasi Rakyat* (GAGASAN – People’s Coalition for Democracy) was less Islamic in its outlook than GERAK, and was chaired by Tian Chua, a prominent activist with the human rights organisation SUARAM. The origins of GAGASAN could be traced back to a 1997 NGO dialogue organised by the small opposition party PRM, but the formalisation of the coalition was clearly spurred by the Anwar affair.⁷⁸ In December 1998, a third civil society coalition was formed, the *Pergerakan Keadilan Sosial* (ADIL – Social Justice Movement). More explicitly linked to Anwar, it was headed by his wife, Wan Azizah Wan Ismail, and *Aliran*’s former president, Chandra Muzaffar, who had developed a close intellectual relationship with Anwar during the 1990s. The formation of ADIL was an attempt to reclaim the momentum of the reformasi movement from GERAK, which was increasingly dominated by PAS. ADIL failed to make any significant impact, however, probably because of its redundancy in relation to GERAK. In April 1999, it was thus relaunched as a political party, KEADILAN. KEADILAN subsequently managed to forge a united opposition front, the *Barisan Alternatif*, which included all the major opposition parties and contested the November 1999 general election, after which the remaining coalitions faded away.

The reformasi coalitions were reminiscent of the SGS and the anti-OSA movements in the 1980s in that they were forged across ethnic boundaries and attracted the participation of both NGOs and opposition political parties. Whereas the 1980s coalitions were very much goal-oriented and specific in their agenda, however, the reformasi coalitions were much broader in their scope.

⁷⁸ ‘Alliance building.’ *Asiaweek*, 30 October 1998.

Attention was focused on a few key issues related to the Anwar affair – repeal of the ISA, restoration of the independence of the judiciary and so forth – but they clearly sought fundamental change in the Malaysian political system. Whilst the civil society coalitions themselves were short-lived, they played an important role in fostering and shaping the opposition front. Even after the broad shift in the reformasi trajectory from a societal agenda to a political opposition, civil society groups remained active in the opposition coalition to a far greater extent than in 1990.

Ethnic Structures: The Islamic Infrastructure

As noted previously, one of the principle mechanisms through which the BN regime maintains its hold on power is through its control of the mass media. This monopoly is used to reinforce the regime's hegemonic stance and also hampers any attempt to spread a counterhegemonic challenge, such a reformasi. Such movements must thus find alternative 'infrastructures' to convey their cause and organise their protests. One such infrastructure utilised by the reformasi movement was the Islamic infrastructure.

Whilst Anwar's call for reform was clearly welcomed by a diverse range of civil society organisations, it was also immediately clear that the main mobilising force would come from Anwar's core supporters throughout his career – young, religiously minded Malays. Islam was a strong motivating factor for the thousands-strong crowds that converged on Anwar's residence every night, the vast majority of whom were young Malays. Regular calls of 'Allahu Akhbar' (God is Great) and the prevalence of Islamic dress, such as the *kopiah* headgear, demonstrated that, for these first protestors, the forthcoming struggle was to be a religiously informed one. The government was also well aware of this support

and one of its first responses to the outburst of support for Anwar in the wake of his sacking was to try and keep him out of mosques.⁷⁹

The reformasi movement spread quickly and attracted so much support across the country in part due to its utilisation of a network of organisations and appropriation of an Islamic discourse that can together be termed the Islamic infrastructure. In this respect it mirrored the success of a number of other social movements that successfully utilised the broad, grassroots based networks of institutionalised religion, from the civil rights campaign in the southern states of the America to the anti-Marcos struggle in the Philippines. Whereas both these movements arose in countries of relative religious homogeneity, however, the multi-religious nature of Malaysian society meant that the Islamic infrastructure presented both opportunities and restrictions for the reformasi activists.

The most obvious manifestation of the Islamic infrastructure in the reformasi movement was the use of mosques as a rallying point for demonstrations. Most of the mass demonstrations in the latter half of September were centred either at the National Mosque or at Kampung Bahru mosque, both in downtown Kuala Lumpur. Anwar himself made frequent use of mosques and other Islamic locations as rallying points during his brief period of freedom between being sacked and being arrested. His first public appearance outside his residence after being sacked was at Friday prayers at the Kampung Baru mosque, in the heart of the Malay area of Kuala Lumpur, where he addressed a crowd of thousands.⁸⁰ The next day, he spoke to a crowd of between ten and sixty

⁷⁹ 'Campaign to gather public support gathers pace.' *Business Times* (Singapore), 7 September 1998.

⁸⁰ 'Anwar speaks at KL mosque.' *Straits Times*, 12 September 1998.

thousand supporters at a rally in the rural state of Kedah. The rally was organised by an Islamic organisation, the Kedah Ulama Association, and was held at a *pondok* – a traditional Islamic school.⁸¹ Finally, on the day of his arrest, Anwar led a mass march through the streets of Kuala Lumpur, which had started at the National Mosque.⁸²

The decision to emphasise the multiethnic aspirations of reformasi saw a drop in the use of mosques as demonstration points from October 1998 onwards. Instead, Merdeka Square and Jalan Tunku Abdul Rahman became the centre of the Kuala Lumpur demonstrations.⁸³ Nonetheless, mosques across the country remained a centre for often spontaneous protests, particularly after prayer times.⁸⁴ In addition, mosques were used throughout the reformasi period to distribute pamphlets and flyers with information on the state of the movement and to organise future demonstrations.⁸⁵ Sermons themselves were also frequently used to spread the reformasi message; many mosque committees had close links with PAS.⁸⁶ In an effort to neutralise political sermonising, a number of bans were imposed, most notably by the Selangor state government, which

⁸¹ 'Anwar roadshow attracts thousands of listeners.' *Business Times* (Singapore), 14 September 1998; 'Reaching critical mass.' *Asiaweek*, 25 September 1998. The *Business Times* and other newspapers placed the crowd at ten thousand, based on reports from *Bernama*, the Malaysian state news agency. *Asiaweek* placed the figure at 60,000.

⁸² 'Crackdown.' *Asiaweek*, 2 October 1998.

⁸³ E.g. '5,000 defy ban on assemblies.' *Straits Times*, 11 October 1998; '3,000 defy cops to protest on KL streets.' *Straits Times*, 18 October 1998.

⁸⁴ See, for instance, 'Pancangan rusuhan tiada sambutan.' *Berita Harian*, 17 April 1999.

⁸⁵ See, e.g., 'Anwar rally organisers warned they can be jailed.' *Straits Times*, 30 July 2000.

⁸⁶ 'Police to keep close watch on mosques.' *Straits Times*, 28 July 2000.

banned PAS leader Nik Aziz from giving *ceramah* in mosques – a ban that he blatantly disregarded.⁸⁷

The extensive grassroots networks of PAS and ABIM were also vital in the spread of reformasi. In rural areas that had little access to relatively independent sources of information such as the Internet, these organisations played a fundamental role in disseminating information about the movement. When KEADILAN emerged as the political manifestation of reformasi, ABIM took on additional importance as many ABIM members signed up to the new political party. Similarly, PAS provided much of the campaigning infrastructure for the *Barisan Alternatif*. The network relationship between PAS and reformasi was in many respects symbiotic; PAS formed the infrastructural backbone of reformasi in the rural areas, but the popular mobilisation of reformasi also allowed PAS to extend its own networks, particularly in the urban west coast – within two months of Anwar's sacking, PAS had already opened fifty new branches in and around Kuala Lumpur.⁸⁸

The Islamic infrastructure thus manifested both positive and negative dimensions for the broad dissemination of reformasi and its message. On the positive side, it offered an extensive and pre-existing network that spread across virtually the entire country, through mosques and through grassroots organisations such as ABIM and PAS. It was also politically relatively safe – any attempt by the regime to crack down on it could be interpreted as an attack on Islam itself, and risk alienating further support. The use of mosques as a safe haven from potential repression was not new in Malaysia – ABIM members had

⁸⁷ 'Nik Aziz chided for disregarding ban on *ceramah*.' *New Straits Times*, 16 October 2000.

⁸⁸ 'PAS Wilayah lancar 50 cawangan baru.' *Harakah*, 30 October 1998.

used mosques to hide from riot police during the student protests in the early 1970s and, in 1986, Muslim protestors against the Christian-dominated state government in Sabah had retreated into the State Mosque, where a three day stand off with the police took place.⁸⁹

The main disadvantage of the Islamic infrastructure was that it was restricted to a Muslim audience, and may even have alienated the many non-Malays who were wary of political Islam. Anwar and his collaborators were clearly cognisant of this fact, and made a conscious effort to try and inject a more multiethnic image, including attempting to inculcate 'reformasi' as the movement's rallying call, rather than 'Allahu Akhbar', which has often been the main rallying call for PAS supporters and other Islamic groups.⁹⁰ Nonetheless, there can be little doubt that the predominance of the Islamic infrastructure within the reformasi movement proved to be a fundamental characteristic of the movement.

Nonethnic Structures: The Internet

In addition to its use of the Islamic infrastructure, the reformasi movement was notable for its use of the Internet as a vehicle for the dissemination and negotiation of reformasi. Initially used simply as a means of bypassing the censorship of the mainstream media, it soon became an integral part of the movement, as chatrooms and forums saw lively debate over the meaning and

⁸⁹ 'Harris and 321 to be charged.' *New Straits Times*, 24 March 1986.

⁹⁰ Interview, Raja Petra.

goals of reformasi. Chandra Muzaffar, KEADILAN's former deputy president, claimed that the Internet proved to be 'vital' for the spread of reformasi.⁹¹

The Internet first made the headlines in Malaysia in 1997, when Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad launched the Multi-Media Super Corridor project (MSC) – a series of business incentives designed to create an Asian 'Silicon Valley' in Malaysia. Rather than viewing the Internet with suspicion, the Mahathir regime embraced it as part of an ICT revolution that would provide the driving force for economic growth, and see Malaysia take its place amongst the industrialised nations, a fundamental goal of Mahathir's developmentalist *Vision 2020*. Yet the rhetoric of this transformation hid a distinct lack of substance. Glib catchphrases such as 'smart partnership' and 'k-economy' abound, but often without any easily discernable or well-defined meaning. As Hilley puts it, 'awareness of IT has been promoted more vigorously than IT awareness'.⁹²

After Anwar's sacking, the Internet became a thorny subject for the Malaysian regime, as it increasingly became associated with the spread of the reformasi movement. Barely two days after Anwar was sacked, the first reformasi website came online, carrying foreign news reports covering the crisis and other relevant information, such as sworn statements by key people involved in the scandal.⁹³ This website was soon joined by a host of others as rumours of ministerial resignations and even allegations that the police had injected Anwar with the HIV virus spread quickly across bulletin boards and other Internet forums.⁹⁴

⁹¹ 'Internet vital for the spread of reformasi: Chandra.' *Malaysiakini*, 23 March 2001.

⁹² Hilley, *Malaysia*, p. 135.

