

**The Social Mobilisation of Conservative Malays
Against the Injured Leviathan: A Case Study of
Perkasa and ISMA from 2008 to 2017**

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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person nor material previously published or written by another person nor material which to a substantial extent has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institute of higher learning, except where due acknowledgement has been made in the text.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

DECLARATION	ii
TABLE OF CONTENTS	iii
ABSTRACT	viii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	ix
LIST OF TABLES	xi
LIST OF FIGURES	xii
LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS	xiii
CHAPTER 1 Introduction	1
1.1 Background to Research	1
1.2 Organisation of Chapters	3
1.2.1 The State as Structural Obstacles	4
1.2.2 Emergence of Reactionary Malay-Muslim Social Forces	6
1.2.3 Reacting to “Protect” Malay Interests	10
1.3 Primary Research Question	13
1.4 Secondary Research Questions	16
1.5 Statements of Propositions	17
1.6 Key Arguments and Findings	19
1.6.1 Fieldwork	20
1.6.2 Research Methodology	22
1.7 Limitations and Weaknesses	25
1.8 Conclusion	27
CHAPTER 2 Literature Review and Theoretical Framework	30
2.1 Introduction	30
2.2 State, Regime and Social Movement	31
2.3 Repression and Social Mobilisation	34

2.4 State Capacity and Regime Type	35
2.5 Understanding the POS in Post-2008 Malaysia	38
2.6 Investigating the State	40
2.7 Slater's Ordering Power Model	43
2.8 Perkasa's Relationship with State and Regime	45
2.9 ISMA's Peculiarity as an Islamist NGO	49
2.10 Differentiating "Mainstream" and "Extremist" Politics in Malaysia	52
2.11 Comparison with Indonesian Social Organisations	55
2.12 Framing Theory: Analysing the Discourses of Perkasa and ISMA	64
2.12.1 Populist Framing to Sustain a Reactionary Movement	67
2.13 Conclusion	70
CHAPTER 3 The State as Robust Leviathan (1969-2008)	72
3.1 Introduction	72
3.2 Theoretical Assumption on State-Regime Fusion	73
3.3 The Robust Leviathan Before 2008	76
3.4 The Robust Leviathan's "Conservative Turns"	83
3.4.1 First Conservative Turn: State-Led Malay Conservatism in the 1970s	84
3.4.2 Second Conservative Turn: State Islamisation in the 1980s	88
3.4.3 "Forced" Consensus for UMNO and Malay-Muslim Hegemony	90
3.5 Minor Liberalisation in 1990s: Economic Growth, Vision 2020 and Reformasi	92
3.6 Globalisation, Terrorism and Transition in the 2000s	95
3.7 Conclusion	101
CHAPTER 4 The State as Injured Leviathan (2008-2017)	103
4.1 Introduction	103
4.2 Defining the Injured Leviathan	104
4.3 How the Leviathan Got Injured?	106
4.4 Impairment of the State's Capacity to Extract Symbolic Power	107

4.4.1	Middle-Class Malays	109
4.4.2	Middle-Class Non-Malays	112
4.4.3	Non-Malay Communal Elites	115
4.5	Straining the State's Capacity to Extract Remunerative Power	118
4.5.1	Concentration of Remunerative Power into Najib's Hands	120
4.5.2	"Cash is King": GST, 1MDB and China's Investments in Malaysia	122
4.6	Opportunities and Threats for the Reactionaries	125
4.7	Cognitive Liberation of the Reactionaries	126
4.7.1	Ketuanan Rakyat's Threat Against Ketuanan Melayu	128
4.7.2	Ahmad Ismail's "Pendatang" Racial Slur	129
4.7.3	Grassroots Revolt Against UMNO's Leadership	131
4.7.4	Creeping Liberalisation in UMNO?	133
4.8	Networks of Allies for the Reactionaries	135
4.8.1	Politicians	136
4.8.2	Civil Servants	138
4.8.3	Academicians and State Religious Authorities	140
4.9	Conclusion	142
CHAPTER 5 Ketuanan Melayu and Islamic Populism as Collective Action Frames		144
5.1	Introduction	144
5.2	Background on Perkasa	146
5.3	Background on ISMA	148
5.4	Ketuanan Melayu as Perkasa's Collective Action Frame	150
5.4.1	How Perkasa Attended to its Core Framing Tasks	158
5.5	Islamic Populism as ISMA's Collective Action Frame	165
5.5.1	How ISMA Attended to its Core Framing Tasks	170
5.6	Conclusion	175
CHAPTER 6 Frame Alignment Processes in Perkasa and ISMA's Discourses		177
6.1	Introduction	177
6.2	Discourses on Economic Globalisation	178

6.2.1	New Economic Model (NEM)	179
6.2.2	Frame Amplification in Perkasa's Discourses on the NEM	181
6.2.3	Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement (TPPA)	186
6.2.4	Frame Amplification in ISMA's Discourses on the TPPA	188
6.3	Discourses on Identity Politics	192
6.3.1	Allah Row	193
6.3.2	Frame Bridging in Perkasa's Discourses on the Allah Row	194
6.3.3	Coalition of Malaysian NGOs in the UPR Process (COMANGO)	199
6.3.4	Frame Bridging in ISMA's Discourses on COMANGO	201
6.4	Conclusion	207
CHAPTER 7 The Injured Leviathan and Populist Framing in Malaysia's Contemporary Politics		209
7.1	Introduction	209
7.2	Inheriting the Injured Leviathan	210
7.2.1	PH Government under Dr Mahathir Mohamad (May 2018 – February 2020)	211
7.2.2	PN Government under Muhyiddin Yassin (February 2020 – August and Ismail Sabri Yaakob (August 2021 – November 2022)	215
7.2.3	Madani Government under Anwar Ibrahim (November 2022 – present	219
7.3	POS under the Injured Leviathan after 2018	222
7.4	Framing of Populist Discourses Beyond 2017	224
7.4.1	The Indonesian Connection of the ISMA's Anti-ICERD Rally in 2018	225
7.4.2	Frame Amplification through Online Journalism and Internet Activism	229
7.5	Analysis of Reactionary "Echo Chambers" on YouTube	233
7.5.1	Dr Mohd Ridhuan Tee Abdullah	235
7.5.2	Firdaus Wong Wai Hung	236
7.5.3	Muhammad Zamri Vinoth Kalimuthu	237
7.6	Conclusion	239

CHAPTER 8 Conclusion	241
8.1 Summaries of Key Insights	241
8.2 Recommendations for Future Research	248
8.3 Concluding Statements	253
APPENDIX 1 (FASS Research Ethics Committee’s Approval)	255
APPENDIX 2 (Perkasa’s Supreme Council, 2013-2016)	256
APPENDIX 3 (Selected Photographs from Perkasa’s AGM)	257
APPENDIX 4 (Samples of Perkasa’s Internal Documents)	258
APPENDIX 5 (Tujuh Wasiat Raja-Raja Melayu)	259
APPENDIX 6 (Dr Mahathir Mohamad’s Speech on 22 March 2009)	260
APPENDIX 7 (ISMA’s Anti-TPPA Flyer in 2013)	270
APPENDIX 8 (ISMA’s Anti-TPPA Flyer in 2015)	271
BIBLIOGRAPHY	272

ABSTRACT

This dissertation provides a critical account on how a reactionary Malay-Muslim social movement (SM) emerged and developed in Malaysia between 2008 and 2017. It examines the political opportunity structure (POS) in Malaysia and how two social movement organisations (SMOs) – Perkasa and ISMA – mobilised conservative Malays for collective actions. It is found that the POS is largely determined by state capacity to repress regime opponents. From a previously “robust Leviathan,” the Malaysian state has been reduced to an “injured Leviathan” following the 2008 general election. Using a component of Slater’s (2010) ordering power model, I explain how the decline in repression brought about a cognitive liberation (McAdam, 1999) among conservative Malays and created an opening for a reactionary movement in civil society. To understand the SM development, I have used frame analysis to identify ketuanan Melayu and Islamic populism as collective action frames (CAF) for Perkasa and ISMA respectively (Snow & Benford, 1988). To further elucidate their collective agency, I investigate their “frame alignment strategies” (Snow, et. al., 1986) to mobilise conservative Malays by examining various discourses on the New Economic Model (NEM), the Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement (TPPA), the Allah row and the Coalition of Malaysian NGOs in the UPR Process (COMANGO). They are found to have employed frame amplification in discourses on globalisation and frame bridging for identity politics. Finally, this dissertation applies the concepts of injured Leviathan, frame amplification and frame bridging to make sense of contemporary Malaysian politics.

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LIST OF TABLES

Table 1: Comparison of Selected Groups on Left-Right Ideological Spectrum	10
Table 2: Big Six “Draconian Laws” in Pre-2008 Malaysia	79
Table 3: Malaysia’s GDP Growth & FDI Net Inflows, 1988 1997	93
Table 4: Parliamentary Seats Won by UMNO, DAP & PAS, 1974-1999.....	95
Table 5: GDP Growth in Malaysia, China & Vietnam, 1998-2007	96
Table 6: MCA Parliamentary Seats & Share of Popular Votes, 1999-2018 ...	115
Table 7: Malaysia’s GDP Growth, Tax-to-GDP & Debt-to-GDP Ratios, 2008-2017	119
Table 8: Comparison of Perkasa’s Objectives with the Federal Constitution	158
Table 9: Perkasa’s Diagnostic, Prognostic & Motivational Frames	165
Table 10: ISMA’s Diagnostic, Prognostic & Motivational Frames	175
Table 11: Free Trade Agreements (FTAs) under Najib’s Administration	187
Table 12: Recommendations for Malaysia under the UPR, 2009-2018	201
Table 13: Discourse Types, Frame Alignment Strategies & Purposes	208
Table 14: Results of elections in six states, 2023.....	220
Table 15: Qualitative Assessment of Malaysia’s State Strength, 1981-Present	223
Table 16: Injured Leviathan & Framing Strategies of Reactionary SM	243

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: Extracting Power from Protection Pacts	45
Figure 2: Components of Movement Solidarity	69
Figure 3: Interactions between Framing, Emotion Work & Collective Identity	247
Figure 4: Major Societal Forces in a Cycle of Contention Against the Injured Leviathan	249
Figure 5: Old vs New Paradigm in State-Society Relations for Malaysia	254

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

1MDB	1Malaysia Development Berhad
ABIM	Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia (Malaysian Islamic Youth Movement)
BEC	Bumiputera Economic Congress
Berjasa	Barisan Jemaah Islamiah Malaysia (Malaysia Islamic Congregation Front)
Bersih	Coalition for Free and Fair Elections
BMF	Buy Muslim First campaign
BN	Barisan Nasional (Nasional Front)
BR1M	Bantuan Rakyat 1Malaysia scheme (1Malaysia Citizens Aid cash scheme)
CAF	Collective action frame
CPM	Communist Party of Malaya
COMANGO	Coalition of Malaysian Non-Governmental Organisations in the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) Process
DAP	Democratic Action Party
DJZ	Dong Jiaozong (Malaysian Chinese education movement)
ETP	Economic Transformation Plan
FDI	Foreign direct investment
FPI	Front Pembela Islam (Islamic Defenders Front)
FTA	Free trade agreement
GNPF-MUI	Gerakan Nasional Pengawal Fatwa Majelis Ulama Indonesia (National Movement of Fatwa Guards of the Ulema Council of Indonesia)
Golkar	Partai Golongan Karya (Party of Functional Groups)
GPMS	Gabungan Pekajar-Pelajar Melayu Semenanjung (Peninsula Malay Students Coalition)
GST	Goods and Services Tax
GTP	Government Transformation Plan
ICERD	International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination

IPKI	Ikatan Pendukung Kemerdekaan Indonesia (League of Supporters of Indonesian Independence)
JAKIM	Jabatan Kemajuan Islam Malaysia (Department of Islamic Development Malaysia)
Hindraf	Hindu Rights Action Force
HRC	Human Rights Council
ISMA	Ikatan Muslimin Malaysia (Malaysian Muslim Solidarity)
JIL	Jaringan Islam Liberal (Liberal Islam Network)
JIM	Pertubuhan Jamaah Islah Malaysia
LMP	Laskar Merah Putih (Red and White Army)
MB	Muslim Brotherhood
MCA	Malaysian Chinese Association
MCO	Movement Control Order
MCMC	Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission
MHS	Malaysian Hindu Sangam
MIC	Malaysian Indian Congress
MN	Muafakat Nasional (National Concord)
MPM	Majlis Perundingan Melayu (Malay Consultative Council)
MU	Malayan Union
MUI	Majelis Ulama Indonesia (Ulema Council of Indonesia)
Muslim UPRo	Muslim Non-Governmental Organisations in the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) Process
NCP	National Cultural Policy
NEM	New Economic Model
NEAC	National Economic Action Council
NEP	New Economic Policy
NUCC	National Unity Consultative Council
PAN	Parti Amanah Nasional (National Trust Party)
PAS	Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party)
Pejuang	Parti Pejuang Tanah Air (Homeland Fighters Party)

Pekida	Pertubuhan Kebajikan dan Dakwah Islamiyah SeMalaysia (Pan-Malaysian Islamic Welfare and Missionary Organisation)
PEMANDU	Malaysia's Performance Management and Delivery Unit
Perkasa	Pertubuhan Pribumi Perkasa Malaysia (Malaysian Organisation for Native Empowerment)
PGRM	Parti Gerakan Rakyat Malaysia (Malaysian People's Movement Party)
PH	Pakatan Harapan (Alliance of Hope)
PKPIM	Persatuan Kebangsaan Pelajar-Pelajar Islam Malaysia (Malaysian National Association of Muslim Students)
PKR	Parti Keadilan Rakyat (People's Justice Party)
PMD	Prime Minister's Department
POS	Political opportunity structure
PP	Pemuda Pancasila (Pancasila Youth)
PPBM	Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia (Malaysian United Indigenous Party)
PPIM	Persatuan Pengguna Islam Malaysia (Malaysian Muslim Consumers Association)
PR	Pakatan Rakyat (People's Alliance)
PSM	Parti Sosialis Malaysia (Malaysian Socialist Party)
PUTRA	Parti Bumiputera Perkasa Malaysia (Malaysian Sons of the Soil Empowerment Party)
SM	Social movement
SMO	Social movement organisations
Suqiu	Malaysian Chinese Organisation Election Appeals Committee
TPPA	Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement
UMMAH	Gerakan Pembela Ummah (Ummah Defenders Movement)
UMNO	United Malays National Organisation
UPR	Universal Period Review
YADIM	Yayasan Dakwah Islamiyah Malaysia (Malaysian Islamic Missionary Foundation)

CHAPTER 1 Introduction

1.1 Background to Research

The 12th Malaysian general election on 8 March 2008 was a watershed event. For the first time since 1969, the ruling *Barisan Nasional* (BN) lost its supermajority in Parliament. Not only that, the state legislative assemblies in Kedah, Penang, Perak and Selangor also fell to opposition parties. While BN remained in power at the federal level, it was no longer as formidable as before. Following that, some political observers commented that “the return of real political competition in Malaysia cannot but bring about great and beneficial changes” (Ooi, et. al., 2008, p.125). Ethnic politics dominated Malaysia for many decades and the fear of ethnic violence was a factor that consistently tipped the electoral advantage in favour of BN. Ethnic clashes during the 13 May Incident in 1969 spooked many older generations of Malaysians, especially among ethnic Chinese, to a point that they could not imagine voting out BN. They feared that racial violence would occur again if that ever happened (Heng, 1996). Hence, the state was able to maintain a kind of hegemonic control over them and this contributed to BN’s longevity as a ruling regime. The control appeared to be a permanent feature in Malaysian politics until it was reversed from March 2008 onwards. The reversal persisted until the 2018 general election when BN was finally defeated.

While the above is the main storyline of the country’s electoral politics, other things also happened in the post-2008 period. Apart from heightened electoral competition, fierce contentious politics also took place in civil society, which saw the emergence of reactionary social forces in the period between 2008 and 2017. Electoral politics may be the only constitutional means for regime change in Malaysia but the influence of social movements (SM) should

not be taken for granted. There are a number of scholarly works that explored the roles of progressive SMs such as the Anti-Lynas green movement (Yew & Tayeb, 2017) and the Coalition for Free and Fair Elections (Bersih) (Ong, 2022; Khoo, 2020) but few studied the conservative ones in depth. Unlike Bersih, which is multiracial and comprising of mostly liberal activists struggling to reform the existing political system, the reactionaries are predominantly Malays and Islamists who want to preserve the status quo as a means of protecting Malay-Muslim values, right and entrenched interests. Due to overlapping identity and ideology with the *United Malay National Organisation* (UMNO), and *Parti Islam Se-Malaysia* (PAS) to a lesser extent, their agency as an independent societal force was often overlooked and neglected.

Malay-Muslim social movement organisations (SMO) such as *Pertubuhan Pribumi Perkasa* (Perkasa) and *Ikatan Muslimin Malaysia* (ISMA) and *Pertubuhan Kebajikan dan Dakwah Islamiyah SeMalaysia* (Pekida) were identified as the foremost right-wing groups which allegedly carried out “dirty work” at UMNO’s behest (Yap & Chi, 2014; Funston, 2016, pp.99-102). Opponents gave the impression that these organisations were clandestine, conspiratorial and illegal to delegitimise them and to implicate UMNO by suggesting that the latter sponsored the former. However, others such as Ismail and Abdul Halim (2022) argued that Perkasa and ISMA were still a part of the Malaysian civil society and should not be relegated to the category of uncivil society.¹ While these Malay-Muslim groups may have links to UMNO and displayed far-right tendencies in their discourses, a more nuanced understanding of them is required. State transformation, elite competition and intricacies of grassroots politics produced a complicated relationship between UMNO and these SMOs. All of these affected their political behaviours. Hence, this dissertation is an

¹ Uncivil society usually refers to societal groups that are openly violent and defy the rule of law such as the Mafia, Yakuza or Triads. However, some scholars also used this term to attack right-wing groups. Political scientist Clifford Bob has also criticised the term for “contributing to conceptual proliferation while adding little of analytic value” (2012, p.209).

exploratory investigation of the factors that fostered the rise and development of a reactionary SM in the post-2008 era.

1.2 Organisation of Chapters

This dissertation has eight chapters with two major parts. The first part looks at how the political opportunity structures (POS) in Malaysia changed over the decades and their effects on SM emergence, with a chapter that focusing on the pre-2008 era and another chapter on the post-2008 era. The second part is my findings on what I view as representing the agency of a reactionary SM in mobilising conservative Malays. After the introduction in Chapter 1, there will be a literature review and discussions on theoretical frameworks in Chapter 2. Here, I will survey some of the scholarly works on state and society that are relevant to Malaysia and highlight the gaps that I have found in them. While my understanding of the Malaysian state is influenced by a Hobbesian-Weberian conceptualisation of state capacity (Slater, 2010), I also draw inspirations from two major traditions in social movement theories (Tarrow, 2011), particularly the political process model (McAdam, 1999) and framing theories (Snow & Benford 2000; 1992; 1988).

The first part of this dissertation's main body comes in Chapters 3 and 4. Both of them will discuss the conditions of the Malaysian state, which I have identified as the most important structural factor constraining the development of civil society in which SMs operate. The second part comes in Chapters 5, 6 and 7. Based on framing theories, Chapter 5 and 6 are my findings on the collective action frames (CAFs) and frame alignment strategies of Perkasa and ISMA. In Chapter 7, I will provide an updated account of these two organisations and evaluate their effects on contemporary politics. As foremost

SMOs of the reactionary SM that emerged in the post-2008 era, their framing strategies on various issues helped to consolidate a new political configuration among the Malays. Finally, this dissertation will conclude in Chapter 8 by presenting a few key insights from this dissertation and how it can guide future research. Besides reflecting on the merits of looking at both structure and agency, I will highlight why studying the reactionaries are important in helping us make sense of Malaysian politics today.

1.2.1 The State as Structural Obstacle

Like other social phenomenon, the emergence of reactionaries in the immediate post-2008 era is not an anomaly but a continuation of an existing political and ideological trend in Malaysia. While arguing for Perkasa and ISMA's collective agency in this dissertation, I could not disregard the structural factors that affected their development. From the various social structures, I identify the state as the most important factor. It is also a historical fact that the Malaysian state was largely shaped by UMNO and BN. Both state and regime were formidable but embedded in society. Looking at UMNO as a political party, we can easily forget that it also started out as a reactionary movement. Its direct predecessor was the Pan-Malaya Malay Congress which met in early March 1946 to plan a response to the British colonial government's proposal to establish the Malayan Union (MU), which would create a centralised administration for Malaya but offered a liberal interpretation for citizenship (Lau, 1991). Besides replacing the previous system of British indirect rule over the Malay states with a central government, MU would give non-Malays, particularly ethnic Chinese and Indians, equal citizenship rights as Malays. Meanwhile, the latter's traditional rulers would lose their sovereignty as MU was directly ruled by the British.

In rejecting MU, the Malay Congress supported the various political demonstrations that were on-going since December 1945 (Amoroso, 2014 p.138) and UMNO was founded two months later at a meeting on 11 May 1946. According to Chandra Muzaffar (1979), it was UMNO which transformed Malay feudalism into neo-feudalism by shifting Malay loyalty away from the royalty to the bureaucratised aristocracy who helmed the party. Even though the Sultans' position was retained and their stature as the original protector of Malays was acknowledged, UMNO took over their role of the de facto Malay protector. By capitulating to British pressure in agreeing to MU, the Sultans were deemed to have failed to protect Malays. This allowed UMNO to gain predominance and the party was instrumental in forming the Federation of Malaya as a proto-state in 1948 (ibid, pp.62-63).

Upon independence in 1957, Malaysia was already a strong state with UMNO as the most dominant political party. Besides inheriting coercive laws from the British, the state also derived its legitimacy from Malays' ideological alignment with UMNO. The state put all of these to greater effects following an outbreak of racial violence in 1969. Scholars noted how feudalism, neo-feudalism and traditionalism influenced Malay political discourses (Muzaffar, 1979; Amoroso, 2014; Omar, 2015). Various elements of Malay traditionalism were reinvented to justify UMNO's rule. Racial politics became the driving force of Malaysian politics albeit one that is institutionalised in electoral politics. As a consequence, the right-wing elements in Malay society were pacified and were dormant until political shocks from the 2008 general election awakened them from a long slumber. The Malaysian state of the post-1969 era and its transformation after 2008 will be discussed in Chapter 3 and 4 respectively.

1.2.2 Emergence of Reactionary Malay-Muslim Social Forces

While the 2008 general election brought about a subtle state transformation, its effects on society were more profound. By eclipsing the violent memories of the 13 May incident, it reduced the chilling effects of voting out BN among the non-Malay populace. However, the prospects of regime change also stimulated the rise a more uncompromising form of right-wing activism among segments of the Malay population. Like what happened to Malay rulers during the MU controversy, it was UMNO's turn to be discredited for allegedly failing to defend conservative Malay interests and upholding *ketuanan Melayu* (Malay supremacy). Due to economic globalisation and growing domestic pressures for political liberalisation, UMNO under Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi and his successor Najib Razak was caught between a rock and a hard place. In liberalising the country, Abdullah came under intense criticisms from Malay hardliners such as Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

Abdullah's successor, Najib also faced similar difficulties in balancing his policies when attacked by UMNO hardliners while trying to revive the declining Malaysian economy and to regain non-Malay votes lost to opposition parties. On one hand, he allegedly sponsored reactionary Malay groups such as Perkasa and ISMA, which this dissertation identified as the foremost Malay-Muslim groups re-asserting an ultraconservative agenda. On the other hand, Najib was accused of conceding too much to the non-Malays in his efforts to win their votes. Interestingly, it was the right-wing groups that he allegedly sponsored which targeted him the most for pandering to non-Malays. In the process, UMNO lost its stature as the sole Malay-Muslim protector to new organisations which also claim to represent conservative Malay interests. Perkasa and ISMA's framings on various issues against the Malaysian state and other opponents will be discussed in Chapters 5 and 6.

There is a need to understand more about the right-wing backlash in society since there was a previous tendency to view Islamist organisations such as *Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia* (ABIM) as progressives seeking Islamic social reforms (Sundaram & Shabery Cheek, 1988; Hassan, 2003). Political scientist Meredith Weiss (2006) suggested that the Reformasi movement which emerged from political conflicts of the late 1990s fostered a unique form of social capital which allowed Islamist and liberal activists in Malaysia to work together. However, the differing characteristics and political orientations of various Islamist groups must be taken into account and re-evaluated from time to time. We cannot assume that all civil society actors are progressive as some of them may become reactionaries. At the same time, we should not jump to conclusion that reactionary movements will have no agency from the larger political structure under which it operates. Even if some of these organisations are ideologically linked with UMNO and PAS, they can still pursue their own agenda in defiance of these major parties.

Nevertheless, we must also resist the temptation of applying labels such as far-right, radical, and extremist as a pejorative on groups with political views that we disagree with. Due to their tendencies to be hyperbolic and controversial, ethnonationalist and fundamentalist religious groups can be easily conflated with radical or extremist organisations, and they may even be falsely accused of perpetuating violence or encouraging terror activities. In December 2014, a group called “25 Prominent Malays” (also known as G25) wrote an open letter to urge Prime Minister Najib Razak to stand up to these “supremacist NGOs,” which indirectly referred to Perkasa and ISMA (“Eminent Malays urge PM,” 2014). Opposition parties such as Democratic Action Party (DAP) and *Parti Keadilan Rakyat* (PKR) also painted Perkasa as extremist (Loone, 2011; “Sarawak PKR wants,” 2014). Even former *Parti Islam Se-Malaysia* (PAS) and later *Parti Amanah Negara* (PAN) MP Khalid Samad

called upon the National Fatwa Council to declare Perkasa as an “extremist and deviant NGO” (“PAS wants Fatwa Council,” 2015). While there may be truth in some of these allegations, I am aware that these labels might be slurs to delegitimise political opponents.

Broadly speaking, right-wing organisations are similar in as far as all of them have stated goals “to maintain structures of order, status, honour, or traditional social differences or values” (Lo, 1982 p.108). However, they can be different in their approaches and strategies. Conservatives may refer to political moderates positioned closer to the ideological centre while ultraconservatives and hardliners are located further away. They differ from far-right radicals and extremists who occupy the fringes of a political spectrum, anti-system and normalise violence as a political strategy. Many far-right organisations have been proscribed and operate illegally. For example, both the Klu Klux Klan (KKK) in the US and the neo-Nazis in Germany are underground movements. While it may not be wrong to describe reactionary SMOs such as Perkasa and ISMA as displaying “far-right” tendencies (Chan, 2023), it is unfair to project the images of KKK or Neo-Nazis upon them (Boo and Sipalan, 2013). According to Lipset and Raab, right-wing extremism is frequently associated with political breakdown where the dominant parties have collapsed and where political conflicts are rampant with actors overtly breaking the rules of the political game (1978, pp.486-487). Certainly, this was not the situation in Malaysia between 2008 to 2017. Although weakened, the state was still formidable and Perkasa and ISMA could be banned if they were really extreme.

Furthermore, there is no consensus among political scientists on the definition for far-right (Martin, 2024) even though they have no problem identifying those belonging to the “extreme right party family” (Mudde, 2002 pp.1-7). In Western Europe, where the term originated, the far-right is often linked to fascism. Parties with this label are viewed as “political pariahs” to be

ignored until they established themselves in mainstream politics or became a relevant political factor due to their violence (ibid, p.6). Scholars such as Jean-Yves Camus and Nicolas Lebourg (2017 p.1) said the fundamental ambiguity in using the term far-right lies in the fact that “it is generally used by political adversaries to disqualify and stigmatise all forms of partisan nationalism” by linking them to fascism and Nazism. They reckoned that using far-right as a category of analysis is not suitable outside of Western Europe even though nationalist, populist and xenophobic parties may be thriving in those places. Using Eastern Europe as an example, they said a different historical experience shaped ethnonationalism in those countries as they struggled for independence (ibid, p.2). Similarly, it takes more than just a combination of traits such as ethnonationalism, exclusivism and ultra-conservatism to label an organisation as far-right because the specificity of local contexts must be taken into account.

Without downplaying the divisiveness of Perkasa and ISMA exclusivist politics, their ideological position is better described as reactionary. Being called a reactionary can be derogatory but it aptly refers to a person who calls for the defence of traditional culture and values in rejecting progress (King, 2012). Similarly, Perkasa and ISMA activists were calling for the defence of Malay-Muslim interests to reject liberalism and to prevent liberalisation. Richard Shorten (2022) has noted how reactionaries have a disposition for populist and nativist discourses emphasising decadence, conspiracy and indignation. As a flexible position, reactionary discourses can move along a broad ideological spectrum that ranges from moderately conservative to far-right. While Perkasa and ISMA are located further to the right of UMNO and PAS, they are still not too radical in the Malaysian context (See Table 1). At the minimal, they are not anti-system like the *Hizbut Tahrir in Malaysia* (HTM), which wants to revive a global Islamic Caliphate (Mohamed Osman, 2009). Instead, Perkasa and ISMA insisted that they adhere to the Malaysian constitution which guarantees Malay special rights and grants Islam the status

as an official religion. When political temperature was rising in the post-2008 era, they never endorsed physical violence as a repertoire even though their inflammatory and racist discourses may render them to the far-right. Even though Perkasa activists were sometimes rowdy and minor scuffles had occurred during protests, there was never a single outbreak of mass violence in Malaysia as a direct result of their actions throughout the period under review from 2008 to 2017. In general, Perkasa and ISMA ideological positions mirrored those of UMNO and PAS, which means they would not deviate too far from mainstream politics. Furthermore, discourses on nativism and ethnic violence have been normalised in Malaysia much earlier.

Table 1: Comparison of Political Actors on Malaysia's Ideological Spectrum

Broadly Left-Wing to Centre	Broadly Right-Wing		
CPM*	Malay/Islamic Conservatism	Reactionary (discourses oscillating between conservative and far-right)	Islamic Radicalism
PSM** PKR DAP	UMNO PAS	Perkasa ISMA	Hizbut Tahrir Malaysia (HTM)

*CPM – Communist Party of Malaya

**PSM – *Parti Socialis Malaysia* (Malaysian Socialist Party)

1.2.3 Reacting to “Protect” Malay Interests

There are scholarly efforts to identify the global far-right and one of the most prominent ones is the Stanford University's Centre for International Security and Cooperation's Mapping Militants Project (n.d). Unlike the *Jemaah Islamiah* in Indonesia or *Abu Sayyaf* in the Philippines, neither Perkasa nor ISMA

or even Pekida in Malaysia are radical enough to make it to the Mapping Militants Project's list. To differentiate conservative from radical and extremist groups, Lo, citing Hofstadter (1964), said conservative movements as those who basically want to "preserve long-standing institutions and values through minimising reforms" (1982, p.108). Similarly, the reactionary social forces studied for this dissertation are those interested in perpetuating Malay special rights as advocated by UMNO and advancing the position of Islam in Malaysia like PAS. Their ethnonationalism and ultra-conservatism converged in the logic of "protecting" the Malays – a point highlighted by Chandra Muzaffar (1979) in his magnum opus, *Protector? An Analysis of the Concept and Practice of Loyalty in Leader-led Relationships Within Malay Society*. Today, the Malay protector has also become an "Islamic protector" for Muslims in general. The neo-feudal ideology in UMNO, as posited by Muzaffar (ibid), is eroding, and the party's reciprocal relationship with the conservative Malays who exchange loyalty for UMNO's protection and patronage is no longer as salient as before.

However, the idea of Malays and Islam needing "protection" remains as strong as before. So, my dissertation will show how the reactionaries emerged when the Malays realised that they could no longer just depend on UMNO. This partly explains the proliferation of various grassroots-oriented reactionary SMOs which were more hardline than UMNO but have been dismissed as the party's proxies, in the post-2008 era. According to a prominent scholar of ideology Michael Freeden, conservatism does not have "a fixed substantive position" comparable to those of liberalism and socialism (2003, p.87). As a more contextual ideology, Malay-Muslim conservatism is reflected in the policies of institutions that acted in its name (ibid). In Malaysia, these institutions are UMNO and PAS.² Besides ketuanan Melayu, various slogans

² I intentionally left out newer parties such as *Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia* (PPBM) and *Parti Pejuang Tanah Air* (Pejuang) as they did not figure prominently or even existed in the period between 2008 and 2017. Undoubtedly, both parties, which were co-founded by the foremost conservative Malay hardliner Dr Mahathir, also operate on the "Malay protector" logic.

and buzzwords over the years such as “*Hidup Melayu!*” (Long live the Malays!), “*Agenda Melayu*” (Malay agenda), and even “*Tanah Melayu*” (Land of the Malays) also reflected Malay conservatism.³ The emergence of Perkasa and ISMA reactionism is a continuation of this trend but also indicated that there are now alternative channels for conservative Malays to make their demands on the Malaysian state.

Freedden also provided another insight for my understanding of Malay conservatism (no matter whether they are feudal, neo-feudal, capitalistic, nationalistic or Islamic) by suggesting that “one common thread running through all conservative argument is an anxiety about change and the urge to distinguish between unnatural and natural change” (2003, p.88). To justify the existing political and social order as “natural,” conservatives are prone to falling back to religion and traditionalism. Thus, conservatism can also be understood from its reactions against whatever is seen as most threatening to the prevailing social order (ibid, p.89). Furthermore, different factions of conservatives also brutally compete against each other as they are vying for support from the same social base (ibid, p.90). Based on Freedden’s (2003) explanation on conservatism, the reactionary Malay-Muslim SM described in this dissertation is an outgrowth of Malay conservatism. What sets them apart is the intensity of their nationalism, ultra-conservatism and Islamic populism that may sometimes parallel far-right discourses in the European context.

In a nutshell, understanding right-wing reactionaries such as those in Perkasa and ISMA will help to shed light on the Malays’ continual need for protection, sense of insecurity, and perception of threats against their interests. While neo-feudalism has eroded, it is not totally abandoned with different

³ Historically, there was another variant of Malay nationalism championed by the left-wing *Parti Kebangsaan Melayu Malaya*. However, that perspective will not be discussed as it is not a major concern for this dissertation.

Malay political factions are still vying for the leadership of conservative Malays. The peculiar conservatism among Malays have been long observed. Scholars referred to it by many names – “psychological feudalism” (Alatas, 1968), “neo-feudalism” (Muzaffar, 1979) and “traditionalistic and capitalistic nationalisms” (Maaruf, 2014) or just “traditionalism” (Amoroso, 2014). All of them represent the Malays’ aversion to change and reluctance to embrace liberalisation. The Malays are also becoming increasingly attached to Islam as their religion. Explicating Malay conservatism is not the primary focus of this dissertation, but it clarifies why I refer to the Malay-Muslim SM represented by Perkasa and ISMA as a reactionary social force. Putting this ideological position in proper context helps to explain their hardline and far-right discourses to mobilise conservative Malays in the post-2008 era (Snow, et. al., 1986; Snow & Benford, 1988; 1992).

1.3 Primary Research Question

From the onset, the focus of this dissertation is to understand factors that created and sustained a reactionary Malay-Muslim SM. As mentioned earlier, some political observers saw Perkasa and ISMA as merely an extension of UMNO. This is because they advocated for the same position as UMNO and attracted support from the same pool of people. However, social relations are often complex with many shades of grey. Therefore, this research sought a more critical and unbiased account of the SM. My fieldwork started in the second half of 2014 when contentious politics in the Malaysian civil society was at its zenith. The 13th general election had just concluded in May 2013 with BN losing more seats in the Parliament as well as the popular vote. Non-Malay political parties in BN such as *Malaysian Chinese Association* (MCA) and *Parti Gerakan Rakyat Malaysia* (PGRM) were almost decimated. As UMNO was able to win back a

few additional seats and regained control of Kedah state government, Prime Minister Najib Razak claimed that it was a “Chinese tsunami” that affected BN’s electoral performance. The following day, the Malay language broadsheet *Utusan Malaysia* screamed in its frontpage headline, “*Apa Lagi Cina Mahu?*” (What else do the Chinese want?). As the next general election would only take place five years later in 2018, political passions of that period temporarily shifted from partisan struggle for state control to political contentions within civil society itself. With controversial religious issues such as the Allah row and apostasy among Muslims coming to the fore, the reactionary SM was receiving more public attention and became even more politically contentious.

The Allah row reached a climax not long after 2013 general election with a court verdict favouring Muslims. Both Muslim and Christian groups had gone to court to fight over their rights to use the Arabic word for God since 2007 following a dispute on the license renewal for a Catholic publication, *The Herald*, which insisted on using the word Allah. During this period, Malay-Muslim groups such as Perkasa and ISMA were the most prominent in pressuring the state to continue protecting Malay-Muslim interests. It can be surmised that their emergence drove a wedge into the interracial solidarity (or what Weiss (2006) called “coalitional capital”), which was painstakingly built during the Reformasi years and strengthened through the Bersih pro-democracy movement as Malay and non-Malay activists joining forces to resist the state. At first, Perkasa and ISMA appeared like state-sponsored SMOs that acted as a countermovement against the progressive movements. However, their independent responses to various issues necessitated further investigations.

On the surface, Perkasa activists were echoing what UMNO’s hardline politicians had always advocated prior to 2008, while ISMA mirrors those of Islamist parties such as PAS and *Barisan Jemaah Islamiah Malaysia* (Berjasa). If Perkasa stands for Malay rights, ISMA stands for the empowerment of Islam.

Just like how UMNO and PAS forged a cooperation via *Muafakat Nasional*⁴ (MN) after 2018, both Perkasa and ISMA found their common grounds in civil society. Even though Perkasa and ISMA might have had their respective linkages with different Malay-Muslim political parties, neither blindly adhered to UMNO and PAS. In fact, Perkasa has been consistently opposing the Malaysian state's liberalisation plans since the earliest days of Najib's administration in 2009. When it came to issues of common interest, both Perkasa and ISMA were also willing to work with their rivals. For example, they cooperated with Bersih 2.0 by mobilising their supporters together to protest the Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement (TPPA) in late 2016. After the TPPA deal was scuttled by US President Donald Trump in early 2017, Perkasa and ISMA also turned their guns on China's foreign investments in Malaysia. By then, their position had become more aligned with *Pakatan Harapan* (PH), which was helmed by Dr Mahathir. Among others, the PH's election campaign manifesto in 2018 promised to review China's foreign investments brought to Malaysia under the Najib administration.

Following the tenets of grounded theory (Charmaz, 2008 pp.155-172), I first went into this PhD project by trying to have as little preconceptions as possible about the subjects of my inquiry despite their well-known reputation. I was also concerned about whether I would be able to maintain the research integrity of this project due to personal biases while struggling with some methodological questions. However, the basic motive in undertaking this academic exercise, which is to develop a more nuanced understanding of the reactionary Malay-Muslim SM, in relation to the changing political contexts of Malaysia remains. Notwithstanding a negative public perception towards Perkasa and ISMA by non-Malays during the period under review, there is

⁴ MN (National Concord) is a political alliance between UMNO and PAS, which was formalised in September 2019 (Zain, 2019). However, this alliance eventually broke down due to the fierce rivalry between UMNO and PPBM, which later joined the alliance, and PAS' insistence on cooperating with PPBM.

much to learn about their emergence, development and actions. Due to my own shortcomings and misreading on what could be the most appropriate theoretical approaches and research methodology to achieve that, I ended up modifying my primary research questions several times as the political contexts changed over the years. Once the theoretical and methodological issues were resolved, I settled on the following as my primary research question:

Taking into account both structure and agency, what are the key factors that allowed a reactionary SM, with Perkasa and ISMA as case studies, to emerge and develop in the immediate post-2008 decade between 2008 and 2017?

1.4 Secondary Research Questions

As I proceeded with this project, some of the questions that were earlier considered as potential primary research question were submerged into the primary research question or relegated to the backseat. However, some of them are still important questions that need to be explored and answered in the process. Therefore, this research will also address the following questions, which are more specific and constitute parts of the dissertation.

- (a) What happened to the Malaysian state (with BN as the ruling regime) before and after 2008 general election? How can we understand and describe the POS in the post-2008 era?
- (b) What was the relationship between UMNO and the reactionary SM that emerged in the post-2008 era? To what extent has the party's ideology of

ketuanan Melayu contributed to the emergence and development of SMOs like Perkasa and ISMA?

- (c) What constituted the reactionary Malay-Muslim SM's collective agency and how the SM derived and sustained its ability to mobilise supporters in the period under review from 2008 until 2017?

1.5 Statements of Proposition

To scaffold the question above, I came up with several propositions to guide my research. These statements were hypotheses that I derived from initial archival research and preliminary fieldwork. Although these propositions are unnecessary for an interpretivist qualitative research (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011), they helped me to be more empirically grounded. Validating or disproving hypothesis is not the goal of interpretivism but research methodology expert Malcolm Williams (2000) said that even interpretivists would inevitably make generalisations. There are practical reasons for me to come up with a set of initial propositions. To improve the validity of my interpretations, I can triangulate my initial findings by cross-checking them with the information collected during fieldwork or comparing them with other textual evidence. Furthermore, grounded theory as an emergent method requires both explicitness and flexibility (Charmaz, 2008, pp.155-156). Grounded theorists can create their own methodological strategies to handle puzzles and problems that arise as the inquiry proceeds. Their methods "can be inductive, deductive and interactive as to allow them to come up with creative problem-solving and imaginative interpretation (ibid, p.156)". Hence, my own unique approaches in answering the questions at hand instead of rigorously following one particular research method. The following are propositions that I developed about the reactionary SM.

Proposition 1

The Malaysian state has grown weaker after Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi took office from his predecessor Dr Mahathir in 2003. His more “liberal” approach to governing provided a fertile ground for both progressive and reactionary SMs to emerge.

Proposition 2

Several events following the 2008 and 2013 general elections have created grievances among reactionary Malays who genuinely believed that all forms of liberalisation (whether political, economic or social) would threaten their material (i.e., Malay special rights) and non-material interests (i.e., Islam’s status as the official religion).

Proposition 3

While there was no lack of resources (i.e., leadership, funds, and allies) to support the mobilisation of conservative Malays, resource mobilisation by the virtue of state sponsorship could not fully explain the popularity and longevity of a reactionary SM during the post-2008 era. It was more important to understand how a combination of factors, in example, changes in state structures and agency of actors supported their collective action.

Proposition 4

While the reactionary SM appeared to have the support from certain state elites, the relationship between movement activists and UMNO was complicated from the start. In opposing certain state policies, they put the BN in a difficult position.

Proposition 5

In framing the threat perception from liberalisation, some reactionary Malay activists displayed tendencies for populism, particularly in their campaigns against economic globalisation. As political competition intensified in Malaysia, their discourses became more populist and heightened ethnic tension.

1.6 Key Arguments and Findings

As I got new insights from personal communication, observations and additional archival research, I would consolidate the above propositions as per my findings in Chapters 3, 4, 5, 6 and 7. Based on my findings, I will make several key arguments throughout this dissertation. In Chapters 3 and 4, I will explain why state capacity, apart from regime type, is important in determining the POS for movement emergence and development in Malaysia. After tracing the historical evolution of the Malaysian state from 1969 until 2008, which I refer to as a “robust Leviathan,” in Chapter 3, I will explain how it became an “injured Leviathan” from 2008 onwards in Chapter 4. By recognising the flux in state capacity, we will understand how political transformation can occur even without regime change. Nevertheless, structural factors represent just one side of the larger state-society equation and we need to decipher the meaning of specific social action that happened within that environment.

Therefore, I will argue that the reactionary SM which emerged in the post-2008 era has collective agency despite its real and perceived linkages with UMNO. While representing a continuity of the previous conservative Malay ideological trend, my framing analyses will show that the movement was never

subservient to the Malaysian state or its constituents. Mustering its own strength in rallying conservative Malays, the SM challenged the injured Leviathan. In Chapter 5, I will explain how Perkasa and ISMA developed their own respective ketuanan Melayu and Islamic populism collective action frames. In Chapter 6, I will discuss the frame alignment processes that took place as they put their respective frames into action to mobilise conservative Malays. Finally, Chapter 7 will show how the concepts discussed earlier are applicable for our understanding of contemporary Malaysian politics by extending my analysis beyond the 2008 to 2017 frame into the post-2018 era.

1.6.1 Fieldwork

Following the initial propositions, I started my proper fieldwork on 15 August 2016 after getting the ethics approval from the University of Nottingham Malaysia's FASS Research Ethics Committee's approval on 23 March 2016 (See Appendix 1). On 15 August 2016, I visited Perkasa's headquarters in Kuala Lumpur, where I met and spoke with Perkasa's founding president Ibrahim Ali and several of his lieutenants, including vice-president Syed Osman Syed Mansor, secretary-general Syed Hassan Syed Ali and supreme council member Ruhanie Ahmad. Prior to that, I spent more than a year doing archival research on the Malaysian state as a key feature of the POS for movement emergence and development. Two months after my initial meeting with Perkasa leaders, I interviewed ISMA's former president Abdullah Zaik Abdul Rahman on 14 October 2016. This meeting took place at the SMO's headquarters in Bangi, Selangor. These interviews were among the two most eye-opening encounters for me as I not only got to interview key activists in Perkasa and ISMA but to see the premises from where they operated. By being on location, I was able to experience interacting with them and got a "feel" on

their identity. It also prompted my interest to further observe their activities and this had helped me to develop more ideas about them.

From then onwards, I started contacting other Perkasa and ISMA's leaders and activists, including those at the grassroots level. On the whole, my proper fieldwork lasted for more than a year until November 2017. During this time, I participated in several Perkasa and ISMA's events and interacted with about a dozen of their activists. While I set up a few formal interviews with their leaders, most of my meetings with grassroots activists were informal. For observation purposes, I attended Perkasa's annual general meetings (AGM) in 2016 and 2017. The first AGM that I attended was held from 19 until 20 November 2016 and the second one was from 18 until 19 November 2017. There I spoke to a few delegates, listened to some of their speeches and took note of their demeanours. I also attended one of ISMA's event called *Muzakarah Ulama: Aplikasi Maqasid Siyasah Syar'iyah Dalam Konteks Malaysia* (Ulama's discussion on the application of Maqasid Siyasah based on the Shariah in the Malaysian context) in Putrajaya on 12 November 2016. I was the only non-Muslim at the event and made acquaintances with several young ISMA activists who appeared keen to engage with me.

With the help of contacts I made from attending events, I was introduced to other activists. I also had the opportunity to visit in one of ISMA branches in Penang. Besides observing events organised by Perkasa and ISMA and speaking to their activists, I also participated in a few events that attracted conservative Malays and Islamists. Among others, I attended a public lecture called *Islam: Problems and Solutions to Humanity* by controversial Islamic preacher Dr Zakir Naik in Malacca before my proper fieldwork started on 17 April 2016. The event was extremely crowded and I saw for myself Dr Zakir's popularity among conservative Malays. Another event that I observed was *Himpunan Solidariti Ummah Untuk Rohingya* (Ummah Solidarity Gathering for

the Rohingyas) on 4 December 2016. This event was significant because UMNO and PAS leaders were sharing a stage for the first time. It marked the start of a possible cooperation between the two largest Malay parties after PAS pulled out of PH. The opportunity to observe all of these events helped me to make sense of the conservative Malay sentiment on the ground.

1.6.2 Research Methodology

As a qualitative study based on interpretivist approach, my research design is influenced by constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006; 2008) and *Verstehen* as prescribed by Max Weber, who suggested that social phenomena must be understood from viewpoints of the social actor (Martin, 2000). Hence, my research methodology is a combination of archival research, participant-observation and interviews, followed by framing analysis. As opposed to traditional grounded theory developed by Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss (2017), constructivist grounded theory proposed by Kathy Charmaz (2006) is a more flexible methodology that is suitable for exploring the subjective meanings and experiences of individuals in various social contexts. Meanwhile, *Verstehen* is a common methodology for interpretive sociology. There are three elements to *Verstehen* – namely intentional behaviour, meaningful behaviour and subjectively understandable behaviour (Tucker, 1965 pp.157-158). Compared to Charmaz's (2006) constructivist grounded theory approach, *Verstehen* is a broader method of finding out the meaning people attached to their actions and in seeing the reality constructed by them as opposed to looking for an objective reality.

Using insights from my own archival research on the Malaysian state and data from Perkasa and ISMA's discourses, I look for structural and agential

factors that may affect the emergence and development of a reactionary SM. While political opportunities may arise from structural changes, a new SM can only emerge and develop when political actors are motivated to take collective action despite constraints imposed by the structure. Of various structural factors, I recognise that a “strong state” is the biggest hindrance to civil society development in Malaysia. After settling on the idea that the state is an important factor impeding SMs, I did more research to understand the broad social processes that the Malaysian state experienced since 1969. Based on these findings, I developed my own theories on state transformation. These are done by re-interpreting existing models on the state, supported by data from my own archival research and insights from fieldwork.

To understand the agential factors that contributed to SM’s ability to mobilise supporters, I turned to framing theories and presented my findings as interpretive case studies. The case study approach is suitable for exploratory research and provide evidence to support my initial propositions. This was where I tried to be as empirically grounded as possible. According to Yin, a case study is “an empirical enquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident” (1994, p. 13).⁵ As I examined and re-examined my data, I became more convinced that Perkasa and ISMA were indeed the two most important SMOs representing broad interests of conservative Malays in the post-2008 era. Perkasa was established in 2009 as a direct consequence of 2008 general election while ISMA came into the limelight after 2013 general election. By doing a purposive sampling and thematic analysis on their discourses in the period between 2008 and 2017, I found a number of cases where they were antagonistic towards the Malaysian state.

⁵ Others such as Darke, Shanks and Broadbent said case study research “has often been associated with description and theory development, where it is used to provide evidence for hypothesis generation and for exploration of areas where existing knowledge is limited” (1998, p. 275).

Even though a large portion of the information in this dissertation was derived from secondary data, I also collected some primary data during my fieldwork from August 2016 until November 2017. The fieldwork was mostly done in the Klang Valley since Perkasa's headquarters is located in Kuala Lumpur while ISMA's head office is based in Bangi, Selangor. As mentioned earlier, I also visited one of ISMA's branches in Penang and spoke to activists there. The fieldwork can be considered as a "mini ethnographic case study" with less time-consuming interviews and a shorter period of observation (Fusch, et. al., 2017). Although most of my interviews were unstructured or semi-structured, I also conducted several formal interviews with Perkasa and ISMA's leaders. I usually engaged with my respondents informally by speaking to them over drinks at a *mamak* (Indian Muslim) restaurant or meeting at their workplace. For this dissertation, I decided to name the SMO leaders whom I spoke to but maintain the anonymity of grassroots activists to protect their identity. These SMO leaders did not insist on strict anonymity and what they revealed to me were generally consistent with their public statements.

From my participation in events organised by these two SMOs, I also retrieved some internal documents, which served as additional sources of primary data for this research. Broadly-speaking, I have followed Charmaz's (2008) constructivist grounded theory approach to a certain extent even though I eschewed intensive coding (ibid, pp.163-165). In lieu of coding using qualitative research software, I looked for broad themes and patterns in my data manually. There was theoretical sampling as my data collection and analysis happened concurrently (ibid, pp.166-167). I also continuously compared data and tried to engage with them reflexively. Whenever feasible, I injected my own perspectives into the findings by recalling my experiences interacting with Perkasa and ISMA activists. According to *Verstehen*, a

researcher is expected to interpret the meanings that respondents attached to their social action.

1.7 Limitations and Weaknesses

Despite my efforts to be empirically grounded, there are various limitations and weaknesses in this dissertation. Like other qualitative work using purposive and theoretical sampling, the findings are subjective and their validity can be contested. Unlike positivist research, an interpretivist study is not generalisable across different countries and time periods. Even though I strived to be empirical, there are many ways to interpret information. While I consider Perkasa and ISMA as two of the most representative SMOs for the reactionary SM, I did not (and could not) examine every Malay-Muslim SMOs in Malaysia. I was selective in my case studies and was particularly interested in those that indicated an antagonistic relationship between the reactionary SM and the Malaysian state. There may be other Malay-Muslim groups without the same degree of agency as Perkasa and ISMA. Hence, one can turn around and argue that the reactionary SM they represented is a state-sponsored movement (without collective agency) by pointing to those SMOs.

However, I believe that a good interpretivist work, while eschewing the idea of objective truth, should cohere with the prevailing public perception. There were many Malay-Muslim SMOs but few people would deny that Perkasa and ISMA were the loudest, most visible and influential reactionary groups in the period under review for this dissertation. Even though Perkasa was different from ISMA, both shared enough commonalities to be classified under the same reactionary movement. There was sufficient ideological congruence between them as reflected in their framing. Perkasa and ISMA were

also sufficiently independent from UMNO, which convinced me they were not merely state-sponsored as alleged by their detractors. Other limitations and weaknesses in my research pertain to the timing of my fieldwork and its potential biasness. Since I only started the fieldwork in August 2016, my observations, interactions and perceptions might have been affected by the prevailing political circumstances in the period between 2016 and 2017.

As the saying goes, a week is a long time in politics. There were many events I could not attend and experience for myself. I only interpreted those events based on news reports. The reactionary activists whom I encountered in 2016 and 2017 seemed to have mellowed considerably from their previously hardline positions in the early 2010s. This was especially true in the case of Perkasa as many things happened between 2009, when it first emerged, and August 2016, when my fieldwork began. When Perkasa was set up in 2009, it displayed far-right tendencies to defy the Malaysian state, which was planning for a slew of reforms. However, as Najib's reforms ground to a halt, Perkasa also warmed up to UMNO in the run-up to the 2013 general election. Things changed again towards the end of 2015 when Dr Mahathir and Najib's relationship soured in the wake of the 1MDB scandal. In contrast to the extreme image of Perkasa portrayed by the media, I encountered activists who were not only critical of Najib but willing to work with PKR and DAP. Most notably, Perkasa Youth chief Irwan Fahmi Ideris resigned from UMNO and joined PKR in December 2017. From my own contacts, I also know that some Malaysian Christian church leaders even cultivated friendship with Perkasa president Ibrahim Ali.