⁹³ 'Supporters take their battle to cyberspace.' *Business Times* (Singapore), 5 September 1998.

⁹⁴ 'Police clamp down on Net rumours.' *Straits Times*, 24 September 1998.

The websites carried a mixture of news, opinions, rumour and simple abuse – one website had an applet computer game in which points were scored by hitting Mahathir with a baseball bat.⁹⁵ During Anwar's trials, some websites carried 'censored' trial information, which the press was barred from making public.⁹⁶

Over time, the myriad of accusatory reformasi websites evolved into a more sophisticated alternative media, most notably with the establishment of sites such as *Malaysiakini* (Malaysia now) and the *Free Anwar Campaign*.⁹⁷ *Malaysiakini* was set up in 1999 a former *Sun* journalists, Steven Gan, as Malaysia's first commercial Internet newspaper. Disillusioned with mainstream media, Gan had originally planned to establish an alternative print media, and it was only the intense Internet activity of the immediate post-Anwar period that persuaded them of the potential benefits of an Internet newspaper. *Malaysiakini* is ostensibly an independent publication, with no political allegiance. As Gan admits, however, it is 'pro-Opposition by default'.⁹⁸ Its limited resources and access – *Malaysiakini* reporters have often been barred from government press conferences – mean that it is often restricted to reporting opposition activities. It is not uncritical in its coverage of the opposition, however, and has garnered the ire of opposition party leaders Lim Kit Siang and Syed Husin Ali.⁹⁹

⁹⁵ *Mahazalim*: <<http://www.mahazalimtwo.net/>>.

⁹⁶ 'Censored trial information emerging on the Internet.' *Straits Times*, 02 March 1999.

⁹⁷ *Malaysiakini*: <<http://www.malaysiakini.com/>>;

Free Anwar Campaign: <<http://www.freeanwar.com/>>.

⁹⁸ Interview, Steve Gan, *Malaysiakini* editor, Bangsar, January 2002.

⁹⁹ 'Uphold integrity, DAP tells *Malaysiakini*,' *New Straits Times*, 23 December 2001.

Malaysiakini thus emerged as the prime source of independent news about the reformasi movement and the political opposition. Moreover, Gan claims that the existence of *Malaysiakini* is forcing the print newspapers into more balanced reportage. This certainly appears to have been the case with the *Sun* newspaper, which gained a reputation for even-handedness, apparently a deliberate editorial decision in response to *Malaysiakini*.¹⁰⁰ After a revamp of its layout and formatting, the *New Straits Times* also adopted *Malaysiakini*'s own motto of 'All the news that matters'. The influence of *Malaysiakini* is such that *Asiaweek* magazine placed *Malaysiakini* and its editor at number eighteen in its 'Power 50' list of influential 'communicators' across all of Asia.¹⁰¹

The regime seems to have been at a loss at how to deal with such reformasi activity on the Internet. In an initial attempt to counter the anti-government rhetoric of Internet forums, for instance, the government set up its own 'Love Malaysia' Internet forum, subsequently expressing dismay when anti-government messages were posted on it.¹⁰² A forty man UMNO 'anti-defamation committee', which was charged with countering anti-government Internet activity, did little more than advertise which opposition sites were most

¹⁰⁰ Interview, *Sun* journalists, July 2001. This mini-*glasnost* came to an end, however, after the *Sun* published an ill-advised Christmas Day front page story about an alleged plot to assassinate Mahathir. Although Mahathir initially laughed off the allegations, the story was picked up by international newswires. Most of the *Sun*'s top editors resigned, and a spree of retrenchments ensued. Eventually, the *Sun* was relaunched as a free newspaper, a shadow of its former self. It appears that the incident may have been used as an excuse to exert political pressure to reign in the independence of the paper.

¹⁰¹ *Asiaweek Power 50*: <<http://www.asiaweek.com/asiaweek/features/power50.2001/toc.html>>

¹⁰² *Borneo Post*, 27 February 1999. The forum was located on the Department of National Unity homepage, <<http://www.kempen.gov.my/>>, and has since been discontinued.

active.¹⁰³ Threats of legal action against webmasters also came to naught, probably because the government realised that even Malaysia's compliant courts would find it hard to make a conviction.¹⁰⁴

The government tacitly admitted launching 'Denial of Service' attacks and other sabotaging measures against anti-government websites, although it also admitted that 'the initial missiles do not seem to follow the enemy but has [*sic*] ricocheted towards us'.¹⁰⁵ Government-controlled newspapers were also used in the counterattack. Editorials portrayed such websites as 'monsters', which 'spewed... hatred and despairing tales'.¹⁰⁶ In logic typical of the *Barisan Nasional* regime, they decried the opposition websites for criticising Mahathir, when 'it is largely thanks to him that they are enjoying the facility [the Internet]'.¹⁰⁷

The Internet itself was restricted in its mobilisational capacity by the limited access in the country. In practice, access to the Internet in Malaysia is overwhelmingly concentrated in urban centres. In 2000, Kuala Lumpur and the surrounding state of Selangor accounted for over half the Internet subscriptions in the country; PAS' rural stronghold of Kelantan had only twelve subscriptions per thousand population compared with over a hundred in the capital.¹⁰⁸ Much

¹⁰³ 'Websites used to attack Government identified.' *New Straits Times*, 8 August 1999.

¹⁰⁴ 'UMNO panel considers legal action.' *New Straits Times*, 28 May 1999.

¹⁰⁵ 'Gov't to launch "upgraded" missiles on dangerous websites' *Malaysiakini*, 5 July 2001.

¹⁰⁶ 'Rumourville on the net.' *New Sunday Times*, 9 November 1999.

¹⁰⁷ 'No-holds-barred game of Malay politics on the Net.' *New Sunday Times*, 23 May 1999.

¹⁰⁸ Government of Malaysia, *Eighth Malaysia Plan 2001 – 2005*, Kuala Lumpur: Government Printers, 2001: 368.

of the material on the Internet found its way to the rural areas, however, through the more tradition media of photocopying and faxing.

FRAMING *REFORMASI*: THE STRUGGLE FOR A MULTIETHNIC FRAME

It was argued in chapter five that the 1980s saw a move towards a more multiethnic civil society in Malaysia, but that ethnicity remained the master frame for mobilising social movements. Thus far, we have seen that a similar dichotomy existed within the reformasi movement itself. Multiethnic influences from civil society ranged against the strongly ethnic mobilising infrastructure of Islam. Throughout the development of the reformasi movement, its leadership sought to reconcile this divergence and create a multiethnic frame for reformasi mobilisation.

The dismissal, detention and trial of Anwar were an important focal point that raised multiethnic concerns. Anwar was widely seen as the victim of a corrupt, personalistic and undemocratic system. Non-Malay sympathy for Anwar was also spurred by the similarity between his predicament and the recently concluded trial and appeal of Lim Guan Eng, which had aroused much concern across all ethnic groups in Malaysia. In August 1998, Guan Eng – an up-and-coming DAP MP who is the son of the party's leader Lim Kit Siang – was found guilty on appeal of publishing false news and sentenced to eighteen months, though acquitted of another charge of sedition. Guan Eng had championed the cause of a Malay girl who had accused four men of statutory rape, including Rahim Thamby Chik, the Melaka chief minister and Mahathir loyalist. The charges against Rahim were dropped by the Attorney-General's office, even though the other three men had been found guilty on essentially the same evidence, and the girl herself was sent to a remand centre. In defending her,

Guan Eng accused the Attorney-General of 'selective prosecution', for which accusation he was himself selectively prosecuted.

Lim Guan Eng's case cut across ethnic boundaries as he was seen by Malays as willing to go to prison to defend one of their own. Anwar's trial sparked similar cross-ethnic sympathies as the issues it raised – police brutality, the independence of the judiciary and the ever-increasing power of the executive – were concerns of all ethnic groups. Capitalising on the similarity of their circumstances, Anwar and Guan Eng exchanged a series of letters from prison, which were widely publicised by the opposition media and on the Internet. The letters emphasised the theme of the struggle for justice transcending 'the Great Divide of race and religion' and, as the reformasi propaganda documents that they clearly were, portrayed Anwar and Guan Eng as twin martyrs to the same cause.¹⁰⁹

Electoral Politics

As we saw above, by early 1999, the initial outburst of reformasi had faded significantly. Reformasi activists were increasingly focussing attention on the forthcoming elections, and it was here that they tried to forge a new multiethnic frame for their cause. The formation of the *Barisan Alternatif* was a remarkably rapid process which contrasted strongly with the tentative formation of the *Semangat* coalitions. In the immediate aftermath of Anwar's dismissal, however, the prospects of a united opposition front were not too rosy. PAS, in particular, had publicly ruled out any electoral cooperation with the other opposition parties.¹¹⁰ The imperative for the BA came from the momentum built

¹⁰⁹ The letters are reproduced on the DAP website: <<http://www.malaysia.net/dap/>>.

¹¹⁰ 'Pas rules out any electoral pact with GERAK members.' *New Straits Times*, 16 October 1998.

up by the reformasi movement, its social mobilisation and civil society networks. By February 1999, both the DAP and PAS had thus declared their willingness to cooperate, although the DAP had made clear its continued rejection of any form of Islamic State.¹¹¹ KEADILAN, the keystone of the BA, was formed in April 1999, barely seven months after Anwar was sacked. By June, the four coalition partners had agreed on a common manifesto.¹¹²

The differences in the process of formation between the *Semangat* front and the BA are instructive. The formation of the BA was almost inevitable, given the colossal social mobilisation of the time. Indeed, Lim Kit Siang admits that the DAP's membership of the coalition was partly a matter of necessity, with the popular momentum of the reformasi movement virtually forcing the DAP into the opposition front. Under such conditions, however, the party leadership saw the BA as the best way to try and influence PAS and to 'nurture' the more moderate elements within the party.¹¹³ Conversely, the formation of the *Semangat* '46-led opposition coalitions was not driven by the over-riding momentum for social change that forged the *Barisan Alternatif*. Rather, it evolved slowly out of the necessary search for political allies.

Although both 'bridging' parties were primarily the result of internal UMNO schisms, the formation of *Semangat* itself was driven by political concerns almost diametrically opposed to those which inspired KEADILAN. *Semangat* was formed as an essentially conservative party, which sought to revive the original

¹¹¹ 'Pas contradicts "no co-operation" stand.' *New Straits Times*, 7 February, 1999; 'Kit Siang: We are willing to work with Pas in polls.' *New Straits Times*, 25 April 1999.

¹¹² 'Opposition in final stage of preparing common manifesto.' *New Straits Times*, 26 June 1999.

¹¹³ Interview, Lim Kit Siang.