On the other hand, ISMA was closer to my initial impression of being more hardline than Perkasa that toning down its rhetoric in 2016. As an Islamist NGO, it is similar to other Islamist *dakwah* (missionary) organisations such as

ABIM.⁶ However, it only came into the limelight much later in 2013 compared to Perkasa. In spite of its image of being extreme and far-right, their activists took great pains to emphasise that ISMA was actually “*sederhana*” (moderate) even though they were vocal in defending what they perceived as legitimate Muslim interests. From my interactions with them, I realised that they would not reject discourses with non-Muslims even though they were ultraconservatives who could be extremely adamant and unbearably pushy on matters pertaining to Islam. Some ISMA activists also hold conspiratorial and misguided views about non-Muslims but their events were open to everyone and they did not forbid anyone, including non-Muslims, from participating. Their activists might even spread conspiracy theories and use inflammatory languages akin to some European far-right party leaders but they did not openly encourage or condone violence. These experiences contributed to my impression of Perkasa and ISMA as representatives of what I have earlier referred to as a reactionary SM in the post-2008 era.

1.8 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have provided some reasons for us to be interested in the reactionary groups that emerged and developed between 2008 and 2017. I believe that Perkasa and ISMA are reactionary Malay nationalist and Islamist organisations who want to preserve and strengthen a conservative status quo that favours the Malay-Muslim majority. In defending Malay conservatism,

⁶ Many Islamist organisations in Malaysia were influenced by the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) and modelled themselves after the MB to an extent by focusing on community outreach and welfare activities. Besides *dakwah* (Islamic religious mission), their approaches strongly emphasise *tarbiyyah*, which means education in Arabic. Most of their activists are highly-educated, with many professionals such as doctors and lawyers among them. While ABIM is mainly led by Muslim graduates of local universities, ISMA is founded by Muslim students who returned to Malaysia after graduating from overseas’ universities in Western and Middle Eastern countries.

they projected (populist) far-right tendencies following a heightened threat perception against Malay-Muslim interests in the post-2008 era. These threats can be attributed to structural factors such as democratisation as UMNO's grip on power was weakened, and globalisation, which increased conservative Malays' fear of Malaysia succumbing to liberalisation pressures. In spite of these, Perkasa and ISMA still managed to stay within the broad framework of mainstream politics by eschewing the fringe politics and violence associated with the European and global far-right. Other than their racist rhetoric, these reactionaries have no revolutionary fervour to transform society like what most radicals or extremists aspire to do (Lo, 1982; Blee & Creasap, 2010).

By adhering to the Malaysian constitution, Perkasa's and ISMA's political goals were not radically different from UMNO and PAS. Understanding this is important because the reactionaries and their brand of ethnonationalism – no matter how unsavoury and repulsive – is unfortunately a staple in Malaysia's mainstream politics. Therefore, regurgitating or amplifying what is regarded as far-right views in Western Europe is insufficient to qualify them as extremist in the local context. It may be more accurate to describe Perkasa, ISMA and others of their ilk as reactionaries since they appeared to have become hardcore and hardline. While not all conservative Malays are reactionaries, Pew Research Centre's surveys have consistently found Malaysia to be among the world's most morally conservative countries (Zurairi, 2014; Mokhtar, 2023). There are much at stake for the reactionaries to spring into action when UMNO power is threatened because Malay traditional conservatism is entrenched even before the country achieved its independence in 1957. UMNO, as the leading party representing conservative Malays, was instrumental in creating the Federation of Malaya in 1948.

As a key component of the state and its regime, UMNO started as a social movement when it mobilised Malays to oppose the formation of Malayan

Union in 1946. However, UMNO's role as a conservative social force took a backseat when it became a political party from 1948 onwards. Favoured by the British colonial government to assume power upon the country's independence, UMNO's position in the state was entrenched and the party led successive coalition governments that ruled the country from 1957 until 2018. There were other right-wing Malay groups but none was a credible social movement prior to the emergence of Perkasa and ISMA. Except for PAS, no other Malay organisation could potentially displace UMNO as the most dominant force representing conservative Malays. The Islamic *dakwah* movement might have emerged in the 1970s but it was progressive in challenging the state on Islamic and other policy matters. Hence, it was a novelty when Perkasa and ISMA emerged in the post-2008 era. In Chapter 2, I will discuss the relevant literature which influenced my understanding of Perkasa, ISMA and the reactionary SM they represent as well as their relationship with the Malaysian state. I will also explain the theoretical framework that is used for this dissertation.

CHAPTER 2 Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

2.1 Introduction

This chapter discusses the relevant literature and theoretical traditions that influenced my analyses on the emergence and development of a reactionary movement in Malaysia from 2008 to 2017. To illuminate how I came up with my theoretical framework and original perspectives on the reactionaries, I reviewed a lot of literature and organised this chapter into three main parts. In the first part, I will explore some ideas relating to the interactions between the state and its ruling regime and how these affected the prospects for movement emergence. Then, I will discuss how state repression or coercion functions as an element of state capacity. From these, I conceptualise the changes to state capacity as representing a political opportunity structure (POS). Hence, I will also highlight some literature on POS by social movement (SM) scholars such as Doug McAdam and Sidney Tarrow. In seeing the state as POS, I am inspired by Dan Slater's (2010) ordering power model with a realisation that it is state capacity, not regime type, that holds the key to understanding the dynamics of state repression. All of these perspectives, theories and models inform my analysis of the Malaysian state in Chapter 3 and 4 as a POS that respectively hindered and facilitated the emergence of new movements in particular periods.

In the second part, I turn to the literature on Perkasa and ISMA to understand how these two organisations are understood and perceived by scholars of Malaysian politics. Drawing upon the debates on the characteristics of far-right parties and movements in Europe, I will offer my own insights to arrive at a more nuanced understanding of Perkasa and ISMA. I will also make

a comparison between these two Malaysian organisations and their counterparts in Indonesia to show where the labelling of the former as far-right “extremist” may have fallen short. Finally, the third part will discuss framing theory, which is another branch of SM studies. Since I have conceived Perkasa and ISMA as reactionary groups that used populist discourses, frame analysis is the best method to assess the efficacy of their mobilisation. Here, I will highlight the relevant works by framing theorists such as David Snow and Robert Benford. This chapter will show that my subsequent analyses in this dissertation will comprise of just two major elements – one based on the idea of the state as POS and another is a framing analysis, albeit one that looks at populist discourses. As mentioned earlier, I want to unravel the relationship between the Malaysian state and a reactionary movement which detractors implied as state-sponsored (Lim, 2010; Govindasamy, 2014; Funston, 2016). I am also interested to know how the reactionaries in Perkasa and ISMA successfully mobilised conservative Malays and sustained their activism in the turbulent years following the 2008 general election.

2.2 State, Regime and Social Movement

There is no denying that the state is the most important structure that shape the environment for movements to emerge and develop in society (Tarrow, 2011 pp.87-89). Generally speaking, the state is a sovereign entity with a defined territory, a population, and a system of government which enforces laws on the population within that territory. This is most common definition for a state but there are also other ways to understand a state (Cudworth, et.al., 2007). One of the earliest attempts came from the political philosopher Thomas Hobbes (2008). In his work, *Leviathan*, originally published in 1651, Hobbes called for a strong, centralised state to maintain order. He portrayed the state

as “Leviathan” – a biblical sea monster that conjures up the imagery of a powerful and fearsome social structure. The Leviathan may be ferocious but Hobbes believed that without a strong state, the life of an individual in the natural state of society is “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short” (ibid, p.106). There will be endless conflicts and violence as individuals and groups fight each other.

In the 18th century, philosophers such as John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau also contributed to discussions of the state. Locke, in his *Two Treatises of Government*, focused on the social contract and the protection of natural rights by the state (Laslett, 1988). Meanwhile, Rousseau (1994) proposed in *The Social Contract* the idea of a general will and an egalitarian state. In the 19th century, the great sociologist Max Weber defined the state as an organisation with “a monopoly on the legitimate use of violence” to enforce its sovereignty within a given territory and to exercise control and authority over the population (Cudworth, et. al. 2007 p.95). Of these, the Hobbesian and Weberian definitions are the most relevant for this dissertation because they focus on the use of coercion to dominate society. Max Weber’s identification of legal-rational authority as the most common source of power in modern states also guided my understanding of Hobbes’ Leviathan. It influenced my decision to look at how elections can provide or deny legitimacy for the use of draconian legislations as tools of state repression. The coercive capacity of a state ultimately shapes the political context for SM emergence. The more “legitimately repressive” a state is, the more difficult for a movement to be successful.

In the effort to understanding the state, we also need to look at the regime because the intensity of state repression hinges on its ruling regime’s willingness to employ coercion. Even though the state and its regime are interrelated, they are two distinct concepts. A regime conventionally refers to

the government but it can also mean a specific set of rules, institutions, practices, and power relationships that govern the state (Easton, 1953; Dahl, 1971). In other words, the regime encompasses the political, economic, and social institutions that shape how power is exercised in a state. I will refer to the Malaysian regime in this dissertation as either UMNO or BN. I do not see an issue in doing this because BN was the ruling coalition that shaped Malaysia's authoritarian institutions with UMNO as the most dominant party. According to Juan Linz, authoritarian regimes often reflect the "mentality" of their rulers (2000, pp.162-165). Similarly, it was BN (and UMNO) mentality that entrenched the institutions and practices of authoritarianism in the Malaysian state. Furthermore, "one-party states" are common phenomenon in many non-democratic countries where the line separating the state and its government is blurred (Brooker, 1995). This matter will be briefly discussed at the start of Chapter 3, which is simultaneously a historical review and critical analysis on the Malaysian state. These will contextualise my findings on POS for movement emergence in Chapter 4.

After discussing the definitions for state and regime, I would now clarify the concepts of SM and SMOs. Although both are different units of analysis, they are inextricably intertwined. Some scholars define an SM as a "collective" where a group of people with a common purpose or goal come together to bring about social, political, economic, or cultural change (Tilly and Wood, 2009; Tarrow, 2011). According to Tarrow, SMs are "collective challenges, based on common purposes and social solidarities, in sustained interaction with elites, opponents and authorities" (2011, p.9). Meanwhile, an SMO is a formalised or structured group that is a part of a particular SM. While it is possible for an SM to exist temporarily without SMOs, the movement will fade away after a while "without some degree of formal organisation" (ibid, p.124). Studying SMOs such as Perkasa and ISMA is important because they are the most reactionary among conservative Malay groups comprising various shades of right-wing

persuasions. They represent what I called a reactionary movement within a larger political movement.

2.3 Repression and Social Mobilisation

Movement scholars such as Doug McAdam, Sidney Tarrow and Charles Tilly (2001) who worked together to come up with the notion of “contentious politics” as a unifying theme in studying various forms of conflicts have all examined the role of states in facilitating and hindering SMs in their individual works. McAdam (1999) and Tarrow (2011) highlighted how social mobilisation can be affected by changes in state policies, shifts in political alignments, and constraints in political participation. Tilly also raised the issue of state repression (Davenport, 2009). He said state repression hinders social mobilisation when a regime resorts to banning political movements, using informants and agents provocateurs, censoring newspapers and arresting dissidents. It may even go to the extent of torturing dissidents, enforcing disappearances and mass killing (Tilly 2003). However, Davenport (2009, p.379) noted that Tilly (1978; 2003; 2006) had also consistently argued that repression and dissent are related to each other. Totalitarian, authoritarian and weak regimes are all repressive to varying degrees but authoritarian regimes are the most repressive towards dissidents (Tilly, 1978). Even though state repression affects social mobilisation, the flow of power in state-society relations is not simply a unidirectional, top-down process where the state is always able to impose its will on society.

According to Tarrow, the state itself is a major target of contentious politics (2011, p.71). With social cleavages as a source of contentious politics, the state is a prize to be captured by dominant societal groups. In capitalist

societies, Marxists see the state as beholden to the bourgeoisie. The state is also a fulcrum for the mediation of conflicts and a regulator of society's needs (ibid). Depending on their balance of power, societal forces can resist the state to varying degree. Examples from developing countries however show that state repression does not always work and states are known to have been obstructed from carrying out its policies by different groups in society. Joel Migdal (1988) also highlighted this in his seminal work, *Strong Societies and Weak States*, in which he characterised strong societies as "web-like" with "a melange of fairly autonomous social organisations" (ibid, p.37). Although many post-colonial states are weak, Malaysia is exceptional for being identified as a strong state (Jesudason, 1995; Slater, 2012; Larsson, 2013). Due to its history of war (i.e., the Malayan Emergency from 1948 until 1960) and ethnic conflicts, Malaysia inherited a set of colonial laws that effectively "weaponised" the state against society until today. It also had a high capacity in extracting taxes from society, which buttressed its coercive powers (Slater, 2010, pp. 8-9).

2.4 State Capacity and Regime Type

Describing Malaysia as an "authoritarian Leviathan," Dan Slater explained that the internal conflicts that erupted after World War Two necessitated the British and their "local collaborators" (i.e., UMNO) to embark on an extensive state-building. This endowed Malaysia with "effective civilian institutions of coercion" and a "capacity to impose direct tax on the elites" (ibid, pp.21-25). However, Tomas Larsson (2013), who surveyed the fiscal and legal-administrative state capacities in Southeast Asia, found that Malaysia's fiscal capacity had declined between 2005 and 2009. Malaysia was apparently suffering from a "fiscal sclerosis" as the state was spending more money than it was able to collect in taxes (ibid, p.348). Citing Slater (2010, p.35), he said

revenue collection is the “next best thing as the perfect barometer of state power” (Larsson, 2013 p.338). This indicated that some structural changes were taking place in this period as the Malaysian state started to face budgetary constraints which required tax adjustments and subsidy rationalisation. In 2007, Prime Minister Abdullah said Malaysia could no longer afford to spend RM35 billion ringgit in oil and gas subsidies each year (“Malaysian PM signals,” 2007). Despite recognising Malaysia as a strong state, most scholars of Malaysian politics were more concerned with regime type compared to a shift in state capacity. So, the country’s exceptionalism as a strong state was taken for granted. This is understandable as regime change has never occurred in Malaysia and the question of authoritarian durability was foremost in the minds of many political scientists. Hence, the focus on Malaysia’s prospects for democratisation.

For a long time, scholars were fascinated with regime typology for Malaysia. The regime has been given various labels, from “quasi-democracy” (Ahmad, 1989), “semi-democracy” (Case, 1993) “repressive-responsive” (Crouch, 1996) to “pseudo-democratic” (Case, 2001), “electoral autocratic” (Diamond, 2002) and “illiberal democracy” (Weiss, 2006).⁷ More recently, the Malaysian regime was popularly referred to as either “electoral authoritarian” (Case, 2008) or “competitive authoritarian” (Way & Levitsky, 2010). Despite BN’s defeat in 2018, Malaysia is still considered an electoral authoritarian regime due to the lack of substantive reforms (Fong & Teh, 2020). Even in social movement literature, there is an underlying assumption that Malaysia’s coercive capacity was fairly constant and what matters is whether the regime is authoritarian or democratic. Most analysts reckoned that regime type ultimately determines the outcome of state repression. This is also the impression I gathered from Meredith Weiss’ (2006) study on the Reformasi

⁷ Political scientist and CNN commentator Fareed Zakaria popularised the term illiberal democracy to describe hybrid regimes. Anwar Ibrahim used this term to describe the BN regime with his “Letters from Sungai Buloh”, which were published in Malaysiakini while he was in prison (Mageswari, 2001).

movement, Ming Chee Ang's (2014) research on the Chinese education movement and Ying Hooi Khoo's (2020) work on the Bersih pro-democracy movement.

Both Weiss (2006) and Ang (2014) have referred to Malaysia as an illiberal democracy. Describing the relationship between this regime type and social mobilisation, Weiss said the Malaysian regime was an illiberal democracy that left "an incentive for contained contention with functioning opposition parties that stand at least some chance of electoral victory" (2006, p.43). Being "moderately coercive", the Malaysian state inadvertently allowed for the development of "coalitional capital" to facilitate the process of coalition-building among the diverse oppositional forces in civil society (ibid). Meanwhile, Ang (2014) did not question the state's capacity to crack down on SMs. Since it focused on high intensity protests, she reckoned that societal resistance may become clandestine and small-scale to minimise the risks of being repressed (ibid). However, Ang believed that oppositional movements can exist and even thrive under a repressive environment by cultivating allies within the regime. Taking a leaf from the larger framework of contentious politics (McAdam, et. al., 2001), Ang suggested that movement activists "engage in active and dynamic collaboration, rather than passive resistance, with non-liberal democratic regimes through brokers" (ibid, p.19). This is how the Chinese education movement is able to survive for decades.

More recently, Khoo (2020) wrote a book on the Bersih movement based on her PhD thesis, which assessed Bersih's contributions to Malaysia's democratisation. It discussed regime type but nothing much was said on state capacity, except for a section on state repression (ibid). For decades, the ruling regime had shown determination in wielding the strong state capacity to clamp down on dissent by restricting certain types of collective action such as large gatherings and street protests. Nevertheless, there is still a vibrant civil society

with a myriad of social movements in Malaysia. The development of these civil society organisations is well-documented, even though researchers may not employ a movement perspective to study them (Weiss and Hassan, 2003). During the 1970s and 1980s, the question of Islamisation and emergence of Islamist NGOs such as ABIM led by the charismatic Anwar Ibrahim dominated academic interests (Nagata, 1980; Abu Bakar 1981; Muzaffar, 1987; Sundaram and Cheek, 1988). BN was particularly sensitive towards groups which tried to undermine the state politically through mass protests and would not hesitate to suppress them. This influenced SMs' strategies of survival with open dissent not being opted as a common repertoire of contention by civil society until the Reformasi movement led by Anwar Ibrahim broke out in 1998.

2.5. Understanding the POS in Post-2008 Malaysia

After highlighting the importance of studying state capacity and its ruling regime's determination to muster the strength, I return to Sidney Tarrow (2011) and Doug McAdam (1999) for guidance on theories of political opportunity structure (POS). I follow Tarrow's definition on political opportunity as "a consistent – but not necessarily formal or permanent – dimensions of the political environment or of change in that environment that provides incentives for collective action by affecting expectations for success or failure (2011, p.163). According to him, "opportunities" and "threats" are two of the most important dimensions that we must consider when assessing a political opportunity structure (ibid, p.160). In explaining "opportunities," he followed Jack Goldstone and Charles Tilly's (2001) description of them as "the (perceived) probability that social protest actions will lead to success in achieving a desired outcome" (ibid, p.182). Therefore, anything that affects state capacity or shifts support away from the regime will increase opportunities. In

explaining “threats,” he suggested that it relates to “the risks and costs of action or inaction rather than the prospect of success” (Tarrow, 2011 p.160). He also highlighted that writers in the political opportunity tradition emphasise mobilisation of resources external to the group and look at certain mechanisms in the immediate environment that may spark mobilisation. These included “the attribution of opportunity and threat, the availability of potential allies, the formation of coalitions, both on the margins of or within the polity, and the framing of entire episodes of contention” (ibid). Following the same tradition, this dissertation will cover these mechanisms to understand the factors that allowed the reactionary SM to emerge.

Social movement theorist Doug McAdam (1999) also provided an important theoretical framework for my understanding on POS. Although his work was originally published in 1982, his political process model also contributed to my overall analysis of the political opening in Malaysia after the 2008 general election. From my observations of Perkasa and ISMA, I realised that they were also resisting the ruling elites instead of just supporting them as the latter were considering reforms. As reactionaries, they were determined to prevent Malaysia from liberalising. In this respect, McAdam’s work informed me to examine the “broad social processes” that may lead to the restructuring of existing power relations over a long period of time. The PP model also posited that cognitive liberation and indigenous organisational strength as two other important factors that may contribute to a movement’s emergence. Cognitive liberation refers to the subjective meaning that people attach to their situation (McAdam, p.48). Many people in a group must see a shift in political opportunities before they are motivated to take collective action and to which extent they can garner enough support to successfully carry out their collective action. While the objective structural changes may have occurred, social mobilisation will not take place without cognitive liberation.

There are a number of clues on how some conservative Malays achieved their cognitive liberation to point of becoming reactionary. For example, many of them were shocked when Anwar Ibrahim unilaterally declared an end to ketuanan Melayu and proposed for “ketuanan rakyat” (people’s supremacy) to replace the former, if the opposition comes to power, not long after the 2008 general election. What added to their sense of urgency was Anwar’s claim that he had the numbers to topple the government. The pronouncement was so shocking that it spurred the emergence of a new reactionary movement to resist ketuanan rakyat. On indigenous strength, McAdam stressed the power of networks for the success of a movement (ibid, p.44-48). Citing Oberschall (1973), McAdam said: “If no networks exist, the aggrieved population will not be able to generate anything more than a short-term, idealised, ephemeral outbursts and riots” (1999, p.44). Similarly, the reactionaries comprised of a diverse networks of Malay organisations. Those not involved in Perkasa and ISMA could also become indirectly affiliated with the reactionary movement. Many of its allies and supporters came from UMNO and other Malay-based political parties as well as among some Malay bureaucrats with conservative leanings. All of these factors will be explored in Chapter 4.

2.6 Investigating the State

Earlier, I highlighted how most scholars overlooked state capacity as a structural constraint for movement’s emergence (Weiss, 2006; Ang, 2014; Khoo, 2021). They usually discussed regime type with an underlying assumption that the state capacity (or the regime’s determination) to carry out repression is constant. According to Charles Tilly (1978), there are four types of regimes (which were described as tolerant, repressive, totalitarian and weak governments) based on their responses to dissent – in terms of repression,

facilitation and toleration of protests. Repression means cracking down on dissidents and their activities while facilitation is the opposite when a regime decides to reduce the cost of collective action. Instead of arresting protestors, the government may publicise and encourage its citizens to participate in SMs. Toleration refers to a situation in between repression and facilitation. It may indicate inactivity or quiet acceptance by the government towards protests.

For Tilly (*ibid*), a repressive government, or an authoritarian regime, is the worst even though it may tolerate some dissent. This can be juxtaposed with a weak government with limited capacity for repression and has to tolerate more protests. Although the Malaysian state had no qualms in repressing dissidents in the past, the situation changed after Dr Mahathir stepped down as the prime minister in 2003. The regime remained authoritarian but the intensity of state repression has declined while the frequency of protests was rising. Prime Minister Abdullah also allowed for a freer media and his successor Najib repealed a preventive detention law. It was unusual because strong authoritarian regimes were expected to apply the full weight of state repression on dissidents who threatened their powers. As such, we should investigate state capacity rather than just focusing on regime type.

However, scholars of democratisation such as Lucan Way and Steven Levitsky (2010) did not notice a declining capacity. Despite BN's electoral setback in the 2008 general election, they reckoned that the Malaysian state maintained extraordinary strength and the regime was stable. They explained that a competitive authoritarian regime's stability is influenced by three factors – its linkage with Western powers, its own organisational power, and the leverage that Western powers have on the regime. Since they believed that Western linkage and leverage on the Malaysian regime were generally low, the most important factor accounting for its stability was organisational power. In this respect, the BN ruling regime was said to have “high organisational power”

while the state had “enormous coercive capacity” (ibid, p.319). This follows the logic that an authoritarian regime has better prospects for survival if it has greater power to prevent or to crack down on dissents. Hence, Way and Levitsky believed that Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi had “underutilised his coercive power” against regime opponents (2010, p.328). No further explanation was offered for this anomaly. They also overlooked the effects of globalisation on Malaysia in favour of Western powers’ linkages and leverage with the regime. However, Way and Levitsky (ibid) were not alone as scholars such as Dan Slater (2012) also suggested that an authoritarian regime can restrain its use of state repression voluntarily. Commentors such as Bridget Welsh and James Chin noted that even a “Mr Nice Guy” like Abdullah could ascend to the top position of an authoritarian regime (2013, pp.103-108).

Nevertheless, coercive power is just one aspect of state capacity. There are other dimensions to state capacity such as fiscal capacity and legal-administrative capacities. More importantly, state capacity is not static and can also decline over time. Tomas Larsson has shown that the Malaysian state’s fiscal capacity on average was relatively low compared to other Southeast Asian countries (Larson 2013, pp.338-339). It was unable to collect as much taxes as it required to sustain its huge spending (ibid, p.348). Undeniably, the fiscal dimension of state capacity can affect a state’s coercive capacity and its willingness to apply coercion. For example, a decline in fiscal capacity may hamper the procurement of new equipment for riot police and affect the state’s ability to quell protests. Not surprisingly, poor countries are usually weak states that cannot fully repress regime opponents due to weak fiscal capacity. Fiscal health is also important to maintain elite cohesion, which is critical to the success of a regime’s high-intensity coercion against its opponents (Way and Levitsky, 2010, p.60). Therefore, we should carefully examine the Malaysian state’s transformation over the years to understand what affected its capacity and its regime’s determination to use coercive power more forcefully. This will

have a significant impact on the POS. It may not be just a matter of choice for ruling elites to refrain from cracking down on opponents as they need to consider the costs of carrying out repression against their prospects in winning elections under an electoral authoritarian regime.

2.7 Slater's Ordering Power Model

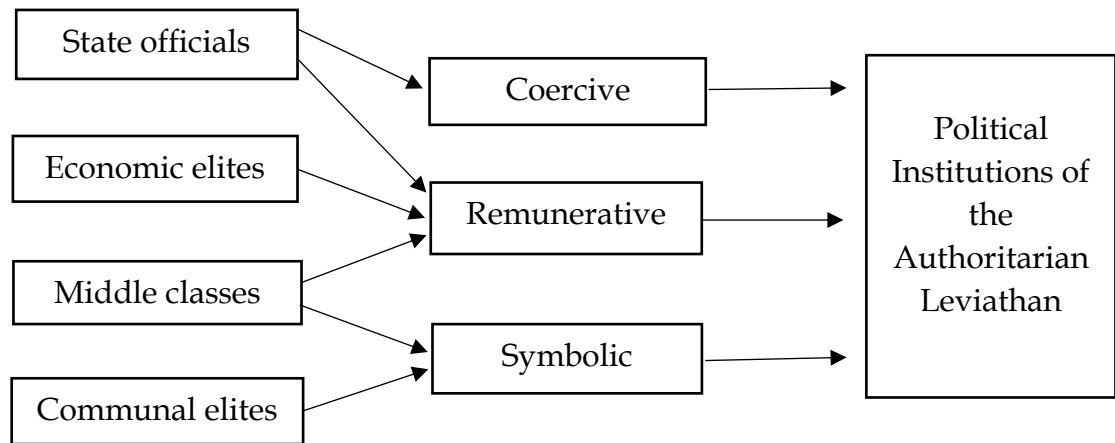
To explain Malaysian state's transformation, I appropriated a part of Slater's (2010) "ordering power model" which deals with state ability to extract power from society. While model explains authoritarian regime durability, it is still relevant for my analysis of the broad social processes in Malaysia. According to Slater (2010, p.5), societal elites are willing to support authoritarian regimes to have a strong state if they believe it will protect them from certain threats. Therefore, they participate in what is known as "protection pacts." As Slater put it: "When elites do not act collectively, authoritarian institutions do not function effectively" (ibid). There are four sets of societal elites that give power to the state under these protection pacts. They are state officials, economic elites, the middle classes and communal elites. Based on Amitai Etzioni's (1961) subtypes of organisational power, Slater proposed that the state extracts three types of power from the elites: coercive powers from state officials (i.e. army generals and police chiefs); remunerative powers from state officials, economic elites (i.e. corporate tycoons and industrialists), and the middle classes (i.e. petty bourgeoisie and professionals); and symbolic powers from the middle class and communal elites (i.e. leaders of a particular ethnic group and religious leaders). The powers extracted from societal elites are "stored" in the political institutions of an authoritarian Leviathan. For a long time, BN was one of these institutions in Malaysia. Under a protection pact, the direction of power resources is one-way, flowing from societal elites to the state

and not the reverse. Thus, the Leviathan is strong. In fact, when a state has ample reserves of remunerative and symbolic powers, it does not need to resort to repression (See Figure 1).

Examining the theoretical foundations for these three types of organisational power, I realised that we need to pay more attention to the extraction of symbolic power. Some broad social processes had taken place among the middle classes and communal elites in the immediate years before the 2008 general election. While the power extracted from state officials comes in the form of loyalty from the military and police and the power extracted from economic elites and middle classes are taxes, Slater did not explain further on what constitutes symbolic power beyond saying that it included public endorsement from religious authorities and secular intellectuals. To support my analysis, I modified and clarified the notion of symbolic power, which is derived from Amitai Etzioni's (1961) concept of normative power, with Pierre Bourdieu's (1984) concept of symbolic power.

In his book, *The Active Society*, Etzioni (1968) suggested that normative power plays a crucial role in maintaining social cohesion and regulating individual behaviour on the basis of voluntary commitment. However, this may not always fit the situation in Malaysia due to a lack of shared values between Malays and non-Malays. By turning to Bourdieu's (1984), we can understand how the state operated through control and manipulation of cultural symbols, knowledge, and practices. Here, the regime used the symbolic power extracted from the middle classes and communal elites to legitimise its position. Individuals are often subjected to the dominant symbolic order, and their actions and choices are influenced by their position in social hierarchies and habitus (or learned dispositions). Due to socialisation, they may not even be conscious that their habitus – which is then taken as a consensus – leading to the state's domination over them.

Figure 1: Extracting Power from Protection Pacts



Source: Slater (2010, p.17)

2.8 Perkasa's Relationship with State and Regime

Despite its high profile in the media, there were not many scholarly research on Perkasa. In fact, most studies only mentioned Perkasa in the background to research on UMNO or Najib's administration. Following the BN's setback in 2008 general elections, scholars such as Hamayotsu (2013) observed that ethnic and religious tensions were also growing in Malaysia. Commenting on the rise of Perkasa, which she described as an "ultranationalist" group, she suggested that the opposition parties' electoral prominence and Bersih's activism in civil society affected traditional Malay and Islamic institutions. As beneficiaries of the government's pro-Malay policies and state institutionalisation of religion, conservative Malays would stand to lose if the opposition parties led by Anwar Ibrahim and the Bersih electoral reform movement succeeded. As Perkasa was making headlines during this time,

Hamayotsu claimed that the SMO's views were "actually winning much more sympathy and backing from the Malays" than what its detractors in civil society were willing to acknowledge (ibid, p.67).

Many analysts also assumed that it was UMNO which fostered Perkasa's rise (Funston 2016; Chin 2016; Kessler 2016). Even though Perkasa attracted considerable media attention with its controversies, there was a dearth of scholarly literature on Perkasa. Until today, there are few research on Perkasa, which has an unsavoury reputation among non-Malays and liberal-minded individuals. While many scholars are interested in UMNO and Malay nationalism, only a handful brought Perkasa into the picture (Hamayotsu, 2013; Govindasamy, 2014; Embong 2016; Funston; 2016; Chin; 2016; Kessler 2016). At a time when Perkasa was riding high, Sophie Lemiere (2013) also completed her PhD thesis and she received considerable publicity after sharing details from her dissertation (Loone, 2013). This led to a speculation on similarities between Perkasa and Pekida in the media ("The real dons," 2013). However, from those cited above, only Govindasamy (2014) and Embong (2016) discussed Perkasa at length. Commenting on UMNO, Funston (2016), Chin (2016) and Kessler (2016) all believed that it was UMNO which fostered Perkasa's emergence and development. This gave an impression that Perkasa was part of a state-sponsored SM beholden to UMNO, implying a lack of independence in charting its own course.

From a movement perspective, I see their arguments as closely aligned with the resource mobilisation theory. For example, Funston suggested that "a novel tactic employed by Najib was to work closely with conservative Islamic groups and extreme ethnonationalist NGOs" (2016, p.99). Meanwhile, Chin observed that the rise of Perkasa and ISMA "coincided with increasing efforts on the part of the bureaucracy to impose Islamisation on the non-Muslim population" (2016, pp.201-202). Developed by scholars like John McCarthy and

Mayer Zald (1987), RM focuses on organisational and strategic aspects of mobilising resources for collective action. They said the authorities have the ability to frustrate or to enable resource mobilisation is crucial and may even become adherents or constituents of an SM (ibid, p.24). Based on this argument, most of Perkasa's resources to mobilise supporters, if not all, are presumed to have flowed from UMNO. My dissertation, however, will challenge this position by highlighting Perkasa's agency.

Meanwhile, Govindasamy said Perkasa was a "conservative, extreme right-wing Malay movement" with the core ideology of protecting and defending Bumiputeras, particularly Malays, and their constitutional rights (2014, pp.121-122). He claimed that Perkasa was "the radical face of UMNO" with its core members being party supporters and that it was formed to win back the Malay support. Pointing to the 2013 general election, Govindasamy (ibid, p.123) suggested there was a nexus between UMNO and Perkasa because the latter's president Ibrahim Ali and vice-president Zulkifli Nordin stood as BN candidates. However, this argument lacked depth for not accounting for the complexities of internal politics among conservative Malays. Even though Ibrahim and Zulkifli stood under the BN banner, they were not UMNO candidates. There were many grouses within UMNO against Ibrahim's candidacy and the latter only got to contest due to Dr Mahathir's lobbying on his behalf (Koh, 2013). In fact, the Perkasa co-founder was previously sacked from UMNO for contesting against the party in 2004 general election. UMNO was only one seat away from wresting the Kelantan state government from PAS and Ibrahim Ali was the primary cause of UMNO's failure. In 2008, PAS allowed Ibrahim to contest a parliamentary seat under its ticket, which he won without joining the Islamist party. Meanwhile, Zulkifli was a PKR MP who was sacked for going against the party stand on the Allah row in 2010 (Samy, 2010). Before that, Zulkifli was an associate of Anwar Ibrahim. Both Ibrahim and Zulkifli were incumbent MPs with axes to grind against their former parties

and they rode on the BN to achieve their agenda. It was not simply a case of Perkasa genuinely wanting to help UMNO in the 2013 general election.

Rahman Embong (2016) was more nuanced in his account of Perkasa. As Perkasa had claimed that 60 percent of its members came from UMNO, he pointed out these people were those “disgruntled” with the party leadership (ibid, p.55). Embong also painted Perkasa’s emergence as a “right-wing backlash” that feeds on the fears and grievances of Malays (ibid). To make an impact, Perkasa was said to have used anti-Chinese sentiments, threats of racial riots and anti-Christian postures. Unlike Lim (2010), Govindasamy (2013), and Funston (2016), Embong did not go to the extent of suggesting that Perkasa was propped up by UMNO. Instead, he said its development was related to the “weakened position of UMNO and BN” and “the rise of opposition parties and democratic forces in civil society (Embong, 2016 p.59).” Embong also noted that Perkasa had the awareness to tone down on its anti-Chinese and anti-Christian posturing. After getting a lot of flak, Perkasa president Ibrahim Ali organised a Chinese New Year gathering and held a dialogue with Christian groups to foster better understanding (ibid, p.56). When the Bersih 4.0 protest was held in August 2015, he even permitted Perkasa members to support the rally. This was a far cry from the time when Perkasa was opposing the Bersih 2.0 rally in 2011. Embong’s account of Perkasa was not comprehensive but provided some clues on Perkasa. Due to a lack of studies on Perkasa, more research is needed to understand this SMO.

2.9 ISMA's Peculiarity as an Islamist SMO

Unlike Perkasa, there are more academic works on ISMA, partly because it is still active today. Furthermore, ISMA only made its presence felt during 2013 general election while Perkasa was already in the media limelight for several years. There are several new studies on ISMA which were published after 2018 (Hew, 2020; Chan, 2023; Abdul Hamid & Razali, 2023) but this section will start with a review of those available from 2008 until 2017. Like those on Perkasa, the pre-2018 writings on ISMA discussed the reasons for its emergence and effects on politics and society. Among these literature (Abdul Hamid & Razali, 2015, 2016; Embong, 2016; Osman & Saleem, 2016), I found the work of Ahmad Fauzi Abdul Hamid and Che Hamdan Che Mohd Razali (2016), which traces the ideological origins of MB-influenced Islamist NGOs, as a useful starting point to understand ISMA. Like other Islamist groups, ISMA traces its beginning to tutelage given by MB activists to Malay-Muslim students who were studying abroad. The tutelage from MB, as the most established Islamist movement in the world, had a “galvanising effect on Malay-Muslim students determined to translate their idealism cultivated overseas into practice upon their eventual return to Malaysia” (ibid, p.6). Abdul Hamid and Che Mohd Razali also suggested a link between ISMA and UMNO by pointing at how the former took up the latter’s nationalist rhetoric at the time when UMNO was “ideologically bruised and beleaguered” (ibid, p.7).

ISMA’s own motto of “*Melayu Sepakat, Islam Berdaulat*” (Malays unite, Islam rules) was also handy when UMNO decided to recruit help from civil society. Like UMNO, ISMA leaders saw the erosion of Malay-Muslim hegemony as threatening Malaysia’s identity as a nation. Since Anwar Ibrahim and PAS were seen as colluding with the secular and Chinese-dominated DAP in the *Pakatan Rakyat* (PR) coalition, ISMA leaders felt that the former had betrayed the Islamic struggle. ISMA’s president Abdullah Zaik Abdul Rahman

was quoted as attributing Malay backwardness to “colonial mentality,” “the shrewdness of certain non-Malay leaders,” and “a stealthy Jewish conspiracy” (ibid). ISMA’s pivot towards Malay nationalism was also said to have been inspired by MB founder Hassan al-Banna’s idea of “*nasionalisme terpuji*” (benign nationalism) (Abdul Hamid & Che Mohd Razali, 2016, p.8). The *Majmua’ah Rasail* (Collection of Epistles), a treatise written by al-Banna, was a major reference for ISMA. Henceforth, Arab nationalism as promulgated by al-Banna also became the basis for ISMA’s embrace of Malay nationalism.

ISMA also emulated MB’s experience in the Middle East by participating in elections (ibid, p.9). In the 2013 general election, it fielded candidates for seven parliamentary seats and two state seats under the ticket of a small Islamist party, Berjasa.⁸ Even though it failed to win any seat, Abdullah Zaik claimed that ISMA achieved its objectives of introducing a new message to society and to “change the mindset and action of members to become more aggressive” (ibid, p.9). More recently, Abdul Hamid and Che Mohd Razali (2023) characterised ISMA as condoning what “non-violent extremism”. They claimed: “Although ISMA itself disowns violence, the extremism foregrounded in ISMA’s public presence may result in violence among the disgruntled elements of the Malay-Muslim society within which they operate” (ibid, p.161). However, their position on “non-violent extremism” does not necessarily qualify ISMA as a far-right organisation in the local context due to the illiberal characteristics of Malaysian mainstream politics. In fact, what constitutes hate speech is also subjective in Western liberal democracies. To circumvent this quagmire, I explore what constitutes the “political mainstream” in Malaysia to differentiate ISMA from other Islamist groups which are subscribing to more radical and extreme views in the following section.

⁸ Berjasa is a party that splintered out of PAS in 1977. It was founded by former Kelantan Menteri Besar Mohamed Nasir after he was sacked from PAS following the 1977 Kelantan Emergency due to a political impasse and violence in the state (Hwang, 2003 pp.117-118).

Besides Abdul Hamid and Che Mohd Razali (2016; 2023), Wai Weng Hew (2020) and Nicholas Chan (2023) also stood out for their research on ISMA in recent years. While their work does not correspond with my periodisation from 2008 to 2017, they confirmed some of my initial impressions. Hew (2020) made some pertinent observations on ISMA's mobilisation strategies by describing its shrewdness in combining online campaigns and offline rallies. He explained how ISMA launched online campaigns to urge Muslims to vote for "credible Muslim candidates" and to "buy Muslim products first" (ibid). He also said that it worked with political parties and other organisations to manipulate Muslim public opinion. Besides maintaining Facebook groups that attracted millions of viewers, ISMA led an Islamist coalition called *Gerakan Pembela Ummah* (UMMAH) in staging two rallies.

The first rally was held in July 2018 to protest the PH government's proposal to recognise the United Examination Certificate (UEC), which is the standardised test used by independent Chinese high schools in Malaysia. The second rally in December 2018, which protested the government's plan to ratify the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD), was supported by UMNO and PAS. Meanwhile, Chan noticed the "novelty" in some ISMA-linked human rights organisations (2023, p.19). He said these groups "turned human rights discourse into a cover for undermining it (ibid)." Looking at the discourses of Centre for Human Rights Research and Advocacy (CENTHRA) and Malaysian Alliance of Civil Society Organisations in the Universal Periodical Review (UPR) Process (MACSA), he claimed that these reactionary activists had subverted Malaysia's human rights agenda. Both CENTHRA and MACSA are successors to an Islamist coalition called Muslim UPRo, which will be discussed in Chapter 6 of this dissertation.

2.10 Differentiating “Mainstream” and “Extremist” Politics in Malaysia

Based on my observations on Perkasa and ISMA, I highlighted in Chapter 1 that they are better described as reactionary organisations. Here, I would like to further clarify what influenced my thoughts on this matter despite the conventional labels of “extremist” and “far-right” slapped on them. From a Western liberal perspective, Perkasa and ISMA may appear as “far-right” due to their ultra-conservatism and use of racist discourses. Some detractors even compared them to the Klu Klux Klan (KKK) in the US and the neo-fascists in Greece (Boo & Sipalam, 2013; Shankar, 2011, “Zaid: Like Greece,” 2013). However, appearance and rhetoric can be misleading. What more important are their ideologies, goals and actions based on local specificities. Despite what critics say, there are strong reasons to argue that Perkasa and ISMA do not fully meet the criteria as “far-right extremists” in the Malaysian context. This is because mainstream politics in Malaysia is not only influenced by nativism but is outright illiberal when compared to countries which practise liberal democracy in North America and Western Europe. Far-right experts Jean-Yves Camus and Nicolas Lebourg (2017, p.2) have suggested that the term “far-right” is not suitable for application outside of Western Europe. Other scholars have also questioned its misuse, especially in news reports of Western media (Martin, 2024). Among them is political scientist Tim Bale, who is a scholar of populism and right-wing politics in the UK. Together with Cristobal Rovira Kaltwasser, the University of London professor is the co-editor of *Riding the Populist Wave: Europe’s Mainstream Right in Crisis* (2021).

In a recent post on LSE weblog, Bale (2024) highlighted that it is “probably a mistake” to use the term “far-right” to describe political parties such as Reform UK following the British Broadcasting Corporation’s (BBC) retraction of a news report after getting defamation threats from the party. Led by the controversial Nigel Farage, Reform UK has been accused by its

detractors and the media as being “far-right” (Hope Not Hate, 2024). Some even insinuated that the party has the potentials of becoming more “extreme” (Naughtie, 2024). Amidst the “noises” emanating from the “cultural war” and identity politics raging across the Western world today, I agree with Bale’s observations that the term “far-right” was “too visceral a reaction” and “too broad to be meaningful” (2024). There are basically two subtypes of right-wingers, namely the “mainstream right” and the “far-right” in Europe. The mainstream right is fairly easy to identify as they are represented by established parties such as the Conservative Party in the UK and the Christian Democrats in Germany, while the far-right as an umbrella term comprises of the “populist radical right” and the “extreme right”. For Bale, what makes “far-right” an inappropriate label to describe populists is the conflation of them as equally predisposed to using violence as the extremists (ibid). It may not be wrong to put those with roots in fascism and neo-Nazism as extremists but things are not straight-forward when it comes to right-wing populists.

For this dissertation, the strongest argument against the application of a far-right label to describe Perkasa and ISMA is the fact that they have been engaging in mainstream politics, which is also illiberal in the Malaysian context. They may challenge those considered as “liberals” in the Malaysian state and civil society but never operated clandestinely at the political fringe. There are a lot of empirical evidence to support this assertion. From their internal documents, I found declarations that they respect the Malaysian constitution and will adhere to the country’s laws (Perkasa, n.d.-a). It is also noteworthy that Perkasa and ISMA leaders lost a number of court cases yet abided by those judicial rulings. For example, the Federal Court ordered Perkasa chief Ibrahim Ali to pay RM150,000 in damages to DAP leader Lim Guan Eng for defamation (Lim, 2021). Similarly, the court compelled ISMA to convey its regret, which it promptly did, when the organisation was sued for defamation by social activist Marina Mahathir (Yatim, 2015). More recently, a Federal Court’s ruling forced

ISMA and its affiliate *Ikatan Guru-Guru Muslim Malaysia* (i-Guru) to give up their quest for a judicial review to declare vernacular schools as unconstitutional (Lim, 2024). Except for their ultra-conservatism and racist discourses, the actions and reactions of Perkasa and ISMA are more mainstream than extreme in most occasions. In terms of ideology and discourses, their positions are actually not too far away from, if not similar with, mainstream parties such as UMNO and PAS.

While a racist statement can be seen as unusual or outrageous in the mainstream politics of Western liberal democracies, it is unfortunately something normalised in Malaysian politics. It is the same when it comes to insinuating ethnic violence. Ibrahim Ali received much flak for his remarks on “waging a holy war against Christians” (“Is Ibrahim's speech seditious,” 2011) and “Bible burning” (Shankar, 2013) but UMNO Youth activists had reportedly said worse things previously. Citing various news reports, political scientist Harold Crouch (1996, pp.108-109) said UMNO Youth members carried banners and posters with anti-Chinese slogans such as “Chinese are rascals,” “Chinese go back to mainland,” “Close down Chinese and Tamil primary schools,” and “Revoke the citizenship of those who opposed the Malay rulers” during a huge rally in October 1987. What more threatening were slogans such as “Soak it [the Malay dagger] with Chinese blood”. UMNO Youth members even tried to present Najib Razak, who was then UMNO Youth chief, with a *parang* (machete). Another example of UMNO Youth activists using violent language happened during a protest in front of the Selangor Chinese Assembly Hall in August 2000. They threatened to burn down the building if the *Malaysian Chinese Organisation Election Appeals Committee* (Suqiu) refused to retract its appeals, which among others called for the removal of distinction between Bumiputera and non-Bumiputera (Mohamad, 2001, p.218).

Therefore, racist rhetoric and hate speech were already a distinctive feature and not an anomaly in Malaysian politics well before the emergence of Perkasa and ISMA. If we go back even further, we will discover that UMNO was established with the slogan of “Malaya for Malays” in protests against the MU in 1946. One of its objectives was to deny citizenship for non-Malays and this was achieved when the British agreed to tighten citizenship laws in replacing the MU with the Federation of Malaya in 1948. However, UMNO relented for the non-Malays to gain citizenship after it built an alliance with MCA and MIC to achieve independence in the 1950s. Nevertheless, inflammatory and racist statements were continuously used during election campaigns throughout the 1960s. This was partly a reason for the violent racial clashes in May 1969 and provided justifications for the state to strengthen the Sedition Act of 1948 to curb debates on sensitive issues pertaining to citizenship, language, royalty, race and religion (Crouch, 1996, pp.82-84). Even though this legislation has been selectively used to silence legitimate regime opponents, it does not negate the fact that racist rhetoric is already entrenched in Malaysia’s mainstream politics as exemplified by controversies stirred up by UMNO Youth in the 1980s and 2000s. When viewed in comparison with UMNO Youth discourses, the rhetoric of Perkasa and ISMA activists are not too extreme. What is extraordinary, however, is their emergence and development, in spite of UMNO, in the post-2008 era.

2.11 Comparison with Indonesian Social Organisations

The development of Indonesian civil society in the immediate years after 1998 may provide some comparisons to understand the rise on reactionary movement in Malaysia from 2008 to 2017. If the 2008 general election’s result was unprecedented for Malaysia, the political shocks in 1998 were greater for

Indonesia. Following the Asian Financial Crisis, the Indonesian student-led reformasi movement emerged, anti-Chinese riots erupted and President Suharto's New Order regime was toppled. As Indonesia was undergoing democratisation in the late 1990s and 2000s, countless new social organisations (*organisasi masyarakat* or "ormas" in Bahasa Indonesia) cropped up in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Older ormas reinvented themselves and a contentious yet vibrant civil society was created in the country. Historically, political developments in Indonesia have always preceded Malaysia. For example, the Indonesian nationalist movement of the 1920s inspired a group of Malay youths to establish *Kesatuan Melayu Muda*, a left-leaning Malay nationalist organisation, in 1938 (Sani, 2011 p.34). Likewise, the socio-political situation in Indonesia from 1998 onwards would most likely have a similar influence on the reactionaries in Malaysia as some right-wing Indonesian ormas became powerful nationalist and Islamic populist social forces in the 2010s. In this section, I will discuss four Indonesian ormas in comparison to Perkasa and ISMA as Malay ethnonationalist and Islamist organisation respectively. They are *Pemuda Pancasila* (PP), *Laskar Merah Putih* (LMP), *Front Pembela Islam* (FPI) and *Majelis Ulama Indonesia* (MUI).

From the various Indonesian nationalist ormas, PP and LMP is two organisations that bear strong resemblances to Perkasa in Malaysia due their appeal to nationalism, use of intimidation and linkages to established political parties. Set up in 1959, PP was a paramilitary youth wing of an Indonesian military-linked political party called *Ikatan Pendukung Kemerdekaan Indonesia* (IPKI).⁹ In the early 1960s, it attempted to act as a "back up" for President Sukarno's military campaign in West Papua. Later, it was involved in the

⁹ IPKI was established as a political party by former Indonesian army chief General Abdul Haris Nasution in 1954 to facilitate the entry of the military into politics. Its original members were recruited from active and retired military personnel and it played a role in influencing President Sukarno to return to the 1945 decree and implement guided democracy (Ryter, 1998 pp.52-53).

Indonesian mass killings from 1965 to 1966 and supported President Suharto's New Order regime from 1966 to 1998. Even though PP started with the military's backing for IPKI, it is today known as the foremost organisation of "preman" (street hoodlums). Its members are "extortionists, debt-collectors, parking attendants, and nightclub security" when they are not outright violating the law (Ryter. 1998, pp.46-47). Claiming millions of members, PP were loyal to Suharto and his *Golongan Karya* (Golkar) party throughout the New Order regime but this relationship changed after 1998 when the former lost many members to other preman groups (Wilson, 2010 p.208). Disappointed with Golkar for failing to repay its loyalty, PP chairman Yapto Suryosoemarno established a new political party called *Partai Patriotik Pancasila* in 2003 (ibid). In recent years, PP has endorsed presidential candidates from different parties. It backed Prabowo Subianto in the 2014 presidential election but shifted to Joko Widodo (Jokowi) in 2019 (Asril, 2019).

Meanwhile, LMP is a fairly new paramilitary-like organisation established after the fall of the New Order regime in 1998. It traces its roots to militants who fought to preserve the territorial integrity of Indonesia when East Timor and Aceh were agitating for independence. According to Farish Noor (2012, p.4), LMP was formally launched at the *Forum Bersama Laskar Merah Putih* (Forum with LMP) in February 2004 when more than 100 nationalist NGOs and pressure groups met in Jakarta. They elected a Chinese Muslim convert Eddy Hartawan as LMP's first leader. Operating as a grassroots organisation, it reached out to the lower working classes and supported the relationship between the army, police and the Indonesian state. However, LMP is also notorious for organising protests against Malaysia. In 2002, its activists burned a Malaysian flag and pulled down the main gates of the Malaysian embassy in Jakarta when rallying against the alleged mistreatment of Indonesian migrant workers in Malaysia (Yap, 2002). LMP protested again in 2009 in response to the territorial dispute between Indonesia and Malaysia over the oil-rich

Ambalat block in the Celebes Sea (“Manohara demo,” 2009). It also demanded for Malaysia’s apology for the error of printing an upside-down Indonesian flag in a souvenir booklet in the 2017 SEA Games in Kuala Lumpur (“Indonesian protests,” 2017). Like PP, LMP endorsed Prabowo, a former army general, for the 2014 presidential election but supported Jokowi in 2019 (Malik and Ambarita, 2019).

Comparing Perkasa with PP and LMP, I found some striking parallels. The timing of their emergence coincided with the decline of existing authoritarian regimes in Indonesia and Malaysia. While PP was traditionally linked to Suharto and Golkar, Perkasa was associated with Dr Mahathir and UMNO. Interestingly, Perkasa also has a direct relationship with LMP through a coalition called *Gagasan Sebangsa Serumpun Nusantara* (Sebangsa), which they jointly established in December 2014 (“Perkasa joins hands,” 2014). This hinted at Perkasa’s own nationalist inclinations but also raised eyebrows because LMP is known to be anti-Malaysia (ibid). However, what stands out is the element of intimidation in their collective actions. Like PP and LMP, Perkasa had acquired an unsavoury reputation for occasionally insinuating ethnic and religious violence. Like LMP with its penchant to protest against Malaysia, Perkasa activists relished the opportunity to abuse their political opponents, especially the DAP, and Penang chief minister Lim Guan Eng. Among others, they allegedly hurled projectiles at Lim (“Guan Eng,” 2012), called him “babi hutan” (wild boar)¹⁰ and even tried to barge into his office (“Penang government, 2014). In another incident, a newspaper reporter was injured when a scuffle broke out (“Journalist provoked us,” 2012). Other than Penang, they were also involved in a fracas during PAS *ceramah* (political talk) in Seremban (Zainal, 2011). The biggest threat of violence came from none other than its president Ibrahim Ali when he claimed that Perkasa would “lawan

¹⁰ “DAPigs” is a racialised term of abuse targeted at the predominantly Chinese party and was typically used in combination with crude anti-Chinese or Malay supremacist language (Temby, 2020, p.6). “Cina babi” (Chinese pig) is also a common slur against ethnic Chinese in Malaysia.

habis-habisan” (fight to the end) to stop the Bersih 2.0 rally, which was supported by opposition parties, from taking place in July 2011 (Sipalan, 2011).

However, the tactic of intimidation is where the similarities between Perkasa and PP and LMP ends. Unlike PP and LMP, which both belongs the preman culture in Indonesia, there is little evidence to suggest that the majority of Perkasa activists are directly linked to criminality or political gangs with military connections as often the case with preman organisations. Perkasa’s own use of violent rhetoric or seemingly far right discourses was more likely copied from UMNO Youth rather than indicating that a local brand of premanism was taking root in Malaysia. As mentioned in Chapter 1, UMNO Youth had a history of threatening violence without carrying out violent acts with the exception of 13 May riots in 1969. Due to the state’s strong legal and security apparatus in pre-empting conflicts, physical violence is rare in Malaysia. Though equally tragic, the level of violence during the 1969 ethnic clashes is incomparable to the mass killings in Indonesia where an estimated 500,000 to one million died between 1965 and 1966 (Kwok, 2015). Nevertheless, understanding premanism can still contribute to our understanding of populism as grassroots reaction to socio-political change. According to Loren Rytter, as much as preman represent the underworld which is extorting society, they also stand for the underclass in the least privileged sectors of society (1998, p.49). Moreover, premanism highlights the intersection between criminality and authority. The word preman, which comes from the Dutch colonial term *vrijman* or “free man”, denotes an independent agent who might serve the purposes of those in power even if he is not directly under the latter’s payroll (ibid, pp.50-51).