‘spirit’ (*semangat*) of UMNO. As Razaleigh himself said of *Semangat*, ‘It is only the vehicle for reviving the old UMNO’.¹¹⁴ This statement contrasts strongly with ADIL’s ‘Statement of Objectives’. In its ‘Declaration of ADIL’, the group declared:

ADIL shall be a vehicle for unifying each and every group that yearns for political, economic and social change and reform in line with the principles of the Malaysian constitution and the laws of the land.¹¹⁵

If *Semangat* was essentially conservative, then, the *Barisan Alternatif* was virtually defined by its civil society links, and it was through this that its multiethnic aspirations were expressed. KEADILAN’s first executive committee was a testament to multiethnic civil society. Its deputy president, Chandra Muzaffar, has undoubtedly been one of the key figures in Malaysian civil society since the 1980s. Tian Chua, the party’s vice president, was a SUARAM activist. Saari Sungib, another ex-co member, was the former president of the *Jema’ah Islah Malaysia* (JIM), a large Islamic movement. In addition, many of KEADILAN’s rank-and-file members were brought in from civil society organisations. Most significant here was the large number of ABIM members who joined KEADILAN.

The close links of KEADILAN – and by default, the BA – with civil society was significant in that it led the coalition to take up a number of causes not directly linked to the reformasi struggle but which filtered through the dense

¹¹⁴ ‘A princely quest.’ *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 27 September, 1990.

¹¹⁵ Declaration of ADIL. Downloaded from <<http://www.members.easyspace.com/reformasi>>, 15 August 1999.

organisational networks into which KEADILAN was tied. Most notable here was their championing of the women's movement, which has otherwise been virtually ignored politically. The BA's common manifesto included a pledge to address all the issues of the Women's Agenda for Change – a social manifesto drawn up by a number of women's organisations. A prominent women's rights activist, Zaitun Kassim, even stood as a BA candidate in the 1999 election. Although nominally under a DAP flag, she campaigned as an independent women's candidate aligned to the BA.

Ironically, considering their involvement in the 1990 election, the sector of civil society that was least involved in the BA was the trade unions and the labour movement. This was not due to the *reformasi* movement being less appealing to the unionists than the *Semangat* opposition, however, but was rather a product of the government's successful neutering of the unions during the 1990s. By the time of the 1995 election, CUEPACS was already standing firmly behind the government again, urging its members to back the government.¹¹⁶ Immediately after Anwar's sacking, CUEPACS asked its members to 'stay away from politics'.¹¹⁷ Later, at the height of the demonstrations, it reiterated its 'undivided support' for the government, and told its members not to take part in demonstrations.¹¹⁸

If CUEPACS position was unsurprising, having always been broadly supportive of the government, the MTUC had effaced a complete turnabout from its staunch support for *Semangat '46* and its coalition partners. It will be remembered that Zainal Rampak, the MTUC president, had been a parliamentary candidate for

¹¹⁶ 'CUEPACS urges its members to back the Government.' *New Straits Times*, 2 July, 1995.

¹¹⁷ 'CUEPACS: Stay away from politics.' *New Sunday Times*, 6 September, 1998.

¹¹⁸ 'CUEPACS: Don't take part in demonstrations.' *New Straits Times*, 2 November, 1998.

Semangat in 1990, before being wooed into UMNO by Anwar himself. Perhaps uncertain of where Zainal's new loyalties lay – with Anwar or with UMNO – the government in December 1998 appointed Zainal as a senator in the parliamentary upper house.¹¹⁹ As the MTUC's support for the opposition in 1990 was a contentious issue for some of its members, so Zainal's tacit support for the government in 1999 displeased other MTUC officials and created a rival faction within the organisation, led by Zainal's erstwhile *confidante*, secretary-general G. Rajasekaran.¹²⁰

Their respective engagements with civil society thus mark significant differences between the *Semangat* front and the *Barisan Alternatif*. The caution with which *Semangat* approached civil society reflected its essentially conservative nature. Inasmuch, it is worth noting that even its relations with the labour movement was associated with the emergence of a number of prominent Malay unionists – such as Zainal and Ahmad Nor – where the movement had previously been Indian dominated.¹²¹ In contrast, the BA's open door policy to all sectors of civil society reflected its ambition of radical change in the political system and the desire among its leaders to create a multiethnic frame for the continuing mobilisation –societal and electoral – of reformasi.

The coalition of political parties and civil society that contested against the regime when the election was finally called in November 1999, then, was an unprecedentedly multiethnic front, including some ethnically-oriented parties and organisations, but espousing and mostly campaigning on nonethnic issues.

¹¹⁹ 'Zainal finally makes it to the Parliament.' *Business Times*, 5 December 1998.

¹²⁰ 'Towards an honourable MUTC.' *Aliran Monthly*, January 2003.

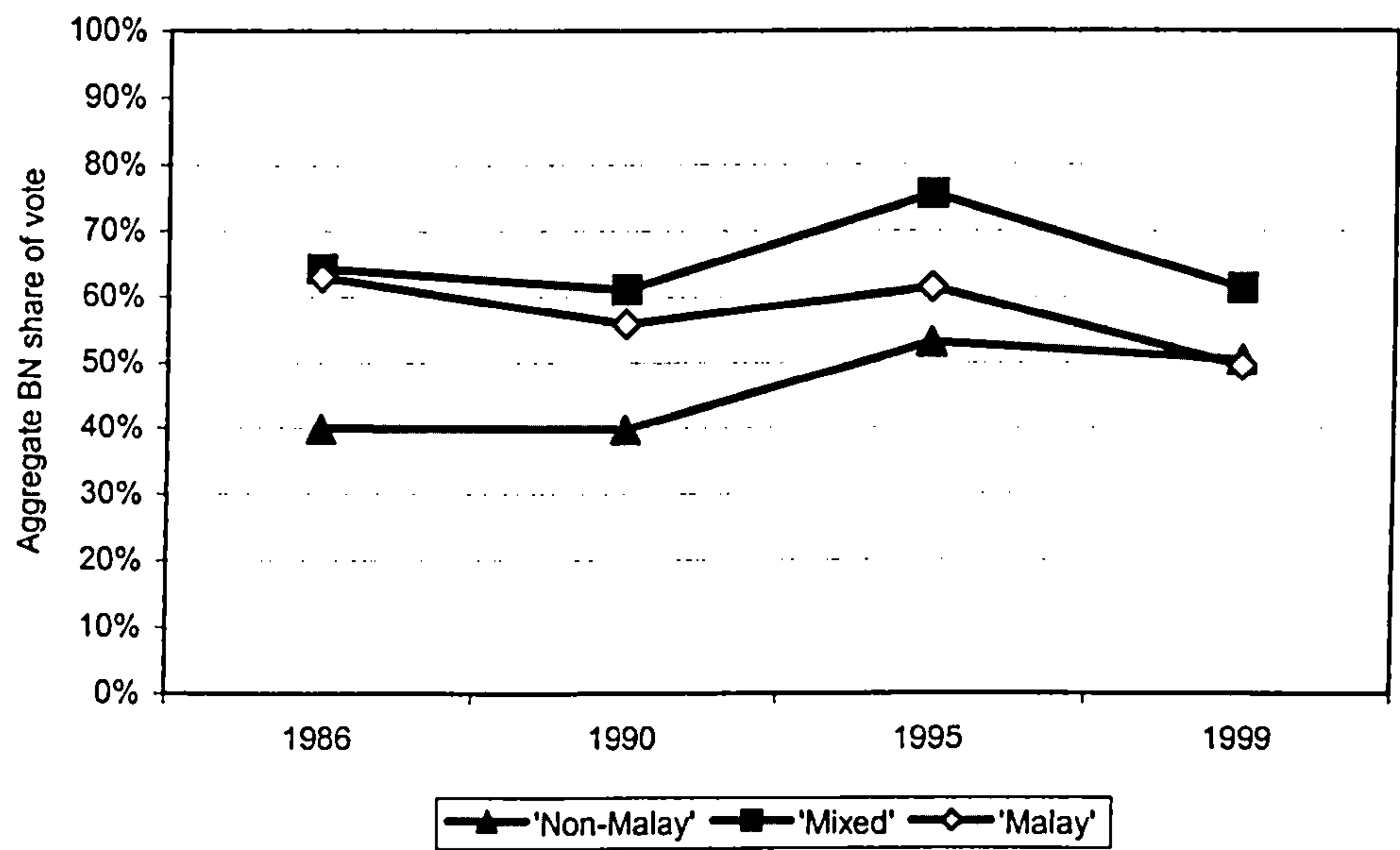
¹²¹ 'Opposition the only pathway to politics for some KL unionists'. *Straits Times*, 8 May 1990.

This was a remarkable feat given the decidedly ethnic infrastructure of the early reformasi movement itself. If civil society had effectively forged a multiethnic political coalition out of the uncertain but ethnically-inclined reformasi movement, however, the limits of this new multiethnicity would be tested, as in 1990, at the election and, as in 1990, would be found wanting by the voting public.

As we saw in chapter six, the 1990 general election has raised expectations with the promise of a broad, albeit somewhat mutually suspicious multiethnic opposition coalition supported, again somewhat suspiciously, by the nonethnic discourse of middle class civil society. These prospects, however, had foundered on electoral mobilisation which fell into the usual ethnic patterns. In 1999, the promise of a new multiethnic politics was even greater, but once again the ethnic structure of the electoral system in Malaysia bedevilled these attempts. Put starkly, the election saw Malay support for the BN erode significantly – further even than in 1990 – and non-Malay, especially Chinese, support strengthen. In the government, UMNO suffered substantial losses, for the first time since independence controlling less than half the BN seats in parliament. Among the opposition parties, PAS more than trebled its parliamentary representation from seven to twenty-seven; it also extended the states under its control to include Terengganu. Keadilan failed to make any significant impact, winning only five seats, although many of its losses were by slim margins. The worst performer was the DAP, which picked up ten seats – only one more than its dismal 1995 performance – with losers including national chairman Lim Kit Siang and his deputy Karpal Singh. Most disturbing for the party was the loss of its core heartlands in the urban Chinese seats; in seats with