The fall of Suharto led to economic liberalisation and democratisation which created new centres of power and diverse networks (Hadiz, 2016). Under this new political reality, the elites realised that getting support from preman

organisations may give them a competitive edge in politics. As a social phenomenon, premanism is not confined to nationalist groups. For the Islamists in Indonesia, there is a notion of *preman berjubah* which refers to “thugs draped in Arab garb” (Burhani, 2020). This is a term employed by Ahmad Syafii Maarif, a former chairman of the mainstream Islamic organisation *Muhammadiyah*, to describe FPI and its leader Habib Rizieq Shihab (ibid). Formed in August 1998, FPI was initially viewed as less of a threat to Indonesia’s democratisation and political reforms compared to violent terrorist and extremist groups such as *Jemaah Islamiah* and *Laskar Jihad*. However, it had become increasingly powerful in channelling and amplifying hateful extremism in recent years (Barton, 2021, p.311). Its influence and capacity to mobilise hateful extremism hit a new high with a mass protest called *Aksi Membela Islam* (Action to Defend Islam) or *Aksi 212* against the Chinese Christian Governor of Jakarta, Basuki Tjahaja Purnama or “Ahok”, for alleged blasphemy against Islam. Despite its reputation as a preman organisation with members who take laws into their own hands, FPI was still able to contribute to the mobilisation of hundreds of thousands of Indonesians, most of whom not even its members, to join the protest (ibid).

Unsurprisingly, this brought FPI to the attention of political elites who wanted to harness its ability to whip up public sentiments and bring in crowds to vote for them during elections. In this sense, it is not wrong for Ian Wilson to describe FPI as a populist yet pragmatic Islamic militant group (2014, p.248). To challenge the perceived liberal excesses in society, it carried out vigilante actions such as raiding bars, gambling dens and night spots apart from combating social ills such as pornography, prostitution and drug abuse. In line with the idea of premanism, Islamic vigilantism is another form of violence justified in the name of upholding religious morality. Successive Jakarta governors and police chiefs even endorsed FPI despite the public outrage over its vigilante attacks as these fell within a grey area in Indonesian law on the role

of citizens in upholding law and order. After all, many of their targets were also illegal entities such as gambling dens, unlicensed bars and brothels (2014, p.259). In term of recruitment, FPI appealed to the urban poor, who made up the bulk of its active membership (ibid, p.249). Instead of a comprehensive and coherent Islamic ideological or political programme, FPI attracted members through a combination of Islamic practices, social conservatism, aggressive rhetoric and provisions of opportunities to advance their livelihood (Wilson, 2014, p.249). Not aligned to any political party, FPI's Islamic vigilantism had a distinct "niche" as a vehicle for populist dissents that are "simultaneously oppositional, opportunistic and hegemonic" in the Indonesian society (ibid, p.251).

In its rhetoric against liberalism, ISMA certainly shared some similarities with FPI. The fact that ISMA leader Aminuddin Yahya was a key driver behind UMMAH raised a question as to their possible connection due to the common usage of the term "pembela" (defender) in their organisations' names. Besides their diatribes against liberalism, there is no evidence of ISMA, which comprised mostly middle-class professionals and university graduates, of being involved in vigilantism like FPI. However, the opposition towards secularism, pluralism and liberalism in Malaysia is very much influenced by developments in Indonesia. So, this position is not unique to ISMA because many Islamist organisations in Malaysia, including state religious bodies such as the Department of Islamic Development (JAKIM), also denounced what they considered as "SIPILIS" (the acronym for secularism, pluralism and liberalism). It is also the Malay-language term for syphilis to denote the moral corruption and permissiveness associated with the sexually-transmitted disease. Even though FPI was the most aggressive Indonesia ormas fighting SIPILIS with vigilantism, it is not the originator of the polemic. It was MUI – an umbrella organisation for Islamist groups – which came up the *fatwas* (religious rulings) that provided legitimacy for FPI's vigilantism (Wilson, 2014, p.264).

The offensive against SIPILIS in Indonesia was partly a response to the formation of *Jaringan Islam Liberal* (JIL) in early 2001. Co-founded by Luthfi Assyauckanie, it was a loose network of young progressive Muslim intellectuals who wanted to start a discourse on the vision of Islam that is tolerant, open and supportive of democratisation in Indonesia. In advocating for Islamic liberalism, they encouraged substantive reading of religious scriptures instead of the literal approaches favoured by the majority of ulamas in Indonesia. However, they invited backlash from conservative Muslims and a radical Islamist group even issued a death fatwa against a prominent member of JIL.¹¹ The situation climaxed in July 2005 when MUI issued a fatwa against secularism, pluralism and liberalism (Sirry, 2013). Just a week after the fatwa, FPI tried to attack JIL headquarters but were stopped by the police (ibid, p.116). MUI was also responsible for a statement that Ahok committed blasphemy against Islam. A new Islamist ormas called *Gerakan Nasional Pengawal Fatwa MUI* (GNPF-MUI), which is more moderate was formed and it cooperated with FPI to organise the Aksi 212 rally in December 2016. Even though MUI was not directly involved with GNPF-MUI and distanced itself from the rally, it is important to understand the role of MUI as an Islamist organisation that was trying to stay relevant in the post-Suharto era.

As one of the most influential Islamic bodies in Indonesia, MUI comprises of larger mainstream Muslim organisations such as *Nahdlatul Ulama* and Muhammadiyah as well as smaller groups such as *Sarekat Islam*, *Lembaga Dakwah Islam Indonesia* and *Persatuan Tarbiyah Islamiyah*. Most of these Islamic organisations are established groups with history stretching 100 years back to the Dutch colonial era in the 1910s and 1920s. Founded in 1975, MUI has a semi-

¹¹ In November 2002, a conservative Muslim group called *Forum Ulama Umat Islam* (FUUI) issued a death fatwa against JIL coordinator Ulil Abshar Abdalla for humiliating the teachings of Islam. They were responding to his article entitled, “Menyegar Kembali Pemahaman Islam” (Refreshing Our Understanding of Islam), which was published earlier in the *Kompas* newspaper. In the article, Ulil strongly criticised the religious understanding of some Indonesian Muslims as being outdated and leaving no room for reinterpretation (Suratno, 2011, p.11).

official status but its relationships with the Indonesian government waxed and waned after the fall of Suharto in 1998. It used to play an important role of providing legitimacy for the New Order regime. For Suharto, MUI was useful for the efforts of suppressing communism and canalising political Islam among some Islamic organisations in Indonesia (Hasyim, 2015 p.489). Hence, the Islamists' aspirations for the establishment of an Islamic state and the implementation of Sharia laws were contained and subsumed under the larger framework of *Pancasila* as the national philosophy. Over the years, this situation also fostered a brand of Islamic modernism that is reformist and inclined towards substantive reading of religious scriptures such as those of JIL.

However, the cozy relationship between MUI and the Indonesian government unravelled after Suharto resigned in 1998. While Suharto's successor President B.J. Habibie was accommodative towards MUI, things changed under President Abdurrahman Wahid, who was critical of MUI's role under the New Order regime. According to Norshahril Saat (2021), MUI had the image of being a "state lackey" in supporting Suharto's policies. Wahid, who was a progressive ulama himself, favoured a substantive reading of Islamic texts and MUI could not barter with him as it did with Suharto. This put Wahid administration at odds with conservatives in MUI who preferred a literalist reading of religious scriptures.¹² Hence, the organisation became independent from the government and asserted its religious authority directly on society. To bolster its position, MUI issued a fatwa against SIPILIS in July 2005. This led to what anthropologist Martin van Bruinessen (2013) termed as a "conservative turn" in Indonesia's Muslim society, which was known for its religious tolerance. This fatwa has a far-reaching impact in Southeast Asia. In Malaysia, state religious authorities at the federal and state levels also followed

¹² In 2001, there were tensions between MUI and Wahid administration regarding the halal status of Japanese food seasoning brand *Ajinomoto* following allegations that it contained pork enzyme. Then MUI chairman Sahal Mahfudz called for the product's withdrawal but Wahid administration allowed Muslims to consume it. Both Mahfudz and Wahid were NU leaders but the latter belonged to the progressive faction (Saat, 2021).

MUI's footsteps and adopted an uncompromising position on SIPILIS.¹³ Today, very few Muslim scholars and intellectuals will openly identify themselves as "liberal Muslims". For conservative Muslims, including the reactionaries in ISMA, the term "liberal Islam" is a pejorative to denote all reformist progressive groups (Ibrahim, 2014, pp.198).

2.12 Framing Theory: Analysing the Discourses of ISMA and Perkasa

Besides examining the POS that allowed Perkasa and ISMA to emerge in Malaysia, the second part of my analytical framework involves a framing analysis to understand how the reactionaries develop their movement and mobilise their supporters. Framing theories are a broad set of concepts and theoretical perspectives on how individuals, groups, and societies make sense of their reality. It originated from Erving Goffman's (1974) book, *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organisation of Experience* and adapted to study social movements. In essence, my frame analysis is guided by the works of David Snow, Robert Benford and their associates (Snow, et. al., 1986; Snow and Benford, 1988; 1992; Benford & Snow, 2000). Central to my understanding of social mobilisation is the concept of collective action frames (CAF), which are "action-oriented sets of beliefs and meanings that inspire and legitimise the activities and campaigns of a social movement organisation" (Benford and Snow, 2000 p.614). However, a frame should not be confused with an ideology. A frame latches on an ideology but it is fundamentally different. Ideology is a fairly broad, coherent and relatively durable set of beliefs that are related to broad ways of seeing the world while frames are context specific. Frames are temporal and function as innovative amplifications and extensions of, or

¹³ JAKIM's website has an explicit warning on the dangers of liberal Islam. It has also banned a Malay book entitled, *Islam dan Pluralisme* (Islam and Pluralism), published by the Middle Eastern Graduate Centre to introduce alternative viewpoints on Islam for Muslims in Malaysia (Ibrahim, 2014, p.210).

antidotes to the existing ideologies or a component of them. If UMNO's ketuanan Melayu is an ideology, it can be repackaged into a CAF for a particular purpose. Unlike an ideology, it does not need to have a consistent intellectual basis. It can be moulded and remoulded according to situations. As a strategic tool of communication, framing is basically a form of "meaning construction" or "signifying work" (Snow, et. al., 1986; Snow & Benford, 1988).

Framing highlights the SM's agency in challenging or reinforcing the existing structures. Firstly, movement activists can exercise agency by strategically framing their grievances and goals to influence how their target audience perceive an issue (Snow and Benford, 1988). Through their framing strategies, they can shape the meaning of a social problem in a particular way to resonate with their target audience (ibid). Secondly, movement activists will gain leverage in advancing their cause if the movement's framing strategies attract more supporters, allies and financial resources. A movement can grow stronger when there are frame alignments (Snow, et. al., 1986). Thirdly, activists can use framing to build collective identity and solidarity among movement participants (Melucci, 1988). Framing allows activists to enhance their agency by fostering a collective identity that motivates and spurs individuals towards collective action despite structural constraints. Fourthly, a movement is exercising collective agency if its activists are free to select frames that are more likely to resonate with their target audience in order to mobilise them. In this respect, Tarrow has highlighted how movements "reflect, capture and shape emotions" (2011, p.143).

In this dissertation, the analysis of the framing strategies employed by Perkasa and ISMA will reveal their relative independence from the Malaysian state and the ruling regime, particularly UMNO. According to Snow and Benford, SMOs have three core framing tasks (1988, p.199-204). They are "diagnostic framing (or the question of who or what to blame)," "prognostic

framing (the question of solutions to the problem).” and “motivational framing (mobilisation or the call to action)”. Organisations that are able to attend to these three core framing tasks effectively will create “frame resonance” with their target audience (i.e., conservative Malays) and to successfully mobilise them. For emotional effects, adversarial and injustice frames are often employed as a part of diagnostic framing. Besides the core framing tasks, a frame can also be further developed, elaborated, and transformed to mobilise supporters. These strategic efforts to link an organisation’s frame with another frame (i.e., the frame of potential supporters or allies) is known as “frame alignment processes” (Snow, et. al., 1986). There are four basic types of frame alignment processes: “frame bridging” (linking two or more ideologically congruent but structurally unconnected frames); “frame extension” (extending an organisation’s frame beyond its primary interests); “frame amplification” (idealising, embellishing, clarifying or invigorating existing values or beliefs); and “frame transformation” (changing old understanding and generating new ones).

Besides CAF and frame alignment processes, there are also the concepts of master frame (Snow & Benford, 1992) and master frame alignment (Swart, 1995) in framing theories. According to Snow and Benford, a master frame refers to a “generic” type of collective action frame that is wider in scope and influence than run-of-the-mill social movement frames (1992, pp.138-141). Unlike ordinary collective action frames, which are context specific (i.e., Chinese education rights frame, Islamic revivalist frame, women’s rights frame in Malaysia), a master frame’s articulation and attribution are “sufficiently elastic, flexible, and inclusive enough so that any number of other social movements can successfully adopt and deploy it in their campaigns” (Benford, 2013). When a movement comes up with a highly resonant frame that is broad in interpretive scope, other SMs within the same cycle of protest will also modify that frame and apply it to their own cause (ibid). For example, ketuanan

Melayu can serve as a master frame for the development of Islamic populism in Malaysia. Building upon Snow and Benford's (1992) ideas on master frames, Swart (1995) suggested that said a master frame alignment can also happen when different movement actors rhetorically transform various master frames and bring them into alignment with their specific contexts.

2.12.1 Populist Framing to Sustain a Reactionary Movement

While I was doing my fieldwork between 2016 and 2017, I noticed some idiosyncrasies in Perkasa and ISMA. If one were to read and hear their statements with racist and xenophobic undertones from a third party's perspective (i.e., vernacular and English-language media in Malaysia), one might think that they harboured deep-seated hatred against ethnic Chinese and Christians, like how the KKK despised African-Americans and the Nazis hated the Jews. Apart from what can be construed as "hate speech", activists from these two SMOs seldom commit or advocate for real violence. At the same time, they were also clearly representing grievances that need to be understood. So, I look for theories that may explain the disparity between their speech and action. The literature which conceived populism as a discursive frame (Bonikowski, 2016; Aslanidis, 2016) and populism theories (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017) provided some clues on their reactionism. According to Bonikowski (2016, p.10), populism should be viewed as "a discursive strategy selectively employed by political outsiders to challenge the status quo" (ibid). This position is shared by Aslanidis (2016) who suggested that populism can be operationalised as a CAF which places populist mobilisation within the methodological tradition of the framing theory in social movement studies. This will allow us to understand it as a strategic meaning-making device

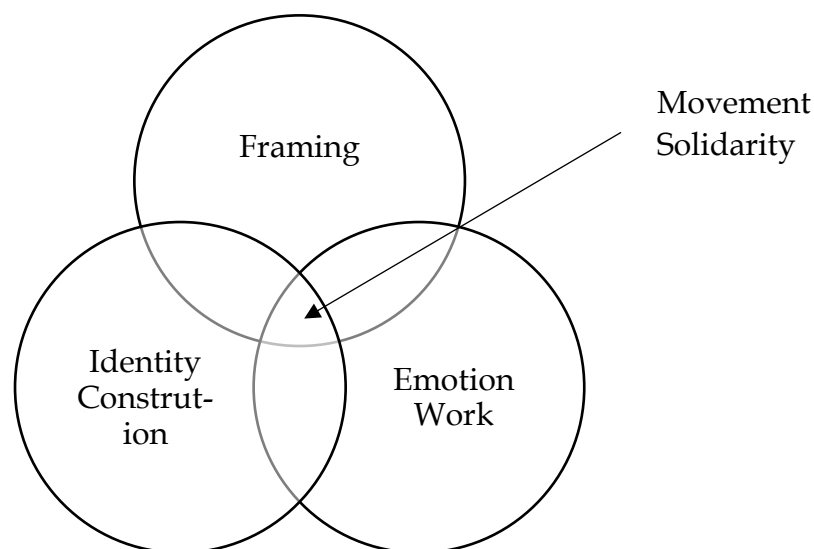
employed by the reactionaries to maximise support from a wider audience (ibid, p.304).

Closer to Malaysia, Vedi Hadiz (2016) saw the emergence of “Islamic populism” as a new form of identity-based political mobilisation to bring the masses of Indonesian voters together under the banner of religion and nationalism. For him, Islamic populism is a societal expression of Muslims’ grievances against neo-liberal globalisation which favours the elites and marginalises the former (ibid, p.46). This form of populism can be found in all sorts of movements, ranging from demagogic but legitimate NGOs to openly violent paramilitary and terrorist groups. Like what Perkasa and ISMA in Malaysia, the proponents of Islamic populism in Indonesia also targeted ethnic Chinese and Christians (ibid, pp.71-724). Hadiz posited that the new Islamic populism is different from previous social arrangements as it represents newly emerging cross-class coalitions to win greater access to state power and tangible material resources for the ummah (ibid, pp.87-95). While it has been suggested that populism is not a mainstay of Malaysian politics (Weiss, 2020), Perkasa and ISMA have displayed populist tendencies that are similar to their Indonesian counterparts. This is something which deserves further investigation. Their populist tendency is more obvious when we look at their discourses against economic globalisation. Without a doubt, the discourses of ketuanan Melayu can be re-framed in a populist mode to build a new collective identity (Polletta & Jasper, 2001; Snow, 2001).

Together with framing and emotion work, identity construction is another component of the meaning-making processes to build movement solidarity (Tarrow, 2011 pp.142-143) (See Figure 2). To mobilise supporters to collective actions and sustain their motivation over time, SMs must construct a collective identity for its activists. The longevity of the reactionary movement as represented by Perkasa and ISMA can be explained by the acquisition of a

new sense of identity among conservative Malays between 2008 and 2017. According to Polletta and Jasper, collective identity is “an individual’s cognitive, moral and emotional connection with a broader community, category, practice, or institution” (2001 p.285). Unlike ideology, identity operates at the emotional level and carries positive feelings for other members of the group. Collective identity is what creates the sense of “we-ness” that leads individuals to band together and participate in collective actions (Snow, 2001, p.2213). While UMNO’s *ketuanan Melayu* refers to the dominance of Malay elites, Perkasa and ISMA have repackaged it to appeal directly to the Malay masses. Looking through Perkasa and ISMA’s discourses, we will find elements cohering with the three core components of populism proposed by Mudde & Kaltwasser, namely the “pure people (conservative Malays),” the “corrupt elite (UMNO),” and the “general will (to really defend Malay interests)” (2017 pp.9-19). Like the convergence of nationalist and Islamist social forces in Indonesia, potentials of the reactionaries’ populist framing depended on its ability to bridge the divide between UMNO and PAS.

Figure 2: Components of Movement Solidarity



Source: Tarrow (2011 p.143)

2.13 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have discussed the relevant literature on the state, SM, Perkasa and ISMA. Even though my dissertation is rooted in SM studies by focusing on POS and framing theories, it is also influenced by concepts on the state and populism. To analyse the structural constraints on movement emergence, I have surveyed the academic works relating to state capacity to understand its potentials in limiting and fostering the POS for new SM emergence. From literature on the Malaysian state, I realised that scholars preferred to study regime type to a benign neglect of state capacity. Nevertheless, understanding the shift in state capacity is vital to explaining the trajectory of right-wing politics in Malaysia. After examining the writings on Perkasa and ISMA, I found that these reactionary groups are relatively understudied, and more research are required to put them in the proper context. They have also been misunderstood as state-sponsored SMOs. Apart from that, recent polemics on the “far-right” in Europe informed me to avoid the same errors committed by Western liberal media.

In the Chapter 3, I will present my findings on the Malaysian state as a “robust Leviathan” which had hindered SMs since 1969. These will form the basis for my “injured Leviathan” argument in Chapter 4. Seeing state capacity as POS, I will argue that a qualitative reduction of state capacity has removed the previous structural constraints on SM emergence and development in the post-2008 era. Taking note of Tarrow’s (2010) definition of POS as something temporal, I will apply ideas from Slater’s ordering power model to explicate the subtle changes in the state, as well as what Doug McAdam (1999) have described as broad social processes. I will also use concepts from McAdam’s PP model such as cognitive liberation and indigenous organisational strength to explain how they complemented the changing POS in facilitating the emergence of a reactionary SM after the 2008 general election. In Chapter 5 and

6, I will present the findings of my framing analysis of Perkasa and ISMA populist discourses. In my interpretation of the specific discourses of four selected cases of contentious politics between 2008 and 2017, I will explain how a particular type of populist framing strategies helped the reactionaries from these two organisations mobilised conservative Malays for collective action in the post-2008 era.

CHAPTER 3 The State as Robust Leviathan (1969-2008)

3.1 Introduction

Although the state is not the only thing that affects SM, it is one of the most important social structures that shapes its emergence and development. There are many reasons why understanding the state is vital for SM research. In struggling for or resisting against socio-political change, movement activists have to decide whether to challenge or support the existing power structures, including the state, its regime and their institutions. The state represents the pinnacle of power in society and whoever controls it has the authority to make and enforce laws, distribute economic resources and regulate societal activities. Therefore, we need to look how state dynamics contribute to the broad social processes and create opportunities or constraints for SM mobilisation (McAdam, 1999, p.41-43). As the state implements policies that affect society, various groups may emerge in response to those policies. Very often, SMs emerge due to the perceived injustice or inequality created by the state or its regime. Responding to challenges from SMs, some ruling elites have resorted to using the state's coercive power to crack down on civil society, which is often the case with authoritarian regimes. States may also intervene in situations where an SM is not directly resisting them. They can become mediators to societal conflicts where two groups of SMs are challenging each other.

Under an illiberal political environment such as Malaysia, state capacity may be a bigger obstacle than regime type in preventing SMs from achieving their goals, that is, if they are allowed to emerge in the first place. Even in liberal democracies like the US, Doug McAdam (1999) highlighted how changes in the US federal government's policies in the 1950s and 1960s played a role in

enabling the growth of a Black insurgency and civil rights movement. Not surprisingly, the relationship between state and SMs has been a subject of considerable interests (Johnston, 2011; Nam, 2006; Ho, 2005; Kriesi, et al., 1995). However, most political regimes in developing countries do not have a strong state that can effectively dominate society or even to hold it together. Regimes may be authoritarian but their states are weak or captured by other social forces in society (Migdal, 1988; 2001). In this regard, Malaysia is one of the few exceptions of developing countries with a strong state that effectively dominate society. Despite its authoritarianism, the Malaysian state has been credited for preventing its multicultural society from descending into ethnic chaos. Hence, this chapter is a historical overview on the key features of the Malaysian state, which gave rise to what I will refer to as a “robust Leviathan” prior to 2008. The following sections will explain why it was difficult for any SMs to emerge under a robust Leviathan. I will also show how the state was Malay-centric and socially conservative. These provide the contexts for my conceptualisation of an injured Leviathan as a peculiar condition that affected the country’s political opportunity structure (POS) in the post-2008 era in Chapter 4.¹⁴

3.2 Theoretical Assumption on State-Regime Fusion

According to political scientist Milan Svolik, authoritarian states can be broadly defined as countries that lack civil liberties such as freedom of religion, or those in which the government and opposition do not alternate in power at least once following free elections (2012, p.20). While Malaysia falls into this broad category before 2018, this definition is too general to shed more lights on the state’s characteristics, which are actually more fluid and dynamic. There are

¹⁴ This chapter is an extension of the literature review in the previous chapter, which primarily focused on the theoretical framework used in this dissertation.

other ways of thinking about the Malaysian state and one of the easiest ways is to ascribe certain features of the regime to the state. After all, the state's executive leadership resides in the regime.¹⁵ With scholars defining and redefining the Malaysian regime over the years, there are also many ways to think about the Malaysian state. In the past, the country's political system was labelled as a "quasi-democracy" (Ahmad, 1989) and a "semi-democracy" (Case, 1993; Huntington, 1991) while its regime was described as "simultaneously repressive and responsive" (Crouch, 1996). Today, most scholars describe the Malaysian regime as "electoral authoritarian" (Weiss, 2022; Case, 2009; Schedler, 2006). Despite the state-regime distinction discussed in Chapter 2, the Malaysian state can be identified intimately with its regime without conflating both because state power was monopolised by the BN regime and UMNO, in particular, until they were defeated in the 2018 general election.

Most scholars will differentiate a state from its regime in liberal democratic countries but there is an intimate connection between the Malaysian state and BN. Even political comparativist Dan Slater (2010) referred to Malaysia as a "party-state". However, Wong, Chin and Noraini (2010 p. 921), went a step further by proposing a new typology of "electoral one-party state"¹⁶ for Malaysia because BN has won all general elections (prior to 2018) and dominated the state since the country's independence. While state and regime are two different things, their conceptualisation of state-regime fusion shows how much the BN ruling elites' decisions and behaviours affect the state. According to them, the one-party state of Malaysia has three key features: a) opposition parties are allowed but constrained; b) state-controlled or manipulated elections; and c) state-party boundaries are blurred (ibid, pp. 937-

¹⁵ In studying the state, Migdal suggested that rather than just looking at the "commanding heights" or pinnacle of the state, we should also look out for the structural strains between the leadership and other layers of the state (2001, p.121).

¹⁶ However, they maintained that the "electoral one-party state" typology is still a sub-species of the larger category of competitive or electoral authoritarianism (Wong, Chin and Noraini, 2010).

939). The third feature suggests a fusion between the state and regime. Historically, UMNO played a significant role in the creation of the Federation of Malaya as a “proto-state”¹⁷ in 1948. The terms for the new federation comprising of two Straits Settlements, four Federated Malay States and five Unfederated Malay States, were exclusively negotiated between the British, Malay rulers and UMNO representatives. In fact, the British accepted the conservative terms to retain the Malay state’s traditional political structures and tightened citizenship rights as a basis for the new state. It was only during constitutional bargains at the eve of Independence in 1957 that UMNO relented to a more liberal citizenship terms for non-Malays. Hence the fusion between the state with UMNO and BN as the ruling coalition.¹⁸

The party-state fusion is also a feature in many authoritarian states. It can be surmised that all communist states are totalitarian party-states. Examples of party-states are the People’s Republic of China and North Korea. These countries are what Wong, Chin, and Noraini (2010 p.922) called “de jure one-party states” where there are no real opposition parties, no elections and no separation between the state and the regime. However, the relationship between the state and regime is not so clear in “electoral one-party states” such as Malaysia. Theoretically, there should be a separation of state and regime but in reality, the line between the two are blurred. For Malaysia, this was determined by the historical and political circumstances explained earlier. Due to BN’s disproportionate influence, state’s policies often reflected UMNO’s will as the dominant party in the regime. There might be tensions between different

¹⁷ According to Griffiths (2016, p.219), a “proto-state” is a particular type of political unit that is organised administratively, given some degree of autonomy, and is typically constructed around a local ethnic group. In fact, Slater (2010, p.92) highlighted that it was the social conflicts of the 1940s and 1950s which created the conditions for Malaya’s proto-protection pact allowing for an authoritarian Leviathan to emerge after 1969.

¹⁸ UMNO was formed following a conservative Malay mass movement against the Malayan Union, which granted liberal citizenship rights to the non-Malays based on a *jus soli* principle, in 1946. For further details on the Malays’ opposition to the Malayan Union and the formation of the Federation of Malaya in 1948, refer to Lau (1991).

elements within the state but the interests of party elites would always prevail over other interests. However, the close relationship also meant that whatever affect BN or UMNO would indirectly affects the state. The regime might not change but the state could be affected in a subtle way. This is why events in the immediate years before and after the 2008 general election are significant. They transformed the Malaysian state profoundly due to this state-regime fusion. Hitherto, the Malaysian state that I will discuss in this and subsequent chapters is one that hinges on its fused relationship with BN and UMNO.

3.3 The Robust Leviathan Before 2008

Prior to 2008 general election, Malaysia was an exceptionally strong state with great prowess in subjugating regime opponents. I will describe it as a “robust Leviathan.” This is the predecessor to an “injured Leviathan,” which will be discussed in Chapter 4. The robust Leviathan is a mighty beast with the capacity to “encapsulate” civil society (Jesudason, 1995) and to “dominate” society (Slater, 2010).¹⁹ However, it is also a rare phenomenon among developing countries, which generally lack the capacity to shape state-society relations, neutralise opposition, gain predominance and achieve social control. Despite the difficulties in building a strong state, a combination of historical factors endowed Malaysia with fertile conditions to become a strong state. According to Slater, the key factor was violent internal contentions,²⁰ particularly ethnic conflicts, which forced societal elites to coalesce in “protection pacts” (2010, p.5). These “broad elite coalitions” are unified by their

¹⁹ According to Slater, Malaysia not only has high state capacity but high party strength and military cohesion as well as high authoritarian durability (2010, p.8).

²⁰ Slater (2010) provided the various social conflicts during the colonial period from 1945 until 1957 and the electoral conflicts that happened after independence from 1957 to 1969 as examples. These included the post-war interregnum by the Malayan People’s Anti-Japanese Army (MPAJA) in 1945, the Malay protests against Malayan Union in 1946, the Malayan Emergency from 1948 to 1960 and the ethnic riots in 1969.

shared support for heightened state power and tighter authoritarian controls to act as institutional bulwarks against social chaos and mass unrest (ibid). Based on a shared perception of threats to their interests, these elites supported authoritarian institutions that strengthen the state. For example, economic elites saw labour unrests as threatening their businesses while communal elites feared they losses of properties, cultural rights and social statuses during and after racial riots.

By “extracting” power from these protection pacts, the Leviathan became stronger and it grew more authoritarian with the increased ability to legally employ its tools of repression on mass society. While states under some authoritarian regimes may resort to taking covert and clandestine actions against opponents, the robust Leviathan of Malaysia seldom resort to illegal or extra-legal measures. The BN regime always maintained a veneer of rule of law, which requires state powers be granted legitimately and that its powers be exercised according to the law.²¹ Legal philosopher Ratna Balasubramaniam (2020) suggested that the Malaysian state under UMNO had often practised “rule by law” when it was in power. He said:

While the rule of law is commonly distinguished from arbitrary power, rule by law involves the use of the legal form, especially legislation, as a cloak for arbitrary power. In Malaysia, rule by law typically involves the use of legislation to grant public officials [with] wide discretion that is immunised from judicial oversight using legislative ouster clauses that limit or exclude judicial review. To operationalize this approach, the UMNO government tightly controlled Parliament and undermined judicial review giving rise to

²¹ After the May 13 riots in 1969, the Malaysian state came up with the *Rukun Negara*, which explicitly states that “*kedaulatan undang-undang*” (rule of law) is one of the five guiding principles for the country.

an executive-dictatorship. Executive-minded judges would treat any intimation by a public official that a decision complies with the law as sufficient to confirm the legal legitimacy of that decision. The purpose of rule by law was to project an aura of legitimacy when in fact exercising legally uncontrolled and arbitrary power, making law an instrument used to dominate legal subjects and to pursue authoritarian rule (ibid).

Under the guise of rule of law to maintain social stability, state officials used draconian laws to silence regime opponents (See Table 2). Even though the seeds for a strong state were planted during the colonial era, I will limit my discussion here to the period between 1969 and 2008. The main purpose is to provide a context for comparing the “robust Leviathan” (pre-2008) with the “injured Leviathan” (post-2008). While the country was already a strong state at independence in 1957, the pre-BN Alliance regime under Tunku Abdul Rahman was relatively liberal and racially accommodative. Malaysia only became more authoritarian and “robust” after the 13 May Incident in 1969. During the tragic event, violent racial clashes broke out in Kuala Lumpur after the 1969 general election. The Alliance and UMNO had suffered a massive setback by winning only 66 out of 103 seats in Peninsula Malaysia. They were also defeated in Penang and there were hung state legislatures in Perak and Selangor. According to official statistics, there were 196 deaths but unofficial accounts suggest a higher death toll.²² The incident was a “turning point” (Crouch, 1996, p.24) or a “watershed” (Funston, 2016, p.29) in Malaysia’s history. Funston said the state was reorganised in “a way that was more Malay and UMNO-oriented, corporatist, and less democratic” (ibid). State-regime

²² According to a British journalist John Slimming (1969), who was in Malaysia at that time, said rumours suggested the death toll was at least 2,500. However, he believed that was too high and concluded that about 800 people were killed during the first week of violence (von Vorys, 1975 p.368).

fusion became more obvious in the early 1970s with UMNO becoming the new “*teras*” (foundation) of national politics. A minister even suggested that “UMNO will always be the ruling party” (ibid, p.30). Later, UMNO adopted the slogan, “*Dulu, Kini dan Selamanya*” (Then, Now and Forever) to imply the party’s permanent fixture as main driver of the Malaysian state²³.

Table 2: Big Six “Draconian Laws” in Pre-2008 Malaysia

State Legislations	Targets of Repression in Society
1. Internal Security Act (ISA) 1960	Opposition party leaders & civil society (NGO) activists
2. Sedition Act 1948	Opposition party leaders, civil society (NGO) activists, journalists, communal leaders
3. Official Secrets Act (OSA) 1972	Opposition parties & journalists
4. Printing Presses and Publication Act (PPPA) 1984	Journalists
5. Societies Act 1966	Opposition party leaders, civil society (NGO) activists, communal leaders, middle-class professionals
6. Universities and University Colleges Act (UUCA) 1975	University students & academics

Although Malaysia was a relatively strong state since independence as it inherited the various instruments of social control from the British, it was not always robust in using the coercive tools at its disposal. The immediate event that created the robust Leviathan was the Proclamation of Emergency in May

²³ Founded in 1946, UMNO’s original slogan was “*Hidup Melayu*” (Long Live the Malays).

1969. The Emergency vested the already strong state with more authoritarian powers through the creation of a nine-member National Operations Council (NOC). Since the Parliament was suspended, the NOC ruled Malaysia for 20 months until February 1971. This was the only time in history when Malaysia came under a political system that is similar to closed authoritarianism. What was most notable during this period was the intense state repression as prominent opposition leaders like DAP leader Lim Kit Siang and trade unionist V. David were arrested under the Internal Security Act (ISA). Between May and July 1969, the number of ISA detainees increased from 251 to 368 people (Crouch, 1996, p.97)²⁴. From 1960 until 1981, more than 3,000 people would be detained under the ISA (ibid, p.80). Over 10,000 people had been arrested under this law before it was finally repealed in 2012 (Centre for Public Policy Studies, 2017). Besides the ISA, the Sedition Act was used to restrict political discussion. Following the 1969 riots, this act was expanded to prevent public discussions on “sensitive issues” such as the special position of Bumiputeras, sovereignty of Malay rulers, position of Malay as national language and citizenship rights of non-Malays. These issues were even prohibited to be discussed in Parliament.

In 1972, the government introduced the Official Secrets Act (OSA) which prohibited anyone from revealing unauthorised government information (Singh, 2001). The free press presented a challenge to the state and various media laws were gradually tightened after 1969. Among others, the Printing Presses Act of 1948 (PPPA), which required all newspapers and printing presses to obtain and renew their licenses annually, was amended to allow the government to revoke newspaper licenses. The PPPA was amended again in 1984 and tightened further in 1988 to enhance the home minister’s discretionary power to ban publications (Anuar, 2005, p.29). The BN also exerted its control on the press through media ownership (ibid, pp.30-32). UMNO strongman

²⁴ ISA was originally enacted to deal with the residue communist threats after the Malayan Emergency ended in 1960 but it was later employed against legitimate political party leaders and social activists from 1969 onwards.

Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah started Fleet Holdings in 1972 to take over the Malaysian edition of the Singapore-based *Straits Times*, which was renamed as the *New Straits Times*. UMNO had earlier acquired a Malay newspaper, *Utusan Melayu* in 1961 and turned it into a party mouthpiece (Funston, 1980, p.188). Other BN component parties also did the same. MCA's investment arm, Huaren Holdings, acquired an English newspaper, *The Star*, in 1977. The government also banned books. Dr Mahathir's *Malay Dilemma*, was proscribed in 1970 for criticising Tunku administration. Even scholarly works on Malaysian politics were not spared as Karl von Vorys' (1975) *Democracy without Consensus* was also banned (Crouch, 1996, p.88).

The robust Leviathan was not only decisive in taking actions against any perceived threats to the social order but became more comprehensive in dominating society. To control the masses of workers, students and middle class, it employed Societies Act and the Universities and University Colleges Act (UUCA). Promulgated in 1966, Societies Act required all societies to be registered with the Registrar of Societies (ROS). Under this law, political organisations are required to get approval from ROS who is also empowered to deregister them (Barraclough, 1984). Meanwhile, university students were no longer allowed to join political parties, trade unions or other organisations outside of their universities without the consent from their vice-chancellors under the UUCA, which was introduced in 1975. They were not even allowed to make statements to support or oppose any political party or trade union. UUCA was so extensive that its prohibitions even covered university staff, who were not allowed to hold any position in a political party or contest in an election (Wan, 2019, p.7). While university staff could join a political party, they were barred from making public statements in support of their party. The UUCA was primarily aimed at containing a potential class conflict as some university students had been protesting against the government in support of squatters in Johor Bahru and farmers in Baling, Kedah in 1974. Following the

protests, many student leaders and some lecturers were arrested under the ISA (ibid, pp.8-9). Among them were future prime minister Anwar Ibrahim and Perkasa co-founder Ibrahim Ali.

While the draconian laws mentioned above had always been used against regime opponents since 1969, their applications were taken to new heights in the 1980s and 1990s. Funston (2016, p.42) noted that UMNO became more dominant and nationalistic under Mahathir administration from 1981 to 2003. As the party was rife with factionalism, Dr Mahathir dealt with the internal opposition to his leadership by concentrating executive powers in his own hands until there was no longer an effective system of checks-and-balance between different institutions of the state. The executive branch of government became more powerful while the judiciary was significantly weakened²⁵. The constitutional crisis of 1988 brought the conflict between executive and judiciary into the open and ended with the dismissal of Chief Justice Salleh Abas in August that year (Crouch, 1996, pp.137-142). Consequently, the Malaysian judiciary was deemed as subservient to the executive branch of the government. Dr Mahathir was so powerful that he could even control the power of Malay royalty. In 1984, he forced through constitutional amendments that removed the royal assent requirement for a bill to become a law. From then onwards, the King can no longer reject a bill that has been passed and can only delay it from becoming a law by referring it back to Parliament. In 1994, the right to delay any bill was also removed (ibid, pp.145). Today, a bill passed by Parliament will automatically become a law even without a royal assent after 30 days.

²⁵ There are many scholarly accounts on the executive dominance in Malaysia. Among others, Hwang (2003) traced how UMNO political dominance, which emerged after 1969, had gradually turned into Dr Mahathir's personal dominance in the 1990s, while Lim (2002) looked at the effects of executive dominance on public administration.

Besides clipping the wings of the judiciary and the royalty, Dr Mahathir's administration also imposed the Big Six draconian laws with greater intensity and frequency.²⁶ Most notably, the ISA was used to arrest 106 political and social activists under *Operasi Lalang* (Weed Operation) in October 1987. It was again deployed in 1998 against Anwar Ibrahim and some of his supporters. According to Tan (1990), the repression under *Operasi Lalang* in 1987 was unprecedented because it affected "virtually all groups and parties in the country." In 1989, the ISA was amended to eliminate the possibility of court challenges and the government no longer need to provide credible justification for detention in the name of national security. Other draconian laws were also amended throughout the 1980s to give them more legal teeth. A mandatory jail sentence of one to 14 years was introduced for those who are found guilty under OSA. During a political crackdown in 1987, it revoked the licenses of three major newspapers – English tabloid *The Star*, Chinese broadsheet *Sin Chew Jit Poh* and Malay weekly *Watan*. In 1991, the circulation of opposition publications was restricted to only party members. Before that, party organs such as *The Rocket* (published by DAP) and *Harakah* (PAS) could be openly sold to the public. All of these had a chilling effect on media practitioners and led to a situation of self-censorship (Wang, 2001 p.73; Anuar, 2000 pp.185-187).

3.4 The Robust Leviathan's "Conservative Turns"

As the strong Leviathan became more robust and authoritarian, it was also becoming more conservative. The Malaysian state had abandoned the liberalism that characterised Tunku administration in the 1950s and 1960s.²⁷

²⁶ The term "Mahathirism" has been used to characterise Dr Mahathir's strongman rule over Malaysia for 22 years (Hilley, 2001; Khoo, 1995).

²⁷ According to historian Boon Kheng Cheah (2002, p.76), Tunku is domestically known for his bold "juggling" policies in the cause of racial harmony, pluralism and multi-racialism even though he also pioneered the policy of entrenching Malay political primacy.

After 1969, the government asserted its Malay identity more forcefully as it had the “political muscle” to do so. Following an Islamisation process among the Malays in the 1970s, the state also became more religiously conservative in the 1980s (Mohamed Osman, 2017; Abdul Hamid & Ismail, 2014; Liow, 2004; Mutalib, 1994). Actually, the Malaysian state was already conservative in the early 1970s – even before Islamic revivalism started. By re-emphasising the state’s Malay characteristics, UMNO was returning to its ethnonationalist roots. Sociologist Clive Kessler highlighted this by distinguishing between the “UMNO of 1946” and the “UMNO of 1951 to 1957” (2016, pp.148-150). The former was a “heroic” Malay party that was exclusionary in fighting for Malay rights while the latter was inclusionary by opting for interethnic conciliation and cooperation to achieve independence.²⁸ The UMNO that emerged after 1969 wanted to reclaim its heroic past by using the various coercive apparatuses at its disposal.²⁹ The following sections will look at the two major conservative turns that the robust Leviathan experienced as a result of this.

3.4.1 First Conservative Turn: State-Led Malay Conservatism in the 1970s

If the draconian laws discussed earlier represented state authoritarianism, the implementation of more Malay-centric policies after 1969, particularly in the economic sector, marked the start of a state-led Malay conservative project. These policies brought the state closer to becoming exclusively Malay and had far-reaching consequences on Malaysia’s multiracial

²⁸ UMNO cooperated with MCA and MIC under the Alliance Party to convince the British in granting independence for Malaya in 1957. See Fernando (2009) for more details on how the Alliance Party came together.

²⁹ According to Abdullah Ahmad, who was a close confidante of Abdul Razak, the second prime minister had confided to his inner circles in the early 1970s, “Never again would the non-Malays be allowed to threaten the political future of the Malays,” and assured them that he would entrench the “pattern of Malay political supremacy which had always existed in the Constitution (Cheah, 2002 p.138). Abdullah Ahmad would later come up with the term, “Malay supremacy” or *ketuanan Melayu*, in 1986.

society. Under Razak administration, the forces of Malay nationalism – led by UMNO young Turks like Dr Mahathir and Musa Hitam – were appeased and the “democratic excesses” of Tunku’s regime were curbed (Mauzy, 1983 p.24, as cited in Cheah, 2002 p.127). There were no more attempts at “pluralism” or “policies of give and take” as the state was determined to narrow the economic disparities between Malays and non-Malays (Cheah, 2002 p.124). Thus, New Economic Policy (NEP) was introduced in July 1971, followed by National Culture Policy (NCP) in August. Even before these two policies were formally adopted, the Razak administration had already forced through a policy to enhance the use of Malay language in education (ibid, p.125).³⁰ Malays considered the sovereignty of Malay language as a symbol of the Malaysian state’s “Malay-ness” and Malay predominance (Crouch, 1996 p.159). By entrenching these policies, the state underwent its first “conservative turn” in the early 1970s. Of the three Malay-centric policies, NEP was the centrepiece of Malay conservatism until 1991 and beyond.

Widely seen as a testament to UMNO’s ideology of *ketuanan Melayu*,³¹ the NEP’s goal was to increase Malay share of ownership in the economy from around three per cent in 1971 to 30 per cent over a 20-year period. To bring the largely agricultural Malays into modern economic sector, the state carried out initiatives that made non-Malays feel discriminated. In education, Malays and Bumiputeras were provided with ethnic quotas for admission into public universities. The government introduced an ethnic quota system in the proportion of 55 per cent for Bumiputera students and 45 per cent non-

³⁰ Before the National Education Policy’s introduction in 1971, the medium of instruction at the secondary and tertiary level was English. When the new education policy was implemented, Malay gradually replaced English as the medium of instruction over a 10-year period. The government also established Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia in May 1970 to fulfill the Malay nationalists’ aspirations of upholding Malay as a language of knowledge.

³¹ Even though the term *ketuanan Melayu* was not found in any documents relating to NEP when it was formulated, it later became associated with the policy because an UMNO ideologue used the concept of Malay dominance in 1986 to call for NEP’s extension beyond its original time frame. See Chapter 5 for further discussions on *ketuanan Melayu*.

Bumiputera students (Lee, 2012). This policy, which continued until recent years, limited the places in public universities for qualified non-Malay students. Very often, Bumiputera student quota exceeded the threshold. In 1977, almost 75 per cent of new students accepted into the five local public universities were Bumiputeras (Crouch, 1996, p.163). Among Chinese businessmen, the Industrial Coordination Act (ICA) introduced in 1975 was the biggest concern (Heng, 1997 p.269). Under the ICA, local and foreign manufacturers were required to ensure that Bumiputeras owned at least 30 per cent of their companies' equity. According to Harold Crouch, NEP and ICA had a negative impact on ethnic Chinese investment with more than RM3 billion transferred out of Malaysia annually between 1976 and 1985 (1996, p.208). While NEP was successful in increasing the Bumiputera's share of the economic pie to more than 19 per cent by 1990, ethnic relations deteriorated. Another scholar of Malaysian politics, Gordon Means (1991) observed that these policies had led to greater polarisation as more issues were defined in ethnic terms.

Even though NCP was not as impactful as NEP, it was nevertheless a symbolic marker of the Malaysian state conservatism in the early 1970s. According to historian Sumit Mandal, NCP was a site of contestation over vital questions such as culture and identity of Malaysia in the 1970s and 1980s (2008, p.274). While it was introduced as an initiative to promote national unity, it created a great deal of contention by equating the national culture with Malay culture to the exclusion of others. The new policy was often attributed as the result of a government sponsored National Culture Congress that attracted about 1,000 participants and produced 60 working papers (Carstens, 1999 p.19-20). Following the congress, the state came up with guidelines to develop a national culture around three main principles:

1. the national culture of Malaysia must be based on the culture of the people indigenous to the region

2. elements from other cultures which are suitable and reasonable may be incorporated into the national culture; and
3. Islam will be an important element in the national culture

From then onwards, the state paid more attention on traditional Malay arts and culture while ignoring non-Malay cultural activities. It did not even attempt to incorporate features of non-Malay cultures into the Malaysian national culture. Instead, it tightened control over cultural activities with the imposition of permits on public performances. By the end 1970s, the pro-Malay cultural policy, together with Malay language policy, created three emotional issues for Chinese Malaysians (Carstens, 1999 p.20). The first issue surrounded the government's refusal to allow Chinese educationists to set up a private Chinese language university known as Merdeka University.³² The second issue was the rejection of their request for Chinese lion dance to be included in the Malaysian national culture³³ and the third issue was the official denial of Chinese Kapitan Yap Ah Loy's historical status as the founder of Kuala Lumpur.³⁴ All of these issues indicated the rolling back of cultural pluralism under Tunku administration in the 1960s. Mandal also pointed out the role played by an exclusionary "cultural leadership" which imbued the policy with a "racialised nationalism" (2008, p.274). According to him, some elements of the

³² The setting up of Merdeka University was one of the contentious issues during the 1969 election campaign. In 1971, the government enacted the University and University Colleges Act (UUCA), which blocked the Chinese educationists' efforts to establish the university as they were required to get the Yang di-Pertuan Agong's approval. In 1978, the Chinese educationists submitted a memorandum to the Agong but it was rejected.

³³ There was an increased interest in lion dance among Chinese Malaysians after its performances welcomed Prime Minister Abdul Razak home following his first visit to China in 1974. Over several years, some Chinese politicians supported the setting up of the Selangor Federation of Lion Dance Associations and requested national recognition for lion dance. However, Home Affairs Minister Ghazali Shafie declared in May 1979 that "foreign" cultural elements could never be accepted as a part of Malaysia's national culture. He instead suggested for the Chinese lion dance to be changed to a tiger dance accompanied by music from the gong, flute, *tabla* (Indian drum), or *gamelan* (Malay orchestra) (Kua, 1990 pp.11-12, cited in Carstens, 1999, p.21).

³⁴ For years, Yap Ah Loy was acknowledged as Kuala Lumpur's founder until the late 1970s. In 1980, Minister of Culture, Youth and Sports Abdul Samad Idris proposed that Raja Abdullah should be to be recognised as the Malaysian capital's founder.

state appeared to have invested in or at least tacitly approved of this.³⁵ After the 1986 general election, UMNO leaders and politicians would openly adopt *ketuanan Melayu*, which will be discussed in Chapter 5, as a response to non-Malays' disenchantment against the state's pro-Malay policies. Due to Chinese frustration, MCA lost seven seats while DAP gained 15 new seats in the 1986 polls. However, UMNO won an additional 13 seats while PAS lost four seats and ended up with only one seat in Parliament.

3.4.2 Second Conservative Turn: State Islamisation in the 1980s

Unlike the first conservative turn, which was primarily a Malay ethnonationalist response to the 13 May Incident in 1969, the second conservative turn of the Malaysian state was a reaction to the Islamisation process in Malay society throughout the 1970s. The works of political scientist Chandra Muzaffar (1987) and social anthropologist Judith Nagata (1984), who both explored the phenomenon of Islamisation, found connections between the increased identification among Malays with Islam and NEP implementation. As more rural Malays migrated to cities under NEP's social restructuring policy, their attachment to religion became stronger. In adapting to a new urban environment, the Malays started embracing the Islamic identity more fervently to differentiate themselves from the non-Malays. It was their coping mechanism in an unfamiliar social landscape. The Malay elites did not have the same problem. Harold Crouch (1996, p.171) observed that while Malays have always been Muslims, explicitly Islamic ideas were not prominent in the elites' political philosophy. This situation changed not long after Dr Mahathir took over as the prime minister from Hussein Onn in 1981. To compete with PAS

³⁵ For a discussion on how the NCP came about and the "cultural leadership" that advocated for its exclusionary Malay vision, refer to Mandal (2008, pp.277-282).

growing political influence among the Malays who were becoming more religious, the state would launch its own Islamisation programme in the 1980s (Liow, 2004).

This political project started when Dr Mahathir convinced Anwar Ibrahim, who is ABIM's founder – the most influential Islamist organisation at that time – to join UMNO in 1982. With Anwar onboard, the state set up the Islamic Bank and the International Islamic University in 1983. Public universities also introduced compulsory courses on Islamic civilisation. The apex of the state's Islamisation effort came in 1985 when Dr Mahathir launched a policy to inculcate Islamic values in the administration.³⁶ Following that, the state gradually expanded its support for the development of federal and state Islamic bureaucracies. There was also a constitutional amendment in 1988 to enhance the significance of Shariah courts, in which a new clause was added to Article 121 stating that civil courts “shall have no jurisdiction in respect to any matter within the jurisdiction of the Shariah courts” (ibid, p.49). This was possible as BN commanded a two-thirds majority in Parliament. According to historian John Funston, Dr Mahathir was more conservative than PAS in his opposition to non-Malays using the word “Allah” to refer to God and initiated the ban on Malay-language bibles using the word Allah in 1981 (2016, p.48). The Cabinet eventually agreed to the prohibition in 1986 and this set the stage for the “Allah row” more than 20 years later.

Mahathir administration also started centralising all Islamic initiatives under the Department of Islamic Development (JAKIM) as a part of the Prime Minister's Office. As a result, JAKIM grew from a small bureaucracy with just 100 staff members in 1982 to 608 by 1987 (Nair, 1997 p.40). Another Islamic institution called the *Yayasan Dakwah Islamiyah* (YADIM), formed in 1974 to

³⁶ This policy was said to be promoting justice, respect, diligence, cleanliness, trustworthiness, efficiency, toleration and other such values in the government (Nair 1997, p.33).

coordinate Islamic NGOs' activities, was also strengthened and tasked with the role of spreading the message of Islam. By end of the 1980s, the state Islamisation programme was firmly in place. The bureaucratisation of Islamic agencies at the federal level was complemented by an expansion of Islamic religious departments at state level (ibid). Mohamed Osman observed that more Islamic laws were introduced to police the morality of Muslims (2017, pp.7-8). Among others, the state of Johor introduced caning and jailing sentences for Muslims who committed pre-marital sex, or who were homosexuals and prostitutes. Meanwhile, the Malaccan state government issued a circular barring its female employees from wearing clothes that reveal their elbows and knees. Some scholars observed: "Mahathir may have entrenched a form of political conservatism in virtually all state and party institutions as the bedrock of his regime's perseverance strategy" (Abdul Hamid & Ismail, 2012, p.392).

3.4.3 "Forced" Consensus for UMNO and Malay-Muslim Hegemony

Besides using coercion, the robust Leviathan had the capacity to extract sufficient "symbolic power" from middle classes and communal elites. As mentioned in Chapter 2, this idea is derived from Dan Slater's ordering power model (2010, p.16-18), which is based on Amitai Etzioni's (1961) theory of organisational powers.³⁷ The state had the legitimacy to implement whatever policy it wished because key elements in society provided it with a consensus to dominate mass society. Despite the non-Malays' unhappiness with the state's pro-Malay policies, they never totally abandoned the parties representing ethnic Chinese and Indians in BN during general elections. The majority of

³⁷ There are three sources of organisational powers – coercive, remunerative and symbolic. The decline of the Malaysian state's capacity extract remunerative powers will be discussed in Chapter 4.

Malaysians – both Malays and non-Malays – grudgingly accepted authoritarianism. Societal consensus may come in various forms but the electoral dimension is the most important. The state's symbolic power was reflected in the number of parliamentary seats and votes that BN could muster. Securing a two-thirds majority in Parliament also gave the regime the power to amend the Federal Constitution. Elections were taken as a vote of confidence for the state to implement draconian laws and impose sanctions on regime opponents. BN had often claimed that street protests threaten public order to justify the use of police force to quell them.