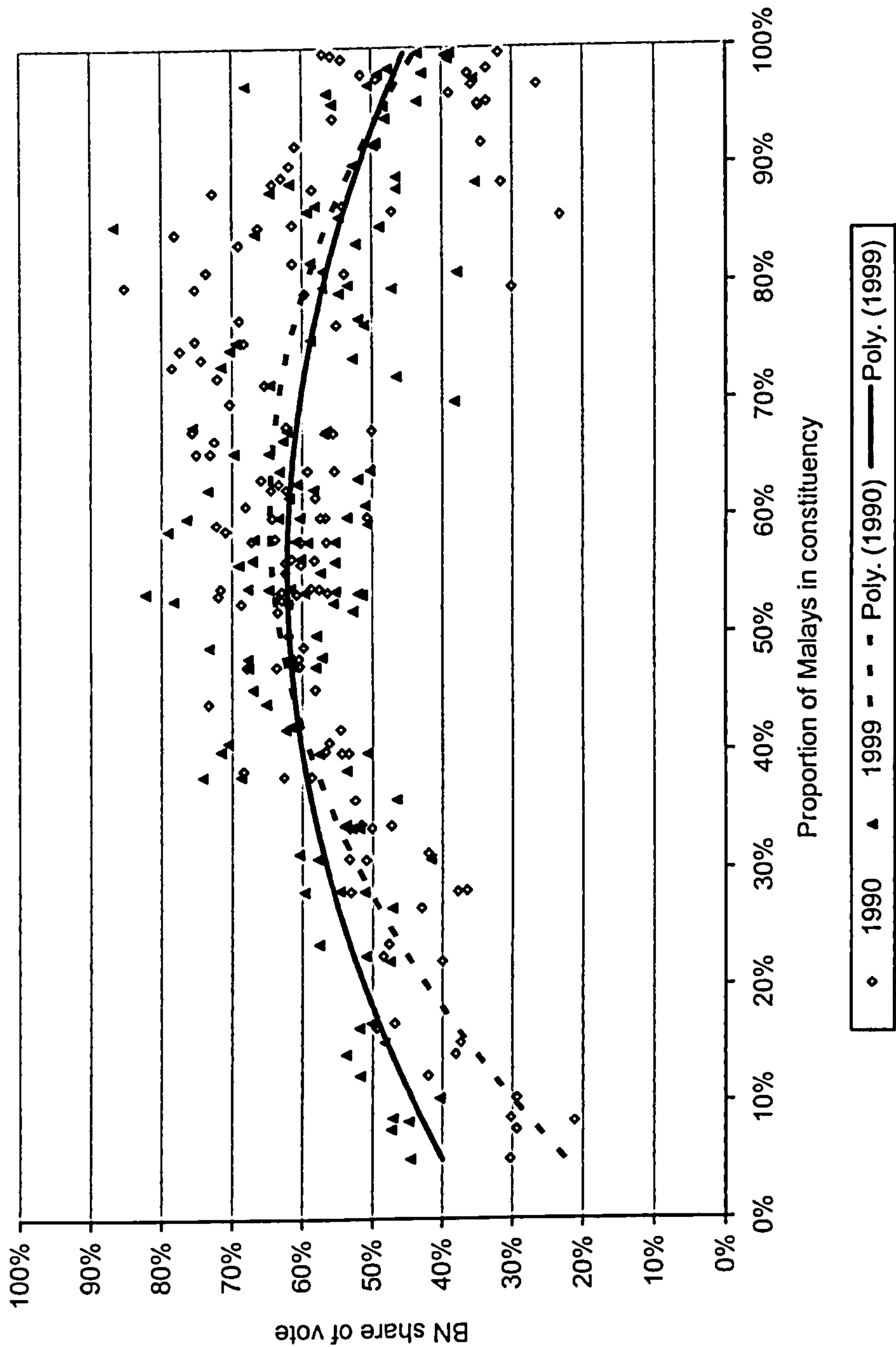
less than one third Malays, the opposition obtained overall a fractionally smaller proportion of the vote in 1999 than in 1995 victory (see figures 8.2 and 8.3). Once again, the 1999 election demonstrated the unwillingness of the electorate to abandon ethnically-determined patterns of voting.

Figure 8.2: BN share of vote by ethnic composition in West Malaysian parliamentary seats, 1986, 1990, 1995 and 1999



Notes: 'Non-Malay' = seats with less than one third Malay voters; 'Mixed' = between one and two thirds Malay; 'Malay' = at least two thirds Malay

Figure 8.3: Proportion of vote won by BN in West Malaysian constituencies by proportion of Malay voters, 1990 and 1999



Re-framing reformasi after the election

The election results were a disappointment for the reformasi activists, but they continued their societal campaign to frame reformasi as a multiethnic movement by incorporating and associating reformasi with a number of non-Malay causes that arose during the period, most notably the Damansara School protests and the Suqiu cause. The Damansara protests revolved around the closure of the Damansara School in the Kuala Lumpur suburbs. In early 2000, the Education Ministry announced that the school, one of the oldest Chinese schools in the country, would be moved to a new location, allegedly following a request from the school governors.¹²² Sceptics noted, however, that the school was situated on an extremely valuable piece of real estate, which the government would be only too pleased to sell for development. As the date for relocation approached, discontented parents began protesting outside the school and at the Education Ministry.¹²³ Whilst the vast majority of the students eventually moved, around seventy refused to do so, and set up a temporary school in a nearby Chinese temple.

The Damansara protests quickly drew the attention of the Chinese community, which has traditionally placed a high value on its vernacular education. The DAP began a signature campaign to save the old school and organised a protest 'walkathon', which saw forty-seven people arrested.¹²⁴ Within the reformasi movement, the Damansara protest was adopted as a something of a symbol of

¹²² 'Chinese school to move to bigger premises.' *Malay Mail*, 21 April 2000.

¹²³ 'Parents protest against school relocation.' *Malay Mail*, 1 January 2001; 'Parents, villagers hold protest at Education Ministry.' *New Straits Times*, 30 January 2001.

¹²⁴ 'DAP starts "Save our school" signature campaign.' *New Sunday Times*, 18 February 2001; '47 held for taking part in protest march.' *New Straits Times*, 19 February 2001.

the multiethnic concerns of the movement. At a PAS ceramah in Kedah, some two thousand Malays were claimed to have signed the DAP's petition.¹²⁵

Chinese support for the reformasi movement was also belatedly encouraged by the government's post-election response to the Suqiu appeal. The Malaysian Chinese Associations' Election Appeals (universally known as Suqiu, from its Chinese form) was an eighty-two point petition drawn up by eleven Chinese organisations, including the influential Selangor Chinese Assembly Hall and the *Dongjiaozong* educationalist movement, as demands for the coming general election. The petition was subsequently endorsed by over two thousand Chinese associations. The government originally responded relatively positively, with the three main Chinese-based parties in the BN – the MCA, GERAKAN and the Sarawak United People's Party – all declaring their acceptance of the petition.¹²⁶ The MCA also proposed that representatives from the organisations be appointed to the Second National Economic Consultative Council.¹²⁷ On its part, the *Barisan Alternatif* also endorsed the petition, and included parts of it in its manifesto.¹²⁸

The government's apparent willingness to accommodate and negotiate with the Suqiu petition dissipated quickly once the election was over. In August 2000, the ever-belligerent UMNO Youth presented a 'protest memorandum' to the Selangor Chinese Assembly Hall over Suqiu's alleged questioning of Malay

¹²⁵'MCA Ministers should emulate the example of PAS and the 2,000 Malays in Kubang Pasu...' DAP media statement, 27 February 2001.

¹²⁶'Three BN components accept Hua Tuan appeal.' *New Straits Times*, 24 September 1999.

¹²⁷'NECC II will have some reps from Chinese associations.' *New Straits Times*, 30 September 1999.

¹²⁸'Opposition endorses 17-point Election Appeal.' *New Straits Times*, 20 October 1999.

‘special rights’, and subsequently made a related police report.¹²⁹ The MCA also sought to distance itself from Suqiu, claiming that it did not represent the Chinese community as a whole; prior to the election, MCA president Ling Leong Sik had stated that the appeal represented ninety-nine percent of Chinese voters.¹³⁰ The real controversy was sparked when Mahathir used his National Day speech at the end of August to attack Suqiu, comparing it to communists and Islamic extremists.¹³¹ A pro-government Malay students’ organisation responded by releasing its own highly chauvinist set of demands, stating that it would not retract them until Suqiu did likewise, and threatening to hold a mass demonstration to back its challenge.¹³² As ethnic tensions rose, the situation became increasingly reminiscent of the 1987 education controversy that had led to the Operation Lalang crackdown – a perception reinforced when Mahathir made direct reference to the 1987 crackdown, warning that, although there were no plans for ‘another Ops Lalang’, the government would take action ‘if people no longer respect law and order’.¹³³ With increasing pressure on Suqiu, the committee finally agreed to drop seven of its most contentious demands.¹³⁴

In fact, the majority of the Suqiu petition was relatively non-ethnic, calling for the same kind of reforms that permeated the reformasi movement – the

¹²⁹‘UMNO Youth delivers protest note.’ *New Straits Times*, 19 August 2000; ‘Police report lodged.’ *New Sunday Times*, 20 August 2000. It was alleged that, on handing over the protest, UMNO Youth had threatened to burn down the Selangor Chinese Assembly Hall, which housed the Suqiu committee, should the petition not be withdrawn.

¹³⁰‘Views don’t represent all of Chinese community.’ *New Sunday Times*, 20 August 2000; ‘Three BN components accept Hua Tuan appeal.’ *New Straits Times*, 24 September 1999.

¹³¹ ‘PM: Don’t play with fire.’ *New Straits Times*, 31 August 2000.

¹³² ‘Make PM post a Malay right, says GPMS.’ *New Straits Times*, 15 December 2000.

¹³³ ‘No plans for Ops Lalang.’ *New Straits Times*, 16 December 2000.

¹³⁴ ‘Hail wisdom and maturity.’ *New Straits Times*, 6 January 2001.

eradication of corruption, the restoration of faith in the police force, and so forth. Demands that did touch on ethnic issues – such an increase in Chinese and Tamil schools and the improvement of Chinese New Villages – were not expressed in any way that could reasonably be understood as challenging Malay special rights.¹³⁵ Instead, it seems clear that the issue was deliberately manipulated by the government in an attempt to ‘play the race card’. Reinforcing ethnic tensions – and the associated portrayal of the opposition parties as extremist and the BN as the defender of national unity – has frequently been a successful strategy employed by the BN regime when its popularity is threatened. With Malay support for UMNO haemorrhaging, attacking the Suqiu petition may have seemed the perfect way to restore UMNO’s image as protector of the Malays. The suggestion that the issue was consciously manipulated is supported by the fact that the UMNO Youth president had public stated that the BN accepted that Suqiu was not questioning Malay special rights less than a week before Mahathir’s inflammatory speech.¹³⁶

Instead of recapturing Malay support for the government, however, the controversy backfired spectacularly, giving the reformasi movement an opportunity to reaffirm its multiethnic claims while the Chinese parties in the BN squirmed at Mahathir and UMNO Youth’s belligerence. At the height of the controversy, Keadilan gave its unconditional support to Suqiu, stating that Anwar was ‘proud’ of the petition.¹³⁷ Even PAS openly declared its support for

¹³⁵ Suqiu website: <http://www.suqiu.org/>.

¹³⁶ ‘BN Youth accepts Suqiu’s explanation that it did not question rights.’ *New Straits Times*, 25 August 2000.

¹³⁷ ‘Suqiu demands tally with reformation aims: Wan Azizah.’ *Malaysiakini*, 20 December 2000.