Similarly, ISA and Sedition Act were also employed in the name of protecting national security. With a supermajority in Parliament, the BN could be decisive in using these tools of repression. This explains why the regime was virtually unchallenged during its “conservative turns” in the 1970s and 1980s. Those conservative turns heightened grievances among the non-Malays and could potentially triggered a strong backlash from them. However, their response was generally muted except for a few outspoken voices from opposition figures who were daring enough to question the state's pro-Malay and Islamisation policies. For example, DAP leader Lim Kit Siang, who was twice arrested under ISA. According to one political scientist:

The bitter experience of the (May 13) riots revealed to Chinese the indisputable fact of Malay superior power backed up by overwhelming Malay-controlled military and police forces. The hard lesson learnt was that, in a showdown, the Chinese lacked the means to impose their will on any issue of fundamental concern to Malays. This realisation resulted in a lowering of expectations and a gradual acceptance of their politically subordinate position in a Malay-dominated state after 1969 (Heng, 1996, p.43).

From this, we know that the non-Malay's communal elites and middle classes were equally complicit in legitimising the robust Leviathan due to their fear of ethnic violence. To protect their material interests, non-Malay communal elites consistently supported non-Malay component parties such as MCA, MIC and PGRM prior to 2008. Meanwhile, the middle classes voted with their feet by migrating overseas. Socialised into accepting that there no other viable options were available apart from BN, they contributed to the regime's longevity when their votes were taken as a consensus for state repression. The rupture in their habit of voting for BN only came in 2008 and this situation will be further discussed in Chapter 4.

3.5 Minor Liberalisation in 1990s: Economic Growth, Vision 2020 and Reformasi

Even though there was no major SM from non-Malays that challenged the state from entrenching Malay conservatism in the 1970s and 1980s, their dissatisfaction was palpable. This can be gleamed from the general election results where it was a norm for DAP to consistently win the lion's share of parliamentary seats in urban constituencies where ethnic Chinese formed a majority. Citing Means (1991, p.186), Heng (1996, p.514), said DAP's share of the Chinese vote was always bigger than the two largest predominantly Chinese BN component parties, which were MCA or PGRM. In 1986, DAP won 24 parliamentary seats and captured 20.3 per cent of the popular vote, representing about two-thirds of the total Chinese vote at that time (ibid). However, non-Malays' unhappiness was somehow assuaged by the high economic growth that Malaysia experienced from 1988 onwards. Foreign direct investment (FDI) was pouring into Malaysia (See Table 3). As both Malays and

non-Malays were imbued with a greater sense of optimism about the country's future, the robust Leviathan became more relaxed in the early 1990s. While the state did not totally backtrack from its earlier "conservative turns", it was more accommodative towards non-Malays. According to Heng (ibid), Dr Mahathir realised that "accommodationist politics" was the only feasible option. When the NEP ended in 1991, it was replaced by New Development Policy (NDP), which stressed more on income creation and less on redistribution. So, there was a "cautious optimism" among Chinese businessmen that "better times might be in store" (ibid, p.515).

Table 3: Malaysia's GDP Growth & FDI Net Inflows, 1988-1997

Year	GDP Growth (Percentage)	FDI Net Inflows (Percentage of GDP)
1988	9.9	2.0
1989	9.1	4.3
1990	9.0	5.3
1991	9.5	8.1
1992	8.9	8.8
1993	9.9	7.5
1994	9.2	5.8
1995	9.8	4.7
1996	10.0	5.0
1997	7.3	5.1

Sources: World Bank Open Data (2022a & 2022b)

Some Chinese leaders were also encouraged by Dr Mahathir's announcement of his "Vision 2020" economic blueprint to transform Malaysia into a fully developed country. As the country needed to maintain a high growth rate to achieve the vision, ethnic Chinese were optimistic that their entrepreneurial energy would not be restrained (ibid). Besides economic targets,

Dr Mahathir's "Vision 2020" had a socio-political dimension. When he unveiled his Vision 2020 at the inauguration of the Malaysian Business Council in February 1991, Mahathir presented Malaysians with nine challenges to overcome to achieve developed country status by 2020. The first of these challenges was to establish "a united Malaysian nation with a sense of common and shared destiny." He said that the nation must be "at peace with itself, territorially, and ethnically integrated, living in harmony and full and fair partnership, made up of one "*bangsa Malaysia*" (Malaysian race) with political loyalty and dedication to the nation (Mohamad, 1991)." Interestingly, he also proposed, in the fifth challenge, to establish "a mature, liberal and tolerant society in which Malaysians of all colours and creeds are free to practise and profess their customs, cultures and religious belief and yet feeling that they belong to one nation (ibid)." With that, a "minor liberalisation" (a term coined by Lim Kit Siang during the 1995 general election campaign) was set in motion.

Indeed, the robust Leviathan's relaxation brought a severe setback to DAP as their parliamentary seats declined to nine in 1995 from 20 in 1990 (See Table 4). However, this period of minor liberalisation did not last. Following the Asian Financial Crisis in 1997, Dr Mahathir had a fallout with his deputy Anwar Ibrahim in September 1998. When Anwar was sacked from government, the robust Leviathan came back into the picture as street protests erupted. Police used high-handed tactics to quell demonstrations with protestors violently beaten up. Anwar was arrested under the ISA and turned up with a black eye in public for his court hearing.³⁸ For a while, a new political opening appeared to be on the horizon in Malaysia with an intra-elite struggle brewing between Dr Mahathir and Anwar. There were no shortages of Islamist NGOs willing to support the Reformasi movement. Yet, they were no match against the state. Even though a large number of Malays turned against UMNO, the

³⁸ For more information on the Reformasi movement and its effects on the civil society, refer to Meredith Weiss (2006).

regime was able to maintain its two-thirds majority in Parliament in the 1999 general election. Some political observers said the BN had successfully spooked non-Malays with the narrative that PAS, which was a part of the *Barisan Alternatif* opposition coalition, would establish a more repressive Islamic state if it ever comes to power (Weiss, 2000; Chin, 2001). DAP, which was one of PAS' coalition partners, only improved its electoral performance slightly by winning two additional seats in 1999 general election (See Table 4).

Table 4: Parliamentary Seats Won by UMNO, DAP & PAS, 1974-1999

Election Year	UMNO	DAP	PAS	Total seats available
1974	62	9	13*	154
1978	69	16	5	154
1982	70	9	5	154
1986	83	24	1	177
1990	71	20	7	180
1995	89	9	7	192
1999	72	11	27	193

Note: PAS was a part of the BN in 1974.

3.6 Globalisation, Terrorism and Transition in the 2000s

Not long after the 1999 general election, the Reformasi movement gradually lost its momentum in the early 2000s. As Malaysia was still reeling from effects of the Asian Financial Crisis, UMNO looked for opportunities to regain the Malay votes it lost in 1999. Unlike the 1990s, the Malaysian economy was in the doldrums, and the non-Malays, particularly ethnic Chinese, were no longer as optimistic about the country's future anymore. Until today, there are

still cautionary tales of Malaysian Chinese stock speculators committing suicide by jumping off high-rise buildings after incurring massive debts when the stock market crashed in 1998. From 1998 onwards, it was also becoming obvious that the Malaysian economy was no longer as competitive as before. Its growth has been eclipsed by the meteoric rise of countries such as China and Vietnam. Malaysia's GDP growth rate was consistently above eight per cent from 1988 until 1996 but it hovered below seven per cent from 2001 to 2008. The Malaysian economy was not only outstripped by China but lagged behind Vietnam. For a while, the Malaysian economy appeared to be recovering when GDP growing by 6.1 per cent in 1999 and 8.9 per cent in 2000. However, it was stunted again when the US economy went into a recession in March 2001 and Malaysia's GDP grew by only 0.5 per cent that year. The economy eventually picked up again but it was clear that Malaysia had lost the dynamism it once enjoyed in the 1990s (See Table 5).

Table 5: GDP Growth in Malaysia, China & Vietnam, 1998-2007

Year	Malaysia	China	Vietnam
1998	-7.4	7.8	5.8
1999	6.1	7.7	4.8
2000	8.9	8.5	6.8
2001	0.5	8.3	6.2
2002	5.4	9.1	6.3
2003	5.8	10.0	6.9
2004	6.8	10.1	7.5
2005	5.3	11.4	7.5
2006	5.6	12.7	7.0
2007	6.3	14.2	7.1

Sources: World Bank Open Data (2022c, 2022d & 2022e)

The early 2000s was also a period when UMNO actively sought to undermine PAS. The event that provided the Malaysian state an excuse to clamp down on the Islamist party was an incident involving a Malaysia-based Islamist militant group called the *Al-Ma'unah* in July 2000. The incident started on 2 July 2000 when *Al-Ma'unah* militants raided a Malaysian army reserve camp and stole weapons from the armoury. It culminated with a military standoff in a jungle at Sauk near Kuala Kangsar, Perak on 5 July, 2000. One militant and two security personnel were killed in the incident, which was also known as the Sauk Siege. PAS denied any knowledge of the group prior to the raid but one of militants involved was a former PAS Youth committee member in Terengganu (Crisp & Oorjitham, 2000). A year later, the robust Leviathan flexed its muscle again by using the ISA to arrest 10 people in August 2001 for their alleged involvement in a so-called *Kumpulan Mujahidin Malaysia*. Among those arrested was Nik Adli Nik Aziz, son of the PAS spiritual leader and Kelantan Menteri Besar Nik Aziz Nik Mat. In making the arrests, Inspector-General of Police Norian Mai claimed that those detained had undergone militant training in Afghanistan and were a threat to national security (Kabilan, 2001).

In what appeared to be the state's effort to link PAS with Islamic militancy was given a boost the following month when al-Qaeda terrorists attacked in the US on 11 September 2001. After US President George W. Bush declared the Global War on Terrorism, the fate of DAP and PAS cooperation in BA was pretty much sealed. On 21 September 2001, DAP withdrew from the opposition coalition (Ngainon & Tong, 2001). To regain Malay support for UMNO, Dr Mahathir fell back to the conservatives' "playbook" of the 1970s and 1980s. In his National Day speech on 30 August 2000 which was televised nationwide, he likened the Malaysian Chinese Organisations' Election Appeals Committee (Suqiu) to those of the "communists in the past" and the *Al-Ma'unah*

movement, for allegedly fanning racial sentiments (Tan, 2000). Suqiu, which represented more than 2,000 Chinese organisations, had presented a memorandum containing a 17-point appeal to the government before the 1999 general elections. Among others, it called for the abolishment of distinction between Bumiputera and non-Bumiputera. Under intense pressure from UMNO Youth backed by the robust Leviathan, Suqiu was forced to withdraw its petition to the government. Dr Mahathir was turning non-Malays into a punching bag to shore up UMNO's declining support among Malays.

During the Suqiu controversy, Dr Mahathir claimed that ethnic Chinese were becoming more demanding towards BN after Malays deserted UMNO in the 1999 general election. UMNO also upped the ante against PAS in the Islamisation race. On 29 September 2001 – barely a week after the DAP cut ties with PAS – Dr Mahathir announced that Malaysia was already an Islamic state and caused a polemic that lasted for months (Tan, 2002). In spite of his efforts, there was no clear indication that the majority of Malays will return to voting for UMNO. A litmus test came during the by-elections for Pendang parliamentary and Anak Bukit state seats in July 2002. PAS was the incumbent for both seats. After a nail-biting contest, UMNO defeated PAS to win Pendang but PAS held on to Anak Bukit. Both seats were won with a slim margin of a few hundred votes. One year later in October 2003, Dr Mahathir stepped down and passed the baton to his deputy Abdullah Ahmad Badawi. Although Dr Mahathir did not expect Abdullah to rock the boat, the latter's sharp departure from Mahathirist conservatism was significant in the Malaysian context (Abdul Hamid & Ismail, 2012, p.398). Before assuming the country's highest office in October 2003, Abdullah insisted that he would not carry out radical changes. However, he later demonstrated "a surprising determination not to become a carbon copy of Mahathir" and his policies were interpreted as "a subtle process of de-Mahathirisation" (ibid, p.393).

Some observers highlighted how Dr Mahathir's authoritarianism took heavy toll on the country (Khoo, 2003; Ooi, 2006) and Abdullah realised that reforms were inevitable despite UMNO's conservatism. In an interview with Bridget Welsh and James Chin, Abdullah revealed how difficult it was for him to manoeuvre and find a balance in carrying out reforms due to the party's institutionalised mindsets. He lamented: "I was sandwiched between an electorate which had high expectations of reform and change, and an administration and party leaders who were resistant to this change" (2013, p.10). Nevertheless, his gentler and reformist approach to running the country and his discourses of liberalisation had a transformative effect on the state. Most important was his refrain from unleashing the full might of the state's coercive tools (which I earlier referred to as Big Six Draconian Laws) to pursue his own agenda and this created the space for SMs to emerge. The democratic opening under Abdullah's administration is well-documented. Among others, John Funston said there were more media freedom, less use of ISA, and more tolerance for public protests in Malaysia under Abdullah (2016, pp.65-67). On inter-ethnic and inter-religious relations, Abdullah attempted to be more inclusive like Tunku Abdul Rahman (Abdul Hamid & Ismail, 2012 p.393). He also tried to make the practice of Islam more progressive through the concept of *Islam Hadhari* (civilisational Islam).

Abdullah's softer image and promises of reforms helped BN to win the 2004 general election with an overwhelming 63.8 percent of popular votes which translated into more than 90 percent of seats in Parliament. To carry out institutional reforms, Abdullah recruited the support of young advisors, notably his son-in-law Khairy Jamaluddin and his team of highly-educated technocrats known as the "Fourth Floor Boys" in the Prime Minister's Department. However, he faced considerable pushback from hardliners within UMNO who alleged that he was trying to dismantle Dr Mahathir's legacies. Abdullah also faced resistance from reactionary Muslims who were not only

unreceptive but equated his Islam Hadhari with liberalism. As he was trying to present a modern face of Islam, the Islamists hardened their positions. Among the explosive issues during Abdullah's administration were those relating to moral policing by Islamic religious authorities, apostasy and unilateral conversions of non-Muslim minors to Islam. The Allah row, which will be discussed in Chapter 6, was also brought to court under Abdullah's watch.

To resolve these religious issues, a civil society group comprising of liberal Muslims and non-Muslims proposed for an Interfaith Commission (IFC) in 2005 but Abdullah rejected it knowing well that the reactionaries were staunchly against it. During this time, some UMNO activists also started making racially provocative statements during the party's annual general assembly. Despite complaints from the non-Malays, it went on for three consecutive years. As Abdullah tried to appease all sides, his reform efforts became stalled. This is a factor which contributed to the shocking results of the 2008 general election, which abruptly ended Abdullah's days as the prime minister. Various groups in UMNO, including Dr Mahathir, blamed Abdullah's allegedly poor leadership as the primary reason for BN's poor showing in the polls. Even though Abdullah initially wanted to hand over power to his deputy Najib by mid-2010, he was forced to step down earlier in April 2009. By this time, the robust Leviathan has effectively transformed into an injured Leviathan as the state capacity to extract symbolic power from society was impaired. In Chapter 4, I will explain how the Malaysian state capacity to extract power from society was further affected in the post-2008 era under Najib's administration from 2009 to 2018.

3.7 Conclusion

This chapter has provided a historical context for the period before the 2008 general election. While this may not represent a thoroughly comprehensive POS, it laid out the broad social processes that occurred in Malaysia from 1969 until 2003. By doing this, I am justifying my claim that the state was the most important factor that shaped the POS for SMs to emerge and develop in Malaysia. Among others, I have identified the 1969 general election as a critical juncture that gave rise to a “robust Leviathan” with increased willingness and capacity to impose its will on society. Although Malaysia was a strong state from the day it gained independence in 1957, it was not robust in dominating society. Despite starting out as a Malay nationalist movement, UMNO, which was instrumental in creating a Malayan proto-state with the British in 1948, opted for inclusivity and pluralism when the country gained independence in 1957. The first prime minister Tunku Abdul Rahman was a liberal and he was more accommodative towards non-Malays. Things changed when racial violence broke out in May 1969. This allowed the strong state to morph into a robust Leviathan.

Unlike other post-colonial states that are relatively weak vis-à-vis their societies, the British had armed the Malaysian state with various tools of repression in the forms of draconian laws to deal with social conflicts. I have shown how the robust Leviathan sharpened these repressive tools to make them more effective throughout the 1970s and 1980s. But whether the state was willing to wield those weapons against regime opponents was the question. The state’s willingness to crack down on dissent depends on its legitimacy, which is provided by a hidden consensus from societal elites. Based on Slater’s (2010) organising power model, I argue that one of the important sources of power for the state comes from its capacity to extract symbolic powers from the middle classes and communal elites. Influenced by these elites, the non-Malays,

as a whole, contributed to the robust Leviathan by voting for the BN regime, despite their misgivings towards UMNO, due to their fear of racial violence. The state also promoted Malay conservatism as it became stronger. Without much opposition from society, it became more conservative and implemented pro-Malay and Islamisation policies during the 1970s and 1980s respectively.

As the state's own conservative project was in full swing, the POS was not conducive for SM emergence in this period. The robust Leviathan had the strength and legitimacy to crack down on opposition movements. Following a period of strong economic growth, there was a minor liberalisation in the 1990s. As the state's symbolic powers grew, it could afford to become more accommodative of non-Malays and there were signs of a changing POS. Nevertheless, the robust Leviathan resurfaced when economic crisis hit the country in 1997. Despite challenges from the Reformasi movement in 1998, the ruling elites closed ranks and non-Malays supported BN again in 1999 general election. After dealing with the Reformasi dissidents, the robust Leviathan easily subjugated the ethnic Chinese and Islamist social forces. All of these helped BN to survive its most difficult period. Such was the power of a robust Leviathan. Even though Malaysia remains a relatively strong state today, Chapter 4 will provide an original analysis of how the robust Leviathan was effectively transformed into a qualitatively different creature from the one discussed in this chapter. In the process, it will demonstrate how the condition of an injured Leviathan created a new POS for the reactionary movement to emerge as exemplified by the rise of Perkasa and ISMA in the post-2008 era.

CHAPTER 4 The State as Injured Leviathan (2008-2017)

4.1 Introduction

Being a competitive authoritarian regime (Way & Levitsky, 2010) or electoral one-party state (Wong, et. al., 2010), Malaysia was politically stable for many years. However, the Malaysian state and society would experience some transformations, especially after Abdullah Ahmad Badawi became prime minister, to an extent that BN was electorally weakened in 2008. Even before the 2008 general election, state repression was no longer quite the same. Under Abdullah administration from 2003 to 2009, the state did not resort to the kind of hard repression that characterised the robust Leviathan under Dr Mahathir. As mentioned in Chapter 2, Lucan Way and Steven Levitsky (2010, p.328) also noticed that Abdullah underutilised his coercive power against opponents. Although the UMNO-led regime occasionally wielded the state's coercive instruments, they were used with much greater restraint and circumspection. Unlike previously, state repression no longer evoked the same kind of chilling effect on society under Abdullah and Najib administrations. The breadth and frequency of state repression fell sharply with greater police tolerance for street protests and fewer mass arrests, especially after a fiasco during the Bersih 2.0 rally in July 2011. In fact, there is a scholarly account on Prime Minister Najib Razak who apparently preferred using "softer instruments" to restrain regime opponents rather than deploying violent coercion (Yew, 2016).

More recently, political scientist Andreas Ufen (2022) suggested that Najib was a "failed autocrat" whose repressive measures were ineffective. Referring to Gerschewski's (2013) three pillars of authoritarianism, Ufen said Najib's supposed autocratisation of Malaysia failed because there was

“inconsistent legitimization,” “botched co-option,” and “ineffective repression,” including what is described as “inadequate hard measures” (Ufen, 2022 p.544-546). However, he may have attributed too much agency to Najib and overlooked important structural factors in the Malaysian state. For this, I turned to a component of Dan Slater’s (2010) ordering power model to support my analysis. In outlining my analytical method in Chapter 2, I highlighted that a state extractive capacity may provide clues to understand the extent of its ability to crack down on regime opponents. In this chapter, I will discuss what happened to the Malaysian state’s capacity to extract symbolic power. I will also provide some insights on the state’s fiscal power or its capacity to extract remunerative power. My analysis shows how these processes not only affected the degree of state’s repression but opened up the political opportunity structure (POS) for a reactionary Malay-Muslim social movement (SM) as represented by Perkasa and ISMA to emerge in the post-2008 era.

4.2 Defining the Injured Leviathan

To conceptualise the Malaysian state in the post-2008 era, I propose the term “injured Leviathan” to juxtapose against the “robust Leviathan” discussed in Chapter 3. Based on a Weberian notion of the state as an organisation with a monopoly over the use of violence, the injured Leviathan refers to *a strong state that lost its iron will to use repression to fully dominate society*. In other words, the “protection pacts” (Slater, 2010) previously offered by the robust Leviathan have collapsed. This caused the BN regime to suffer a legitimacy crisis which forced its leadership to rethink the cost of repression in achieving their long-term goals. While the state’s coercive power may remain intact, repression became more restrained as the ruling elites preferred to avoid further electoral or economic fallout. With a long-term view to stay in power, they calculated that it was less costly to moderate repression against their opponents compared

with the risks of cracking down hard on them. In line with Malaysia's hybridity as an electoral party-state (Wong, et. al., 2010), I conceptualise the injured Leviathan as a unique condition that can only happen to electoral authoritarian regimes in strong states. As a regime that requires legitimation through elections, BN could never rely on repression to justify its rule. Despite its authoritarianism, the regime's "mentality" (Linz, 2000) in governing Malaysia precluded a brutal rule by violence. So, it was susceptible to electoral pressure, which in turn put a restraint on state repression.

Unless society totally falls apart, it is unlikely for Malaysia to slide into closed authoritarianism in which human rights could be totally ignored and free elections prohibited. The Malaysian electoral system was also stable because the country has an unbroken record of relatively free (though not necessarily fair) elections since 1955. Despite various political crises, BN did not shy away from electoral competitions for legitimacy. Furthermore, the state has never come under a closed authoritarian regime, except for a brief period of emergency rule from 1969 until 1970. Therefore, the probability of BN abandoning free elections was remote even if it became more authoritarian. Election was the only game in town to win state power. While electoral authoritarianism was a source of BN's longevity in power when poll victories legitimised its repression against opponents, it became a bane for BN from 2008 onwards as election setback de-incentivised the ruling elites from pursuing hardline repression as a regime maintenance strategy. Even though the state had strong coercive power, its store of symbolic and remunerative powers was declining. Besides placating different ethnic groups in society to maintain its symbolic power, it needs economic growth. The state's fiscal position or remunerative power is also important for the maintenance of coercive power and for patronage purposes. In balancing all these considerations, the injured Leviathan came about and the POS in Malaysia was altered.

4.3 How the Leviathan Got Injured?

In Chapter 3, I highlighted the robust Leviathan's determination and capacity in dominating society as Malaysia underwent two "conservative turns" in the 1970s and the 1980s respectively. Its coercive capacity, expressed in the Big Six draconian laws, was legitimised by BN's electoral victories and this allowed the Malaysian state to continue implementing conservative policies. It also helped to maintain BN rule for several decades despite the unhappiness among non-Malays. Although the state started on a liberal footing under Tunku administration, this condition lasted for only 12 years before Malay conservatism and authoritarianism reigned over the country's multiethnic and multicultural society. Following the racial violence in 1969, the Malaysian state gradually morphed into a robust Leviathan. Thus, it is important to understanding how it ended up as an injured Leviathan almost four decades later. The immediate cause for this situation was the 2008 general election that resulted in BN losing its supermajority in Parliament.

However, the robustness of the Malaysian state's control over society was already in a steady decline even before 2008. Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, who took over from Dr Mahathir in 2003, was said to be a "Mr Nice Guy" with a softer personality and the former was more consultative and practised a more open approach in governing the country than his predecessor, Dr Mahathair (Welsh & Chin, 2013). As mentioned earlier, the line separating the state and regime is blurred in an electoral one-party state. So, whatever happened to the regime affects the state and vice-versa. It was Abdullah who started the initiatives for state transformation during his administration from 2003 to 2009 and Najib inherited his "liberalising" tendencies from 2009 to 2018. To appeal to electorates, both tried to be reformist and differentiated

themselves from Dr Mahathir's conservatism and authoritarianism. Instead of convincing the voters, they however ended up creating and perpetuating the injured Leviathan that further weakened BN's grip on power.

There are a number of discussions on the successes and failures of Abdullah's administration (Welsh & Chin, 2013) but none looked at its implications on state capacity. Taking a cue from Slater's model of power extraction as discussed in Chapter 2, I propose that the injured Leviathan came about when its capacity to extract symbolic power from society was impaired. Even though symbolic power is just one of the three subtypes of organisational power (Etzioni, 1961), it is nevertheless the most important source of power for an electoral authoritarian regime to legitimise its use of coercion. The erosion of symbolic power was the biggest stumbling block that prevented the state from regaining robustness. As a somewhat "liberal" neo-conservative (Hamid & Ismail, 2012), Abdullah's reformism reignited the state's "liberal DNA" which was previously dormant. In the following sections, I will explain how the Malaysian state capacity to extract symbolic power was affected.

4.4 Impairment of the State's Capacity to Extract Symbolic Power

As mentioned in Chapter 2, the state derives its symbolic power from the cultural resources provided by the middle classes and communal elites. Based on Bourdieu's (1979; 1984) ideas on symbolic power, I see these cultural resources as embedded in the "habitus" of these two groups of societal elites. Habitus refers to the deeply ingrained dispositions, tastes and practices that an individual acquired through socialisation (ibid). It provided the state with the hegemonic ability to dominate society without resorting to economic inducement or violent coercion. Slater's (2010) model sees the middle classes

and communal elites as the two societal groups from which the state extracts symbolic power in exchange for a “protection pact”. However, we need to understand the exchange process that took place. In actuality, there were only habitus and no real consensus between the state, middle classes and communal elites. Although Malaysia practised pluralism under Tunku administration in 1950s and 1960s, things changed after 1969 as the state underwent two rounds of conservative turns. Since then, Malays and non-Malays were socialised differently. The discourses of ketuanan Melayu and Islamisation moulded separate habitus for different ethnic groups. For the Malays, they were imbued with a sense of entitlement tinted by insecurity (Lee, 2018). Others developed inferiority complex and a culture of dependency (Lee, 2004).

Meanwhile, non-Malays were socialised into avoiding political confrontations (Chin, 2001). The regime deliberately channelled the non-Malays towards non-political concerns with the politics of developmentalism (Loh, 2002). Therefore, the symbolic power that the state extracted from the middle classes and communal elites were not really consensus in the communitarian sense (Etzioni, 1968). It was a coerced, manipulated and unconsciously manufactured consensus. Yet, it lasted for a long time as a source of symbolic power for state authoritarianism. Habitus was behind the societal elites’ support for BN as the former exchanged their votes for stability and a culture of political apathy. There are many examples of this habitus until today and some are found in the discourses of non-Malays. For example, ethnic Chinese parents sometimes tell their children not to return to Malaysia after sending them abroad for further education as they believe that there is no future for non-Malays in Malaysia. Their oft repeated phrase: “This is their (Malays) country, not our (non-Malays) country.” Others would say that the Malays and the Malaysia will not change.