Suqiu, describing the petition as ‘agreeable’.¹³⁸ Opposition campaigners also credited the backlash against Mahathir’s comments with their surprise win in the Lunas by-election in November 2000.¹³⁹ This view was even supported by Shahrir Abdul Samad, an UMNO supreme council member, who upbraided Mahathir for being the sole cause of the BN’s loss.¹⁴⁰

Whilst the emergence of these Chinese protests and their incorporation into the reformasi movement appeared to indicate the beginnings of a more multiethnic frame for reformasi mobilisation, however, tensions were rising between the ethnic components of the *Barisan Alternatif* coalition. This will be dealt with in more detail in the next chapter. Suffice it here to note that the principle contention was between PAS and the DAP, in particular over PAS’ refusal to disavow its long term objective of setting up an Islamic State, and its proposals to implement *hudud* law in Terengganu. In the early months of 2001, then, the multiethnic political front of reformasi appeared to be breaking up just as its previously Malay-dominated societal mobilisation was showing signs of broadening support. The broadening of societal base of reformasi mobilisation was brought to an abrupt halt, however, with the April 2001 crackdown.

POLITICAL OPPORTUNITY II: *REFORMASI* AND REPRESSION

In 1987, the Malaysian government had effectively stifled societal dissent in the face of an elite crisis through the mass detention of civil society and political activists and the withdrawal of publishing permits for critical newspapers and magazines – the notorious Operation Lalang. At the time, this had been enough

¹³⁸ ‘PAS defends Chinese group’s memorandum.’ *The Star*, 21 December 2000.

¹³⁹ Interview, Raja Petra.

¹⁴⁰ ‘Mahathir’s Dilemma.’ *Asiaweek*, 26 January 2001.

to halt the upsurge in protest activity that many feared would destabilise the country. In September 1998, however, the regime was faced with a slightly different situation. Virtually as soon as the crisis erupted (with Anwar's dismissal), protests broke out on the streets, and the government was thus faced with handling a mass protest movement, rather than attempting to stifle its emergence.

Government repression against reformasi came in three distinct phases, geared respectively against the first wave of protest, the *Barisan Alternatif* opposition and the second wave of protest. Repressive measures against the initial wave of protest grew incrementally. The first week of rallies outside Anwar's residence was allowed to proceed with no police intervention, and Mahathir publicly announced they would be tolerated.¹⁴¹ The police presence also was minimal at Anwar's first mosque demonstration in the capital, despite a ban imposed on such gatherings.¹⁴² It was only when Anwar started his series of rallies around the country that the government moved to prevent his gatherings. At first, the government took measures to try to hamper the demonstrations, rather than to break it them up by force – at one rally in Malacca the planned venue was locked up and all electricity cut off, leaving the area in complete darkness.¹⁴³ The next day, police 'politely requested' that Anwar cancel the nightly demonstrations at his residence.¹⁴⁴

¹⁴¹'Anwar rallies can go on, says Mahathir.' *Straits Times*, 11 September 1998.

¹⁴²'Anwar speaks at KL mosque.' *Straits Times*, 12 September 1998.

¹⁴³'Lights out at Anwar gathering.' *Straits Times*, 14 September 1998.

¹⁴⁴'Anwar to continue talks despite police advice.' *Malay Mail*, 15 September 1998.

The mass rally in central Kuala Lumpur that precipitated Anwar's arrest marked the final turning point in police restraint after security barricades had simply been swept aside by the protestors.¹⁴⁵ Although the police were generally restrained on that day – possibly due to being ill-prepared for the number of protestors – a group of the demonstrators that broke off from the main march and started towards Mahathir's residence was met with tear gas, before being charged down by riot police.¹⁴⁶ The following day, further protests across Kuala Lumpur were met with none of the restraint of the previous day. Tear gas and water cannons were again deployed, and bloody scuffles erupted between the police and protestors.¹⁴⁷ Such violence continued throughout the first wave of protests. By the end of October, more than 230 people had been arrested and charged with illegal assembly.

In addition to the mass repression of demonstrators, a number of Anwar's key supporters were also arrested under the ISA, including UMNO Youth leader Zahid Hamidi and Ahmad Azam Abdul Rahman, the president of ABIM. Two of the principle organisers of GAGASAN – Saari Sungib and Tian Chua – were also arrested repeatedly.¹⁴⁸ After one protest, Tian Chua was charged with attempted suicide for sitting down in front of a police truck.¹⁴⁹

Allegations of police brutality permeated the crackdown. Anwar's own assault whilst in police custody drew condemnation from around the world, but many

¹⁴⁵'Crackdown.' *Asiaweek*, 2 October 1998.

¹⁴⁶'Tear gas, water cannons, riot police greet Anwar supporters.' *Business Times* (Singapore), 21 September 1998.

¹⁴⁷'KL peace shattered for second day.' *Straits Times*, 22 September 1998.

¹⁴⁸'Bruised and battered.' *Aliran Monthly*, October 1998.

¹⁴⁹'A most ridiculous charge.' *Aliran Monthly*, May 1999.

others appear to have suffered the same or even worse. After his first arrest in September 1998, Tian Chua was allegedly beaten so severely that he was unrecognisable. Anwar's speech writer Munawar Anees and his adopted brother Sukma Darmawan, both of whom confessed to being sodomised by Anwar, later retracted their confessions, claiming they were coerced whilst detained under the ISA. Anees later described his ordeal in detail, claiming not only that he was physical beaten but that he was also subject to psychological torture including being stripped naked and forced to simulate homosexual intercourse.¹⁵⁰ Such brutality was not just reserved for activists and those directly involved with Anwar; members of the public were also at risk. During one court hearing at which 127 people arrested during a demonstration were charged with illegal assembly, over four-fifths of the detainees claimed that they were beaten by the police whilst in custody.¹⁵¹

After its victory in the 1999 general election, the regime pursued a second phase in its repressive crackdown, this time targeting the political opposition more specifically. Karpal Singh, the DAP vice chairman, and Marina Yusoff, KEADILAN vice president, were both arrested and charged with sedition on the same day, as were the editor and publisher of PAS' newspaper, *Harakah*.¹⁵² KEADILAN Youth leader Mohd Ezam Noor was detained under the Official Secrets Act the following day.¹⁵³ Karpal's arrest in particular sparked international concern as it related to words uttered in his capacity as a defence

¹⁵⁰Statutory declaration by Munawar Anees, 7 November 1998: <<http://www.dranees.org/affidavt.htm>>.

¹⁵¹Asian Human Rights Commission Urgent Appeal UA981026 (Malaysia). Available online at <<http://www.ahrchk.net/ua/mainfile.php/1998/48/>>.

¹⁵²'Four to face sedition charges.' *New Straits Times*, 13 January 2000.

¹⁵³'Ezam to face OSA charge.' *New Straits Times*, 14 January 2000.

lawyer during the course of Anwar's trial. International bodies such as the Lawyers Committee for Human Rights expressed concern and claimed that the arrest contravened the United Nations Basic Principles on the Role of Lawyers.¹⁵⁴ After repeated delays in going to trial, the sedition case against Karpal was withdrawn in January 2002, two year after his arrest.¹⁵⁵ Marina's also much-delayed trial ended in a conviction and fine.¹⁵⁶

In addition to arresting key opposition personnel, the regime also clamped down on the media. Four independently-minded magazines had their publishing permits withdrawn or not renewed. *Harakah* was also forced to restrict itself to two editions per month, down from its previous two per week.¹⁵⁷ A statement by the Deputy Home Minister that *Harakah* would also be restricted to updating its website only twice monthly was hurriedly denied and the government restated its non-censorship policy towards the Internet.¹⁵⁸

The trial of many key opposition figures was in fact the intensification of an existing trend towards the regime using the courts to stifle and oppress opposition activists. As already noted, Lim Guan Eng had been imprisoned and disqualified from his parliamentary seat after being found guilty of publishing false news. The prominent women's rights activist Irene Fernandez and the

¹⁵⁴'Arrest of Malaysian on Sedition Charges Violates International Law.' Press statement by Lawyers Committee for Human Rights, 12 January 2000, downloaded from <<http://www.lchr.org/media/anwar100.htm>>, 15 April 2000.

¹⁵⁵'Sedition charge against Karpal Singh withdrawn.' *New Straits Times*, 15 January 2002.

¹⁵⁶'Marina found guilty of sedition, fined RM5,000.' *New Straits Times*, 10 February 2001.

¹⁵⁷'A Y2K crackdown.' *Aliran Monthly*, January 2000.

¹⁵⁸'Kerajaan jamin tidak kawal Internet.' *Berita Melayu*, 5 March 2000. See Jason P. Abbott, 'Democracy@internet.asia? The challenges to the emancipatory potential of the net: Lessons from China and Malaysia', *Third World Quarterly*, 22:1 (2001), pp. 99-114.

critical academic Jomo Kwame Sundaram have also been charged with publishing false news. This trend of using often comparatively minor charges to incapacitate and burden oppositionists – whether or not they are found guilty – appears to have been inspired by the example of Singapore, where a spate of libel charges brought by ministers and the prime minister against opposition leaders resulted in a number of imprisonments, and bankruptcy proceedings against the main opposition leader, J.B. Jeyaretnam and the Workers' Party.

The third wave of repression came in response to the resurgence of reformasi protests after September 2000. Once again, heavy handed police tactics were used to disperse gatherings, including tear gas and water cannons laden with chemical irritants, most notably at the 'Keses Highway demonstration'. As the intensity of the protest wave continued, the government took more pre-emptive action, detaining key reformasi activists without trial in April 2001, a move which brought the protests to a swift halt.

The Keses Highway demonstration took place on 5 November 2000. Organisers had hoped to attract a hundred thousand participants to the gathering, which was to be addressed by all the *Barisan Alternatif* leaders, and was originally planned to be held at Keadilan's headquarters, near the Keses Highway. After police cordoned off all exits from the highway, however, demonstrations broke out in several places along the highway itself, eventually bringing traffic to a standstill.¹⁵⁹ After police were accused of excessive violence in breaking the demonstrations up, the newly constituted Malaysian

¹⁵⁹'122 held in illegal assemblies and clashes with police in Selangor.' *New Straits Times*, 6 November 2000.

Human Rights Commission (SUHAKAM – *Suruhanjaya Hak Asasi Manusia Malaysia*) decided to conduct a full scale inquiry into the events.

SUHAKAM was set up in July 1999 as an attempt to divert some of the allegations of ignoring human rights levelled against the government during the Anwar crisis. A nominally independent statutory body, it comprises individuals nominated by the Prime Minister and is tasked with investigating complaints of human rights abuses from the public. It has few powers other than to submit reports to parliament and visitorial rights to all prisoners in the country. Although initially a welcome move, the composition of commission was viewed as disappointing by most civil society actors, who questioned its independence. The selection of Musa Hitam – the former deputy prime minister who had joined Razaleigh in challenging Mahathir's leadership in 1987 – to lead the commission caused particular concern. Whilst it was in some respects a canny move by Mahathir to appoint a former political enemy to give an appearance of independence to the commission, Musa had long since returned to the UMNO fold. Moreover, as NGO activists were quick to point out, it had been Musa who was responsible for ordering the police into the notorious 'Memali incident', which left scores of PAS supporters dead and injured. Musa's own human rights record was thus seriously compromised.¹⁶⁰

Despite these reservations, however, SUHAKAM responded promptly to the numerous complaints it received after the Kemas demonstration, declaring it would set up an inquiry into the incident. After hearing depositions from forty-six witnesses, including police personnel, demonstrators and expert witnesses,

¹⁶⁰'Disappointing composition.' *Aliran Monthly*, April 2000.

the commission produced its report in August 2001. The report was highly critical of the police, finding that the force used in dispersing the demonstration was 'not reasonably necessary' and that 'excessive force' was used against those arrested.¹⁶¹ It concluded that the strategy of 'total denial and domination' employed by the police had resulted in numerous human rights violations.¹⁶² In responding to the report, Mahathir accused SUHAKAM of 'not acting in the nation's interests'.¹⁶³

Repressive measures were used intermittently throughout the demonstrations in early 2001. A Keadilan gathering in Selangor in January was allowed a permit and proceeded without incident; a *ceramah* held in Mahathir's own constituency a few weeks later was forcibly broken up by riot police.¹⁶⁴ For the most part, smaller demonstrations were tolerated for a short time and then dispersed peacefully by the police.¹⁶⁵

As the April 'Black 14' gathering loomed, however, the regime took decisive action. In the two days preceding the demonstration, police detained a total of seven reformasi activists under the Internal Security Act in what many thought

¹⁶¹Suruhanjaya Hak Asasi Manusia Malaysia, *Inquiry 2/2000: Inquiry on its own motion into the November 5th incident at the Kesas Highway*, August 2001: 42.

¹⁶²*Ibid.*: 63. The phrase 'total denial and domination' was used by one of the senior police officers in charge of dispersing the demonstration, and was subsequently used repeatedly in a critical manner by SUHAKAM in its report.

¹⁶³'SUHAKAM taken to task.' *New Straits Times*, 23 August 2001.

¹⁶⁴'KEADILAN fails to muster 100,000 people.' *New Sunday Times*, 21 January 2001; 'PM should be held responsible for Kubang Pasu crackdown.' *Malaysiakini*, 15 February 2001.

¹⁶⁵'Police stop illegal PAS *ceramah*.' *New Sunday Times*, 25 February 2001; 'Gathering dispersed.' *New Straits Times*, 07 March 2001.

was the start of 'another Operation Lalang'.¹⁶⁶ Another three were arrested the following week. Six of the detainees were from Keadilan, including Tian Chua and five committee members from Keadilan Youth, including its president Mohd Ezam. As was noted earlier, Ezam had also been charged with sedition the previous month over a newspaper interview where he had allegedly stated that he wanted to topple the government through street demonstrations.¹⁶⁷ The other four detainees were also key activists in the reformasi movement.

The immediate justification for the arrests was the detainees' involvement in planning the 'Black 14' gathering.¹⁶⁸ The police alleged that mass riots were planned and that a 'secret cell' in the reformasi movement was arming itself with grenades and explosives and readying to topple the government through violent means.¹⁶⁹ Whilst these charges were ridiculed by the opposition, and the police failed to produce any evidence of violent intent, the detentions brought an abrupt halt to the mobilisation of the previous months.

As was noted in chapter six, the extent of the 1987 crackdown can be explained in part by its role as an information gathering process. The April 2001 crackdown also appears to have been used as an information gathering exercise, albeit on a more restricted level. The detainees had all been involved in organising the string of demonstrations throughout the early months of 2001, but had also been the most effective campaigners in the Lunas by-election. Of the ten detainees, eight attested in affidavits to the High Court that one of the

¹⁶⁶'Seven detained under ISA, says police chief.' *Business Times*, 12 April 2001. 'Keadilan member arrested under ISA.' *New Straits Times*, 27 April 2001.

¹⁶⁷'Ezam charged with uttering seditious words.' *New Straits Times*, 14 March 2001.

¹⁶⁸'Four held under ISA over gathering.' *New Straits Times*, 11 April 2001.

¹⁶⁹'Mass violence planned.' *New Straits Times*, 12 April 2001.

main topics of interrogation during their police detention was the tactics and issues used during the Lunas campaigning. Questions were also asked about the relationships between individuals and organisations, such as PAS and ABIM.¹⁷⁰

The pattern of repression against the reformasi movement once again demonstrates the efficacy of repression in the Malaysian context. Although the government-controlled media played up stories of violence, it seems clear that smaller protests were easily broken up by the police – albeit with the threat of riot equipment such as water cannons. Even at larger protests, repressive measures were met with dispersal rather than confrontation, although protestors often regrouped elsewhere. Nonetheless, there were no accounts of the kind of stone-throwing confrontations between protestors and police – let alone Molotov cocktails or petrol bombs – that were so characteristic of the reformasi movement in Indonesia. If the reformasi protests were comparatively easily broken up, it was the select detention of the ‘reformasi ten’ that unequivocally demonstrated to effectiveness of repression in Malaysia. In 1987, Operation Lalang had stifled social mobilisation with the arrest of over one hundred activists; in April 2001 a similar effect was achieved with the arrest of ten people, only six of whom were detained for an extended period.

CONCLUSIONS

From an empirical perspective, this chapter has demonstrated that the dynamics of the reformasi movement did not represent any radical break from the prevailing structures of Malaysian society. Elite fracture, multiethnic versus ethnic tendencies and the efficacy of repression are all structural variable that

¹⁷⁰Affidavits by the ISA detainees. Available online at <<http://www.hakam.org/>>.

shaped the politics of the 1980s. This is not to say that reformasi had no effects on Malaysian politics and society, but rather that these effects are explicable within its existing parameters. Relating these findings back to our theoretical framework is the task of next and final chapter.

CHAPTER NINE

CONCLUSIONS

Let us recap the journey this thesis has taken. We began with the simple observation that theorists of civil society and social movements rarely interact with each other, despite sharing a broad set of overlapping concerns and methodologies. Through a discussion of existing approaches within each paradigm, a reformulated model of state–societal relations was devised, which emphasised the dualistic nature of both state and civil society, placing cultural-discursive contestation alongside institutional engagement. It was argued that this cultural aspect is of particular importance in the mobilisation of protest under the aegis of social movements, which in themselves create new discursive frames, as well as institutional arrangements. The final theoretical step was to employ the ‘privileged’ relationship between ethnicity and culture to emphasise the potential explanatory benefits of such a model in multiethnic societies.

We then turned our attention to contemporary Malaysia as a case study. After setting the scene with discussions of existing approaches to the study of the Malaysian state and society and of political developments prior to 1980, the empirical content of the thesis comprised a detailed analysis of the development of civil society and the state over the ensuing two decades, focussing on the dual crises at the end of each decade. Before drawing out the broad conclusions from this study, it is necessary – and, in the name of completeness, desirable – to enjoin a brief empirical epilogue and examine the post-election trajectories of the 1990 and 1999 opposition coalitions.

EMPIRICAL EPILOGUE: COLLAPSE OF THE COALITIONS

Both the 1990 Semangat '46-based opposition grouping and the *Barisan Alternatif* were irrecoverably damaged by the withdrawal of the DAP, from the former in January 1995, from the latter in September 2001. Without the DAP, neither coalition could realistically claim to represent Chinese interests and maintain its multiethnic front. Although KEADILAN is a nominally multi-ethnic party, even its leaders privately accept that it is, in effect, a Malay party;¹ Semangat made no real attempt to pretend otherwise. On both occasions, the DAP's withdrawal was prompted by its irreconcilable differences with PAS. Yet internal differences within the two opposition fronts had emerged long before the decisive split.

The GAGASAN coalition of the 1990 election was dealt its first blow when the PBS retracted its decision to join the coalition after the election.² The PBS, it will be remembered, had spectacularly withdrawn from the BN just days before the election, but this decision proved to have been a primarily opportunistic one, and when it became clear post-election that the BN was still the dominant political force, the PBS tried to reconcile itself with the federal government. Initially, the PBS offered to set up a coalition government in the state with its former arch-rival, the United Sabah National Organisation (USNO), a BN component, despite the PBS' own clear majority in the state assembly. After this

¹ Interviews with Raja Petra Kamaruddin, FAC Director, Petaling Jaya, March 2001 & Chandra Muzaffar, KEADILAN Deputy President, Petaling Jaya, March 2001.

² 'PBS unlikely to join GAGASAN.' *New Straits Times*, 29 April 1991.

Conclusions

failed, the PBS instead declared that it would 'work along with the Barisan', although remain in opposition.³

The departure of the never-quite-there PBS was soon overshadowed by cracks within the Islamist APU coalition on the mainland. Almost immediately after the election, divisions emerged between Semangat and PAS over the administration of Kelantan state. The APU had won an absolute victory in the state assembly, with PAS taking twenty-four out of thirty-nine seats. Semangat took fourteen seats, with the smaller APU component BERJASA taking the last seat. Disagreement arose, however, over the distribution of party members to the state's appointed district, municipal and town councils. Having a convincing majority on its own in the state, PAS leaders felt they should take the majority of these appointed seats, whilst Semangat apparently favoured an even distribution between PAS and its APU counterparts.⁴

Beyond such administrative squabbles, Semangat members in Kelantan soon became concerned with PAS' Islamisation drive in the state.⁵ Whilst PAS and Semangat were both Malay Muslim parties, PAS' emphasis on the Muslim side of the equation unnerved many local Semangat members, who – being mostly ex-UMNO – were more inclined towards Malay chauvinism than political Islam *per se*. After the defection of two Kelantan Semangat members back to UMNO, which triggered fresh by-elections in their seats, and a poor performance elsewhere in the country, however, Semangat looked more and more like a poor

³ 'Pairin: We'll work along with the Barisan.' *New Straits Times*, 26 August 1991.

⁴ 'Opposition front's Islamic wing appears at early end.' *New Straits Times*, 14 February 1991.

⁵ 'Spreading the word.' *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 31 January 1991; 'Crossover season.' *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 11 April 1991.

Conclusions

brother to PAS in Kelantan, and its members' discomfort with PAS' Islamisation programme was thus tempered.⁶

The nationalist-Islamic dichotomy between Semangat and PAS was accentuated in 1992 by a proposal by the federal government to withdraw the legal immunity enjoyed by the Malay sultans. PAS expressed support for the move, viewing the immunity as un-Islamic. Semangat, however, viewed the proposal with concern, arguing that it insulted one of the vestiges of Malay supremacy in the country, and paved the way for the potential abolition of the sultans altogether. When the DAP expressed support for the government's proposals, it became clear that Semangat stood alone in its defence of the sultans' immunity.⁷ No doubt the fact that Razaleigh was himself a *tengku* (prince) in the Kelantanese royal family did little to assuage fears that Semangat's position was driven by personal interests rather than political ideals. Nonetheless, there was no small irony in the fact that the issue had driven the DAP and PAS into a joint stand against Semangat, the party that was supposed to provide a bridge between the two. When the proposals were put to parliament in the Constitution (Amendment) Bill 1993, the opposition parties fell into further disarray. The DAP abstained at the first reading, in what was seen as a concession to Semangat, but voted with the government at the second reading. Conversely, PAS deputy president Abdul Hadi Awang made a surprise attack on the

⁶ 'Clouded victory.' *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 5 September 1991.

⁷ "'Razaleigh's views different from those of rakyat".' *New Straits Times*, 19 December 1992.

Conclusions

government for introducing the bill, despite his party's pronounced support for the move.⁸

The issue of the sultans' immunity undoubtedly put a severe strain on relations within both the APU and the GAGASAN. DAP deputy chairman Karpal Singh admitted that the issue had illustrated a 'stark contrast of principles' between his party and Razaleigh's Semangat.⁹ Dr Syed Hussein Ali, president of the PRM, called for the 'shelving' of the GAGASAN, as 'serious differences' between the parties' leaderships had left the coalition impotent.¹⁰ Both the GAGASAN and the APU survived a while longer, however, despite their internal differences over the immunity issue – perhaps not least of which *because* of their impotency. The BN's dominance of the federal parliament meant that even if all the opposition members had voted against the bill, the government still had the requisite two-thirds majority needed to amend the constitution. It thus may have been easier for all the parties concerned to overlook their differences at the national level, where they had limited impact, than for Semangat and PAS to overlook their differences in Kelantan, where actual governance was at stake.

By 1994, however, it was clear that the DAP was feeling increasingly restricted by its association with the GAGASAN and, through Semangat, with PAS. In June 1994, the DAP proposed a 'loosening' of the GAGASAN, whereby component parties would campaign under their own symbol and with separate manifestos.¹¹

Finally, in January 1995, the DAP pulled out of the GAGASAN, though stated that

⁸ 'Opposition parties, in disarray, change their views on amendments.' *New Straits Times*, 9 March 1993.

⁹ 'DAP, S46 differ in principles: Karpal.' *New Straits Times*, 8 February 1993.

¹⁰ 'Hussein: Shelve impotent GAGASAN.' *New Straits Times*, 7 June 1993.

¹¹ 'DAP proposes a "loose" GAGASAN.' *New Straits Times*, 20 June 1994.

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it would retain 'bilateral' ties with the coalition members.¹² The steady stream of Semangat members back into UMNO had undermined Semangat's and, by default, the GAGASAN's credibility as a genuine alternative to the BN.¹³

Ultimately, however, it was the indirect links with PAS tied with concerns over its own popular support that drove DAP out of the coalition. PAS' move to implement *hudud* laws in Kelantan, and its refusal to disassociate itself from the ideal of an Islamic State caused the DAP to fear a loss of Chinese support if it maintained even indirect links with the party. The DAP accused PAS of failing to 'respect the constitutional rights and religious sensitivities of non-Malay Malaysians'.¹⁴ DAP insiders such as the prominent social activist Kua Kia Soong, who had joined the party prior to the 1990 election to express his support for a united opposition, later claimed that the DAP's Central Committee and Secretary General Lim Kit Siang in particular were 'obsessed' with diminishing Chinese support for the party. Kua also claimed that the DAP leadership was unwilling to work with its counterparts in PRM.¹⁵

The final collapse of the Semangat-led opposition coalition came after the BN's phenomenal success in the 1995 general elections, taking over sixty-five percent of the vote, and eight-five per cent of the parliamentary seats. Although the APU maintained control of the Kelantan state assembly, with PAS and Semangat taking twenty-four and twelve seats respectively in the enlarged forty-three seat assembly, Semangat members clearly saw the election result as the end of the road for the party. A revival of PAS-Semangat divisions over the allocation of

¹² 'Razaleigh: DAP pull-out won't affect coalition.' *New Straits Times*, 28 January 1995.

¹³ 'Crossover season.' *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 11 April 1991.

¹⁴ DAP press statement, 5 May 1992. Reproduced in Lim Kit Siang, *Selected Speeches and Press Statements April – May 1992*, Kuala Lumpur: DAP, 1992: pg. 44.

¹⁵ Kua Kia Soong, *Inside the DAP*, Petaling Jaya: PB, 1996.

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state executive posts dealt the coalition the death knell.¹⁶ Semangat pulled out of the APU in July 1996, and the party dissolved itself in October the same year, with Razaleigh and his followers returning to UMNO.¹⁷

As with its pull-out from the GAGASAN, the DAP's withdrawal from the *Barisan Alternatif* in September 2001 was ostensibly caused by its failure to come to an understanding with PAS over the latter's advocacy of an Islamic State. Yet the party's position within the BA had long since appeared untenable. This was not because of its differences with PAS, but rather a number of disputes with KEADILAN similar to those which plagued PAS and Semangat in the APU administration in Kelantan.

Even before the November 1999 general election, the long-term viability of the BA was looking tenuous, with the DAP admitting that it was taking a 'very great risk' in joining the coalition; many activists within the party admitted that even at the height of the *reformasi* mobilisation, they were concerned that any association with PAS would spell electoral disaster, as it was perceived to have done in 1990.¹⁸ The BA's joint election manifesto, 'Towards a Just Malaysia', had carefully avoided any reference to an Islamic State, and focussed instead on areas of common agreement, such as freedom of speech and independence of the judiciary. In the run-up to the election, however, a number of PAS leaders – most notably its 'Spiritual Advisor' Nik Abdul Aziz Nik Mat and deputy president Haji Hadi Awang – reaffirmed PAS' commitment to the concept,

¹⁶ 'Kelantan rift.' *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 1 August 1996.

¹⁷ 'Beyond reach.' *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 16 January 1997.

¹⁸ 'DAP taking great risk: Lim.' *Business Times*, 15 November 1999; Interviews with DAP activists, April-November 2001.

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drawing strong criticism from DAP and KEADILAN leaders alike.¹⁹ Some DAP leaders were subsequently explicit in blaming the party's poor performance in the general election on its collaboration with PAS.²⁰ Divisions between the DAP and KEADILAN in the East Malaysian state of Sarawak, which were to play a large part in the DAP's decision to leave the coalition, were also evident before the election, with a high profile squabble over seat allocation. Mistrust between the two parties in Sarawak had deeper roots, however, as many within the DAP were resentful of the 'pinching' of some of its leaders by KEADILAN.²¹

From the time of its formation, then, the BA was at best an uneasy truce between PAS and the DAP. If few commentators would have doubted that a rocky road lay ahead for PAS and the DAP, however, what was less expected was the continuing rift that emerged between the DAP and KEADILAN. After the initial wrangling over seats for the 1999 election, the first serious division between the DAP and KEADILAN arose around the selection of a candidate to fight a by-election called in the Kedah state assembly constituency of Lunas in November 2000 after the murder of its popular BN representative, Joe Fernandez. The seat was of strategic importance, in that an opposition victory would have denied the BN its two-thirds majority in the state assembly. It was also, however, one of the safest BN seats in the country, and with the regime's fearsome electoral machinery gearing up there seemed little chance of an opposition victory.

¹⁹ 'Trouble brewing in opposition front.' *New Straits Times*, 28 November 1999.

²⁰ 'DAP blames defeat on alliance with the PAS.' *New Straits Times*, 1 December 1999.

²¹ 'DAP and KEADILAN tussle over Stampin, Bandar Kuching seats.' *New Straits Times*, 13 November 1999.

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The apparent hopelessness of the situation did not prevent an explosive and much publicised (by the government-controlled press) confrontation between the DAP and KEADILAN over the selection of a candidate for the by-election. The DAP were clear: 'Lunas is our seat. It should be the prerogative of the DAP to choose its candidate'.²² KEADILAN was also keen to contest the seat, however, and eventually announced its candidate, apparently without consulting the DAP. DAP leaders responded angrily, alleging 'dirty tactics' by KEADILAN – a charge usually reserved for the BN – and calling for a 'cooling off period on the issue of DAP's position in the BA'.²³ Lim Kit Siang even expressed 'pure disgust at such unscrupulous politics in the Barisan Alternative [*sic*]'.²⁴

The war of words between the DAP and KEADILAN was probably ameliorated somewhat by KEADILAN's surprise victory in the by-election, which led to a brief resurgence of euphoria in the opposition movement. If the national level parties were attempting something of a rapprochement, however, with KEADILAN deputy president Chandra Muzaffar offering Lim a public apology, the Lunas fracas appears to have stirred up the ill-feeling between the two parties in Sarawak. A state election was due in Sarawak some time in 2001, and the local DAP branches were clearly feeling uneasy at the prospect of contesting within the BA again. In December 2000, the Sarawak DAP announced that it

²² 'Save Barisan Alternatif for the sake of the people', DAP media statement, 24 November 2000.

²³ 'Cooling off period over issue of DAP's position in the Barisan Alternatif', DAP media statement, 23 November 2000.

²⁴ 'I have never agreed at any time that KEADILAN contest in Lunas by-election', DAP media statement, 23 November 2000.

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would be unilaterally pulling out of the BA, calling KEADILAN 'the most unfriendly of partners', and accusing them of 'stabbing us in the back'.²⁵

The main disagreement between the Sarawak DAP and KEADILAN was the large number of former DAP members joining KEADILAN, including the former DAP MP Chiew Chu Sing. This dispute spread to the national level a few months later, when another DAP stalwart and former parliamentary candidate Teoh Teik Huat joined KEADILAN in February 2001. The DAP claimed that this had breached an agreement between the BA parties not to accept membership applications from existing members of the coalition partners.²⁶ Lim Kit Siang responded to the controversy by pulling out of BA meetings, whilst the Penang DAP announced it would be 'loosening' its relationship with KEADILAN.²⁷

By early 2001, it was clear that relations between the DAP and KEADILAN were approaching their nadir. Conflict between the two parties was not so much caused by political differences, however, as by their political similarities. Although the DAP is primarily a Chinese based party, and KEADILAN Malay based, the two share a multi-ethnic and reformist outlook, which left them competing rather than cooperating on a number of issues. Yet when it became clear that the DAP was seriously reconsidering its membership of the BA, the party's rhetoric changed.

²⁵ 'Opposition in Sarawak racked by discord.' *New Straits Times*, 12 December 2000.

²⁶ 'The issue is not Teoh Teik Huat's application to join KEADILAN but whether solemn undertakings made by Barisan Alternative parties to each other are serious and should be honoured', DAP media statement, 28 February 2001.

²⁷ 'I will ask the DAP Central Executive Committee to relieve me from all Barisan Alternative discussions and meetings affecting DAP-KEADILAN relationship and replacement by another DAP leader', DAP media statement, 26 February 2001. 'Penang DAP will loosen relationship with KEADILAN', DAP media statement, 26 February 2001.

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In March 2001, the Sarawak branch of the DAP finally pulled out of the state-level BA. The justification given, however, was not connected to its infighting with KEADILAN, but rather its collaboration with PAS. With a state election approaching, the Sarawak DAP claimed its association with PAS was losing it support amongst the state's mostly non-Muslim population. By pulling out of the BA, the party said, the government 'could no longer accuse it of supporting PAS in the creation of an Islamic State in the country', adding that the BN 'had exploited the issue and this resulted in the DAP losing badly in the last parliamentary elections in Sarawak'.²⁸

The issue of PAS' support for the implementation of an Islamic State, and its definition thereof, quickly took centre stage again in BA relations. A war of words between the DAP's deputy chairman Karpal Singh and PAS' deputy president and Terengganu *Menteri Besar* Hadi Awang on the issue was widely publicised by the government media. In June 2001, the DAP admitted that the BA was most likely 'no more tenable', claiming that 'if the voters are faced with the choice between an Islamic State and a sixth term of Datuk Seri Dr. Mahathir Mohamad as Prime Minister, the choice would be the latter'.²⁹ A number of high level meetings between the BA components were unable to break the deadlock.³⁰ With the DAP increasingly feeling under pressure in Sarawak, and

²⁸ 'Sarawak DAP chairman: We've pulled out from Opposition front.' *New Sunday Times*, 4 March 2001.

²⁹ 'Barisan Alternative is at the crossroads as it is no more tenable with PAS leaders openly flouting the BA common manifesto for "A Just and Democratic Malaysia" and disregarding the opposition of the other three component parties towards an Islamic State', DAP media statement, 30 June 2001.

³⁰ 'PAS, DAP split on Islamic state.' *Malaysiakini*, 9 August 2001.

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the September 11 attacks in the USA heightening the tension, the party finally announced its complete withdrawal from the BA on 22 September 2001.³¹

The similarities in the trajectory of decline between the opposition coalition for the 1990 and the 1999 general elections, then, are striking. Both coalitions ultimately foundered on the irreconcilability of the DAP's Chinese based secular modernism with PAS' conservative Islamic worldview. Both coalitions were also jeopardised, however, by conflicts between parties with similar political outlooks and constituencies, which resulted in internal competition rather than collaboration. It was the fundamentally ethnic constellation of elections and party politics that drove the opposition coalitions apart. Despite being formed in the flush of multiethnic civil society engagement, both fronts were ultimately 'coalitions of convenience' rather than 'commitment', to use Horowitz's evocative phrases.³² In such conditions, they could not long withstand the ethnic pressures of party politics.

CIVIL SOCIETY AND SOCIAL MOVEMENTS IN ETHNICALLY-DIVIDED SOCIETIES: THE LESSONS FROM MALAYSIA

Having visited the demise of the Semangat and Barisan Alternatif opposition coalitions, we can see that on one level the two crises followed a remarkably similar trajectory:

1. regime factionalism intensified by economic recession, in turn creating the political space for greater political contestation;

³¹ 'DAP CEC resolves that the DAP ceases to be a member of the Barisan Alternative', DAP media statement, 22 September 2001.

³² Donald L. Horowitz, *Ethnic Groups in Conflict*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1986.

Conclusions

2. state repression closing down societal avenues of protest;
3. putatively multiethnic opposition party coalition formed with the collaboration and encouragement of sections of the middle class-led civil society;
4. opposition coalition fails to overcome the ethnic structures of electoral mobilisation; and
5. speedy post-election collapse of opposition coalition.

Such a story is not that different from those told by the statist perspective rejected in chapter three, and one might thus ask what need we have for civil society at all. This is not the whole story, however, and it has been the contention of this thesis that only by considering the impact of civil society and social movements can we understand the divergence between the two crisis trajectories.

Drawing comparatively on the previous chapters, the following points can be made. Firstly, whilst both crises had their origin in internal regime factionalism, the extent of this instability differed greatly, the 1980s witnessing turmoil in virtually every BN component and extensive disputes between parties such as was not evident in the 1990s. Whilst part of the explanation for this may lie in the intertextuality of the two cases – BN elites learning from the mistakes of the past – it also seems clear that it was the pre-existing societal mobilisation of the 1980s that heightened the regime crisis of the 1980s through an escalating cycle of ethnic claims and counterclaims. In contrast, the relative absence of social mobilisation prior to the 1998 split left the BN elites in a position to close ranks

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with remarkable speed, even in the face of the spectacular protests *after* the Mahathir-Anwar denouement.

More broadly, and returning to the theoretical case made in chapter two, it was argued that the lack of well theorised examinations of the relationship between civil society and social movements opens up the possibility of a form of 'slippage' between these two spheres of association. In the Malaysian case study, such a slippage has become increasingly clear since the 1970s, as civil society has moved away from ethnic concerns, whilst the successful mobilisation of protest movements remains firmly rooted in ethnic dynamics. In the *reformasi* period in Malaysia, we found this slippage epitomised, as concerted and sustained efforts both by civil society groups and by opposition political parties to force open a multiethnic political sphere foundered on the patterns of societal mobilisation that drew their cause of *reformasi* along inevitably ethnic lines.

Particularly at times when 'suddenly imposed grievances' – such as the dismissal of a popular deputy prime minister – are evident, the imperative for social movement mobilisation is enormous.³³ Such imperative force, however, may overwhelm movements' organisational and infrastructural capacity to orchestrate such mobilisation. It is at such time that existing avenues of mobilisation – societal networks, framing devices and so forth – may be utilised, even if their ideological and practical objectives do not coincide with that of the emergent movement. In Malaysia, the *reformasi* movement attempted to

³³ E.J. Walsh and R.H. Warland, 'Social movement involvement in the wake of a nuclear accident: Activists and free riders in the TMI Area', *American Sociological Review*, 48 (1983), pp, 764-80.

Conclusions

cultivate new modes of mobilisation, such as the Internet, appropriate to its multiethnic aspirations, but also relied heavily on the existing mobilisational networks of the Islamic movement. This mobilisational bias was ultimately reflected in the degree of electoral support for the movement's political manifestation in the 1999 general elections and, as we have seen in this chapter, ultimately contributed to the quick demise of the electoral coalition it provoked.

In chapter two, the theoretical contention was made that in ethnically-divided societies, organisational slippage – particularly at moments of heightened opposition – is likely to fall along ethnic lines for two principle reasons: the prior existence of ethnically oriented networks, and the mobilisational framing difficulties resulting from ethno-cultural differentials. The Malaysian case study demonstrates this process, both in the long-term divergence between civil society and social mobilisation patterns, and specifically at times of political crisis and heightened opposition.

It is now widely accepted that ethnicity and, thus, ethnic divisions are not primordially determined.³⁴ It is the contention here that ethnicity and ethnic identities *are* 'constructed' phenomena, albeit within the limits of existing religious, cultural, and racial differences. What this thesis has demonstrated, however, is that even constructed identities become embedded not just in the structures of government and electoral politics, but even deeper in the structures of societal association and mobilisation. Attempts to overcome societal ethnic

³⁴ For such arguments in respect of the Malaysian case, see Charles Hirschman, 'The making of race in colonial Malaya: Political economy and racial ideology', *Sociological Forum*, 1:2 (1986), pp. 330-361; and Anthony Milner, *The Invention of Politics in Colonial Malaya: Contesting nationalism and the expansion of the public sphere*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994.

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divisions by governments or civil society thus face multiple levels of embedded practices and forms of association to overcome. Thus, in Malaysia, ethnicity remains the dominant political paradigm, despite the concerted efforts of civil society and even, since the 1990s, the government to reduce its importance. Ethnicity, to borrow Keynes' description of unemployment, is 'downwardly sticky'.

FINAL WORDS

Throughout this thesis, it has been attempted as far as possible to avoid normative comment in the interests of maintaining objectivity and a strictly theoretical perspective. In these final paragraphs it is hopefully excusable to break this convention and make a few prognoses and recommendations for the Malaysian case, however personal they may be. It seems clear that civil society has had, and must continue to have, a positive effect in fostering interethnic tolerance and political engagement in Malaysia. As yet, however, it has been unable to break down the structures of social mobilisation and electoral politics which reduce most everything to ethnic equations. The question must therefore be asked, what can and what should civil society do?

In casual conversation with the Penang-based scholar-activist Francis Loh in the course of preparing this thesis, he opined that civil society had mistakenly seen KEADILAN and the *Barisan Alternatif* as a 'shortcut to democratisation'. This pithy assessment encapsulates the problem facing civil society. Whilst the structures of societal and electoral mobilisation in Malaysia remained tied to ethnicity, pushing for further democratisation may be futile and even counterproductive – a cursory glance at the experience of countries such as Kenya shows that 'shortcut' democratisation in ethnically charged societies can

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be disastrous. Civil society instead should be in for the long haul, seeking to promote and inculcate discursive frames and institutional arrangements that are nonethnic and pluralistic. The task is difficult and long but, I believe, one that civil society is uniquely capable of achieving.

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Chief Minister of Sabah, 1985-1994

PETRA KAMARUDDIN, RAJA, Bangsar, April 2001
Director, FAC, 1998-2001
Editor, *Berita Keadilan*
Former ISA detainee

RAJAMOORTY, T., George Town, June 2002
Editor, *Third World Resurgence*

RAMAKRISHNAN, P., George Town, October 2001
President, ALIRAN

S. SOMAH SUNDRAM, Subang Jaya, September 2001
Central Committee member, MTUC

ZULKIFLI SULONG, Kuala Lumpur, May 2001
Editor, *Harakah*

NB: Where multiple interviews were conducted, date given is that of most recent

Anonymous Informants:

Staff, volunteers and activists from the following organisations:

Consumers Association of Penang (CAP); Citizens' Health Initiative (CHI);
Democratic Action Party (DAP); *Jama'ah Islah Malaysia* (JIM); Malaysian
Chinese Association (MCA); Malaysian Trades Union Congress (MTUC); *Partai
Islam seMalaysia* (PAS); *Parti Keadilan Nasional* (KEADILAN); *Parti Rakyat
Malaysia* (PRM); Sabah Progressive Party (SAPP); *Sahabat Alam Malaysia*
(SAM); SOS Damansara; *Suara Rakyat Malaysia* (SUARAM); United Malays
National Organisation (UMNO)

Primary Sources: Archival Material

Aliran Monthly; Asiaweek; BBC Interactive (UK); Berita Harian; Berita Minggu; Borneo Post; Business Times (Malaysia); Business Times (Singapore); Daily Express; Far Eastern Economic Review; Harakah; Harian Metro; Malaysiakini; Minggu Metro; New Straits Times; New Sunday Times; Star; Straits Times (Singapore); Sun; Utusan Pengguna; Utusan Malaysia.

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