Such was the non-Malays' pessimism and fatalism to the extent that Malaysia experienced a huge wave of emigration in the 1980s and 1990s. This created pockets of Malaysian diasporas in countries such as Singapore, Australia and New Zealand, which are popular destinations for higher education due to its geographical proximity with Malaysia (Koh, 2014). To avoid inflaming Malay sensitivities, non-Malays grudgingly accepted their "second-class" status and continued voting BN in return for social stability (Chin, 2000; 2001). With these, the state prevailed over the ethnically divided society. Never in the non-Malays' wildest dreams did they think that BN could ever be defeated until the 2008 general election, following which the state's store of symbolic power would decline until political change became possible.

4.4.1 Middle-Class Malays

As beneficiaries of NEP, middle-class Malays initially saw UMNO as their sole protector and they became the most important source of symbolic power for the state (Muzaffar, 1979). As their size increased from the 1970s onwards, they were BN's most consistent supporters (Crouch, 1996, pp. 192-193). Despite competition from PAS, UMNO always came up top in general elections on the back of their support. However, the Reformasi movement in late 1990s ruptured their habitus and affected the state's ability to extract symbolic power from middle-class Malays. Discourses during the Reformasi period from 1998 to 20001 hinted at the rupture. One argument suggests that UMNO's leaders were detached from Malay reality on the ground. In Malay culture, a leader can impose the harshest punishments, even to the extent of executing their followers but they should not humiliate them (Singh, 2000). The issue of "*maruah*" (dignity) is very important to Malays (Mohammad Shukri, 2021). Political scientist Hari Singh (2000, p.542) said Dr Mahathir disregarded Malay political culture and went overboard in persecuting his former deputy.

Among others, Anwar was accused of being a homosexual, a traitor and a puppet of foreign countries (ibid). Hence, the Malays were not only upset with Anwar's sacking but they were outraged at how Dr Mahathir shamed his former deputy.

While the majority of UMNO elites remained cohesive, those disgusted by how Anwar was treated left the party to join the Reformasi movement. Since Anwar was ABIM's co-founder, various Islamist groups also extended support to him. This resulted in the largest street protests the country had seen in two decades. Together with Anwar's supporters from within UMNO and civil society, they established *Parti Keadilan Nasional* (PKN), which later became PKR. They also built a multi-ethnic coalition by bringing DAP and PAS together under the BA coalition. Consequently, UMNO lost 17 parliamentary seats in 1999 general election. Even though BN retained its two-thirds majority by winning 148 out of the 193 seats in Parliament, it was unprecedented for UMNO to lose four of its incumbent Cabinet ministers and five deputy ministers in the polls (Weiss, 2000 p.416). What is more interesting was a trend suggesting substantial shift in the voting pattern among urban voters, especially those in the Klang Valley, where Anwar's calls for reform were the loudest in the months leading up to the general election.³⁹

According to Weiss, the voters there "probably had the most widespread access to the Internet and other alternative media and so might have been less easily swayed by the BN-controlled mainstream media" (ibid, p.419). Meanwhile, sociologist Abdul Rahman Embong pointed out that the new middle-class Malays were among those with "a growing crisis of confidence towards the BN regime" in his pioneering study on *Melayu Baru* (New Malays)

³⁹ Among others, she pointed out the cases of Shah Alam, where Keadilan Youth chief Mohamad Ezam Mohd Nor narrowed UMNO's majority from almost 41,000 in 1995 to just 1,140, and Bandar Tun Razak, where social activist and university professor Chandra Muzaffar brought down MCA's winning margin from 14,735 to 1,224.

(2002, p.199). Despite being state-sponsored, he reckoned that these new middle-class Malays “asserted their ideological and political independence from the state” (ibid, p,200). Like Weiss (2000), Embong also sensed the disaffection and oppositional stance in the populace in the 1999 general election. Therefore, it is not too far-fetched to suggest that some Malays, especially those in urban areas, no longer saw UMNO as their sole protector since the Reformasi outbreak. These urban Malays were developing a new habitus and breaking away from old dispositions that tied them to UMNO.

Following the BA’s formation, a Malay-led opposition had also emerged in Parliament for the first time. Before 1999, most opposition MPs were ethnic Chinese. In the 1999 general election, PAS was the biggest winner among opposition parties with 27 seats. Besides retaining power in the Kelantan state government, the Islamist party also wrested the Malay heartland state of Terengganu from UMNO. Another wake-up call for UMNO came when the party lost the Lunas state constituency to PAS in a by-election in November 2000. As Kedah was Dr Mahathir’s home state, there were murmurs within UMNO attributing the defeat to him. Increasingly viewed as a liability to his own party, Dr Mahathir would reluctantly pass the baton to Abdullah in 2003. However, the Malaysian state was unable to fully recover its ability to extract symbolic power from middle-class Malays. This problem was compounded by Dr Mahathir’s criticisms against Abdullah administration. In contending with the former’s opposition to his reform agenda, Abdullah suffered an image problem. Blogging was a popular online activity in the mid-2000s and Abdullah’s critics took to the Internet to attack his administration.

On this matter, political observers such as Bridget Welsh and James Chin (2013, p.xivii) said they were “almost certain” that an UMNO faction was out to destroy Abdullah’s government. Middle-class Malays would not miss the

negative comments on Abdullah and his caricatures as a “sleeping PM.”⁴⁰ Besides his portrayal as an ineffective leader, detractors targeted Abdullah’s family. Among others, Dr Mahathir accused Abdullah’s son-in-law, Khairy Jamaluddin of meddling in government affairs and planting his Oxbridge-educated friends in the Prime Minister’s Department. Bloggers linked to Dr Mahathir also claimed that the people running the country were actually the “Fourth Floor Boys” led by Khairy. All of these were taken up by opposition parties to further undermine the credibility of Abdullah administration. According to Farish Noor, the sleeping PM image, which may not be true, stuck because Abdullah was seen as failing to act decisively on many important issues (2013, pp.45-47).

4.4.2 Middle-Class Non-Malays

Unlike the Malays, middle-class non-Malays were not BN’s most consistent supporters. Many of them would vote for DAP instead as they were frustrated with the state’s discriminatory policies since the 1970s. They also experienced periodical violent threats from UMNO Youth in the 1987 and 2000. However, a sizeable chunk of them still retained a measure of support for BN’s Chinese-based parties such as MCA and PGRM. All depended on the prevailing ethnic mood in a particular period and how persuasive those BN parties were in convincing ethnic Chinese to vote for them. For example, urban Chinese mostly voted for DAP throughout the 1980s but shifted their support to BN after a so-called “minor liberalisation” in the 1990s.⁴¹ As Malaysia

⁴⁰ Explaining why he had been photographed as sleeping during events, Abdullah said he would sometimes doze off unconsciously as he had sleep apnea. See Welsh and Chin (2013, p.23-24).

⁴¹ In the run-up to the 1995 general election, Lim Kit Siang used this term to describe the relaxation of certain state regulations on education and economic matters in the early 1990s. See Lim (1994).

experienced rapid growth from the late 1980s onwards, Dr Mahathir was said to have become more accepting of pluralism in building an inclusivist *Bangsa Malaysia* (Malaysian race) as a part of his Vision 2020 (Heng, 1996, p.515). Following the minor liberalisation, Chinese-based parties in BN also started receiving more votes and increased their parliamentary seats in 1995 general election. At the height of the Reformasi movement in 1999, middle-class non-Malays, particularly ethnic Chinese, voted for BN. This was attributed to a habitus characterised by fear and marginalisation (Chin, 2001).

Despite being racially marginalised, non-Malays voted for BN because they believed that the alternative would be a more repressive Islamic state under PAS in which their rights could be further curtailed (ibid). Nevertheless, they managed to overcome this habitus in 2008 general election. It was UMNO itself that broke the habitus among middle-class non-Malays. After giving a strong mandate to BN in 2004 general election, the ethnic Chinese expected Abdullah to do something about the discrimination and racism that they had endured. Their hopes were dashed when UMNO delegates continually made racially provocative statements during the party's annual general assembly from 2005 to 2007. One of the most provocative acts in the eyes of non-Malays was the *keris* wielding ceremony, which was introduced during the UMNO Youth's general assembly in 2005. For three consecutive years, UMNO Youth held processions carrying the weapon into the meeting hall, where it was handed over to the party's youth chief, Hishammuddin Hussein, who unsheathed, kissed and hoisted it.

On its own, the *keris* ritual is a Malay cultural ceremony with little significance for non-Malays. To make sense of its implicit meaning, the performance must be understood in the context of what happened in an earlier UMNO meeting. During the 2004 assembly, the party's newly elected deputy chairperson Badruddin Amiruldin brandished a book on the 1969 racial riots

and said those who questioned Malay rights were akin to stirring a hornets' nest. "Let no one from the other races ever question the rights of Malays on this land. Don't question the religion because this is my right on this land," he warned (Gatsiounis, 2004). Defending Badruddin's statement, UMNO Youth executive council member Dr Pirdaus Ismail said they should remind "Chinese chauvinists'" not to question Malay privileges. He said: "Badruddin did not pose the question to all Chinese in the country... Those who are with us, who hold the same understanding as we do, were not our target. In defending Malay rights, we direct our voice at those who question them" (ibid).

The final straw came in 2006 UMNO Youth assembly, which was televised live. During the meeting, some of the party's delegates made a number of threatening remarks. For example, Malacca's delegate Hasnoor Sidang Hussein said, "UMNO is willing to risk lives and bathe in blood in defence of race and religion" while UMNO Youth executive council member Azimi Daim said, "when tension rises, the blood of Malay warriors will run in our veins." The most alarming statement, however, was made by Hashim Suboh, who was a delegate from Perlis. Directing his question to the UMNO Youth chief, he asked: "Datuk Hisham has unsheathed his *keris*, waved his *keris*, kissed his *keris*. We want to ask Datuk Hisham when he is going to use it" ("BN parties refuse," 2006). Although non-Malays raised concerns about the *keris* wielding ceremony and UMNO delegates' provocative statements, their complaints fell on deaf ears as Hishammuddin continued to wield the *keris* the following year. He claimed that the ritual would inject a new spirit among younger Malays and he had no ulterior motives.

Nevertheless, non-Malays were not convinced. It raised questions about among them on whether to continue supporting BN since UMNO itself was promoting racial violence. This further impaired the state capacity to extract symbolic power from middle-class Chinese, which was never stable in the first

place. It was only after the 2008 general election that Hishammuddin realised his mistake and apologised to non-Malays. He admitted that the *keris* wielding ceremony was among the causes of BN's poor electoral results (Teh, 2008). However, it was too late because BN would never recover from that episode as the Chinese habitus of retaining some support for BN had been ruptured. The number of seats won by UMNO's non-Malay partners in BN would plummet from 2008 onwards. BN's largest Chinese-based party, MCA only managed to win 15 seats in 2008 general election, barely half of the 31 seats it won in 2004. It declined to seven seats in 2013 general election. The party was almost decimated by winning only one parliamentary seat in 2018 (See Table 6).

Table 6: MCA Parliamentary Seats & Share of Popular Votes, 1999-2018

Election Year	Number of Parliamentary Seats Won	Popular Votes (in percentage)
1999	29	14.43
2004	31	15.45
2008	15	10.72
2013	7	7.98
2018	1	5.41

4.4.3 Non-Malay Communal Elites

The Malaysian state had not only impaired its capacity to extract symbolic power from the middle-classes (both Malays and non-Malays) in 2008 but alienated non-Malay communal elites. Unlike middle-class non-Malays, communal elites were more consistent in supporting BN due to their personal links with MCA, MIC and PGRM. Some of these communal elites were party members and they could be counted upon to pacify ethnic Chinese and Indian

masses and to persuade them to keep voting for BN. Comprising mostly of businessmen, educationists and religious leaders, these communal elites would occasionally make demands on the state on behalf of their respective ethnic groups. However, the communal elites wanted stability even more than the middle classes. As communal elites, they had bigger material interests to protect and would stand to lose more than the middle classes if another conflict like the 13 May Incident breaks out. Furthermore, they would be the first to benefit from the state's concessions for ethnic minorities. However, the Malaysian state also could no longer extract much symbolic power from them due to several events in the years leading up to the 2008 general election. Even if they supported the regime, these communal elites could not become effective intermediaries in persuading their ethnic masses to vote for BN. Once again, UMNO had shot the state (and itself) in the foot.

For Chinese communal elites, the *Suqiu* controversy in 2000 was a defining episode in their interactions with the Malaysian state. *Suqiu*, which means "appeal" in the Chinese language, refers to an electoral memorandum signed by more than 2,000 Chinese organisations, including the Chinese education movement *Dong Jiao Zong* (DJZ).⁴² There were 17 points in the memorandum, including a suggestion for the government to consider abolishing the distinction between Bumiputera and non-Bumiputera. As the 1999 general election was approaching, BN announced that it accepted *Suqiu*'s proposals in principle as it needed Chinese votes. Even though ethnic Chinese had largely backed BN in the polls, UMNO lost a lot of Malay votes to PAS. To shore up Malay support, Dr Mahathir turned *Suqiu* into a "punching bag" by publicly alleging that the *Suqiu* committee, comprising of Chinese communal

⁴² Citing a news report by Joceline Tan (2000), Collins suggested that DJZ was an important force behind *Suqiu* (2006, p.310). Even though DJZ is often deemed to be oppositional, the Malaysian state also extracted symbolic power from the movement because some of its leaders were MCA and PGRM members or had strong ties with non-Malay political elites in BN. Historically, there were strong links between DJZ and MCA and both had formed temporary alliances over particular issues over the years (ibid, pp.305-308).

leaders, was an extremist group similar to “communists” during his national day speech that was televised live in August 2000.

The *Suqiu* committee which drafted the memorandum also received violent warnings from UMNO Youth members who threatened to burn down the Kuala Lumpur and Selangor Chinese Assembly Hall, an iconic and historical building located in the heart of the city. Eventually, the *Suqiu* committee was forced to retract the part of their appeals that UMNO deemed as “seditious.” Due to their linkages with BN non-Malay politicians, these Chinese communal leaders had not imagined *Suqiu* would become so controversial. Forced to give up on their appeal, they “lost face” and could not gracefully “*xia tai*” (Chinese for “exiting the stage”). As a whole, their repudiation was also slap in the face that awakened the ethnic Chinese masses who voted for BN in 1999 (Tan, 2012, p.35).

Before the *Hindu Rights Action Force* (Hindraf) movement broke out in 2007, the Malaysian state had few difficulties in extracting symbolic power from ethnic Indian communal elites, particularly those with linkages to MIC such as the *Malaysia Hindu Sangam* (MHS).⁴³ Like *Suqiu*, Hindraf started as a coalition of 30 Hindu NGOs committed to the preservation of Hindu community rights and heritage in Malaysia. After local authorities demolished several Hindu temples in the country in 2006, Hindraf complained to Abdullah but did not receive any response. Many Hindu groups suspected there was a systematic plan of temple cleansing in Malaysia. The authorities claimed that the temples were built illegally even though some were centuries old. Ethnic Indians also faced other problems that MIC could not resolve. Many estate workers were facing evictions while some Indian mothers had to endure custody battles due

⁴³ Like DJZ’s relationship with MCA, MHS also has a historical link with MIC. The NGO is a brain child of K. Paramalingam, a lawyer and Public Trustee Department director-general. In forming MHS, he was assisted by K. Ramanathan, who was MIC president from 1950 to 1951 (Malaysia Hindu Sangam, n.d.).

to unilateral conversion of their children by their ex-husbands who embraced Islam. All these culminated in Hindraf filing a class action suit against the UK government for US\$4 trillion on the 50th anniversary of Malaysia's independence on 31 August 2007. It accused the British of abandoning the Indians to the mercy of a Malay-majority government. On 25 November 2007, thousands of ethnic Indians took to the streets of Kuala Lumpur, where they were met by riot police with tear gas and water cannons.

4.5 Straining the State's Capacity to Extract Remunerative Power

While the state's capacity to extract symbolic power was impaired by UMNO during Abdullah administration, Najib worsened the condition by straining its capacity to extract remunerative power. To keep BN in power, he had to do something to rejuvenate the injured Leviathan's extractive capacity and prevent its remaining store of symbolic power from being exhausted. However, he could not revert to Dr Mahathir's conservative and authoritarian policies without further alienating non-Malays. So, Najib tried to burnish his own reformist credentials by promising more reforms than Abdullah. In 2009, he introduced the *1Malaysia* concept to promote ethnic harmony, national unity, and efficient governance. He introduced this slogan with two major reform plans, namely the *Government Transformation Programme* (GTP) in January 2010 and the *Economic Transformation Programme* (ETP) in September that year. Like his predecessor, Najib started on a positive note but ended up squandering the state's remaining store of symbolic power while exerting its remunerative power. Instead of pushing through genuine reforms, he eventually resorted to doling out state funds to keep BN in power. Even though Malaysia experienced a modest gross domestic product (GDP) growth at an average of five percent per annum from 2009 to 2018, the country's fiscal position grew weaker. Debts

were piling up but the state capacity to collect taxes could not catch up with growing expenditure.

Table 7: Malaysia's GDP Growth, Tax-to-GDP & Debt-to-GDP Ratios, 2008-2017

Year	GDP Growth (Percentage)	Tax-to-GDP Ratio (Percentage)	Debt-to-GDP Ratio (Percentage)
2008	4.8	14.7	39.8
2009	-1.5	14.9	50.8
2010	7.4	13.3	49.6
2011	5.3	14.8	50.0
2012	5.5	15.6	51.6
2013	4.7	15.3	53.0
2014	6.0	14.8	52.7
2015	5.1	14.1	53.6
2016	4.4	13.6	51.9
2017	5.8	12.9	50.0

Sources: World Bank Open Data (2022f; 2022g & 2022h)

According to the World Bank (2022g), Malaysia's tax revenue as a percentage of its GDP fell from a high of 19.8 percent in 1997 to 12.9 percent in 2017. Under Najib's administration, there were only two years when the percentage of tax revenue as a ratio to GDP grew. Between 2012 and 2017, the tax collection ratio was consistently declining (See Table 7). In 2023, Malaysia's tax-to-GDP ratio was among the lowest in the Asia Pacific region ("Malaysia urged," 2023). Besides low tax collection, its public debt ratio is high. In 2017, the country's debt was reported at 50.8 per cent of GDP or RM686.8 billion. This figure, according to International Monetary Fund (IMF), was higher than the debts accumulated by Indonesia and Thailand at 29 percent and 42 percent respectively. When PH came to power in May 2018, Dr Mahathir, who returned

as the prime minister, dropped a bombshell by claiming that the national debt had exceeded RM1 trillion. This figure was later disputed by Najib ("Najib congratulates," 2018). In spite of the claims and counter-claims between PH and BN, it was undeniable that the Malaysian state's fiscal power had declined. In the following sections, I will explain how Najib's efforts to regain support for BN strained Malaysia's state capacity to extract remunerative power.

4.5.1 Concentration of Remunerative Power in Najib's Hands

Knowing that the regime's store of symbolic power might be insufficient to win the 2013 general election, Najib administration spent a lot of money on patronage and exhausted more of the state's store of remunerative power to compensate for its erosion of symbolic power. Slater has noted that an authoritarian regime which loses its protection logic will opt to become provision-driven (2010, p.19). Similarly, BN under Najib was more reliant on the distribution of patronage. The injured Leviathan had to channel more financial resources back to society. However, this meant the state also needed to grow the economy in order to extract more remunerative power or taxes from the bourgeoisie. In doing this, Najib concentrated some of the state's remunerative extractive power in his own hands. Since the prime minister was also a finance minister, this was not a problem. According to political scientist Bridget Welsh, Najib became the "patron of patronage" and the "ultimate fount and dispenser of rewards" (2016, p.248).

There were many ways for the injured Leviathan to manipulate the flow of state funds to help BN win the 2013 general election. Among others, Najib introduced a government-funded cash transfer programme called "*Bantuan Rakyat 1Malaysia*" (1Malaysia People's Aid or BR1M) in 2012. This programme

benefited millions of low-income Malaysians and helped BN to stay in power in spite of the erosion in symbolic power. However, UMNO no longer played a direct role in delivering patronage as BR1M applicants could apply for the cash aid directly from state agencies and Najib was said to have taken credit for himself (ibid). Some politicians and academics also noticed that the PM's Department (PMD) had grown drastically under Najib's administration (Loh, 2018). As of 2017, there were a total of 13 Cabinet members in PMD – 10 full ministers and three deputy ministers. Within PMD, there were 57 sub-departments, 10 federal statutory bodies, 13 companies, five corridor development agencies, five foundations and two international organisations.

Even watchdog agencies such as the Attorney-General's Chambers, the Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission and the National Audit Department were parked under PMD (Loh, 2018 pp.52-54). The number of employees in PMD were just 4,414 in 1981 but they had increased to 33,904 in 2017 (ibid). More revealing was the amount of funds that was allocated to the PMD. In 2000, PMD only received RM5.2 billion, representing 4.6 per cent of total government budget. However, Najib administration allocated RM15 to RM20 billion every year between 2010 and 2015 for PMD. In 2016, it received RM20.6 billion, representing 7.6 per cent of the total budget that year (ibid, p.54). DAP MP Liew Chin Tong, who had highlighted the issue since 2013 likened the RM20 billion allocation provided to the PMD between 2011 and 2014 as a "near slush fund" ("#Viewpoint*," 2013). He also pointed out: "Something is very wrong with the way Prime Minister cum Finance Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak handles our public coffers" (ibid).

4.5.2 “Cash is King”: GST, 1MDB and China’s Investments in Malaysia

The phrase “cash is king” became a buzzword in Malaysia after Najib allegedly used it in his conversation with Dr Mahathir.⁴⁴ While there was always a perception of corruption in UMNO, it was also true that BN needed more money in the post-2008 era to stay in power. However, the injured Leviathan’s fiscal capacity was limited. There are several factors for this. Firstly, Najib came to into office when the country was undergoing a recession in 2009. According to the World Bank (2022f), Malaysia’s economy contracted by 1.5 per cent that year (See Table 6). Secondly, there were inefficiencies in the tax collection system and the government has been running on a deficit for many years. Economists often urged Malaysia to implement tax reform and cut down on subsidies. Thirdly, the country’s GDP had to grow faster for the state to extract more tax revenues. Malaysia needed to scale up its productivity, move up the value-chain, and attract new foreign direct investments (FDI).

Some economists also highlighted that Malaysia was stuck in a “middle-income trap” and might not make the transition into a high-income country if economic reforms were not carried out (Cherif & Hasanov, 2015; Woo, 2009). To overcome these problems, Najib’s administration embarked on several controversial economic policies and projects. They included the implementation of a goods and services tax (GST), setting up the 1Malaysia Development Fund (1MDB) and getting investments from China. Dr Mahathir opposed all three initiatives.⁴⁵ Najib’s administration had realised early on that the country’s tax collection system needed reforms following years of budget

⁴⁴ Dr Mahathir claimed that Najib told him that “cash is king” when questioned on the policy of giving direct cash handouts to lower-income groups under BR1M (Boo, 2015). Three years later, Najib admitted that he had used the expression but explained that he did not mean giving cash handouts to buy support or to bribe someone (“Najib explains,” 2018).

⁴⁵ Among others, Dr Mahathir had urged Najib to abolish the GST (Kamarulzaman, 2015), called for investigations on 1MDB (“Bare all on 1MDB,” 2016) and balked at the Chinese investments that Najib brought into Malaysia (“Dr M: Malays should fear,” 2017).

deficit. The state would not be able to distribute more patronage and maintain the effectiveness of its coercive apparatus such as the police and the military without sufficient funds. However, when the GST Tax Bill 2009 was first tabled in Parliament in December 2009, the government received widespread criticisms and Najib was forced to delay it.

Originally, Najib wanted to implement GST in the third quarter of 2011 but held it back for several years until 2015. The GST implementation was necessary but it was loathed in society, especially among Malays. If it was implemented in 2011, the BN would have probably lost the 2013 general election. It was only after the 2013 polls that Najib mustered the courage to reintroduce it and GST became effective from 1 April 2015 onwards at the rate of six per cent. This valued-added tax was enforced until it was abolished by PH on 1 June 2018. Many Malaysians considered the GST as a burden as it would increase the cost of living. Considering that it had been delayed once, Najib knew how unpopular the tax would be among the people. Yet, he pushed ahead with the GST. This indicated how bad the state's fiscal position was, to a point the regime could no longer afford to delay its implementation. Some observers later identified the GST implementation as one of the causes of BN's defeat in the 2018 general election (Netto, 2018).

The 1MDB financial fiasco can also be understood in term of the state capacity to extract remunerative power as the it desperately needed funds to help BN stay in power. Some scholars suggested that the financial scandal surrounding 1MDB was a case of kleptocracy (Abadi, 2022), where Najib's motive was primarily personal enrichment. However, the issue can also be seen a consequence of the state's growing dependence on remunerative power to compensate for its erosion of symbolic power. Knowing that the limitation of the injured Leviathan's fiscal power for patronage, Najib set up 1MDB as a sovereign wealth fund to boost its ability to dispense patronage on behalf of BN

to win elections. By channelling state funds into 1MDB, Najib was essentially building up BN's political war chest as state funds were used for patronage and propaganda. In June 2015, *Wall Street Journal's* journalist Tom Wright (2015) reported how Najib used 1MDB money to bankroll BN's election campaign. According to Wright, 1MDB made an overpriced purchase of power assets from the Genting Group in 2012, in return for donation to a charitable organisation called *Yayasan Rakyat 1Malaysia* controlled by Najib before the 2013 general election (ibid). 1MDB also directly contributed to BN's election campaigns by acquiring a 9.52-hectare land for RM112.5 million in Penang as Najib promised to start an affordable housing project in the state (Zainul & Achariam, 2020).

Another hint on Malaysian state's strained fiscal capacity in extracting remunerative power was Najib's pivot to China from late 2016 onwards. As BN's access to the state's store of remunerative power was increasingly blocked up following the 1MDB expose in 2015 as state debts were piling up,⁴⁶ Najib went on a six-day official state visit to China on 31 October 2016. He brought back more than a dozen business deals worth RM143.6 billion to Malaysia ("M'sian, Chinese firms," 2016). Under China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), he took billions of dollars in loans for various infrastructure projects. These loans also served as a means for Najib to cover up 1MDB debts (Abadi, 2022). Furthermore, developing a closer relation with China was a strategy to pacify non-Malays. On one hand, Chinese foreign investments could potentially boost Malaysia's economy and improve the state's declining fiscal position. Economists noted the positive correlation between increased FDI and Malaysia's GDP growth (Mustafa, et al., 2021; Har, et al, 2008). On the other hand, cooperation with China was symbolic in regaining support from the ethnic Chinese economic and communal elites, who wished for stronger bilateral ties between Malaysia and China. Not surprisingly, MCA even

⁴⁶ 1MDB was reported to have accumulated more than US\$11 billion (around RM41 billion) in debts by mid-2015 (Wright, 2015).

resorted to putting up billboards showing a party leader shaking hands with China's President Xi Jinping and highlighting the benefits of China's BRI during the 2018 general election (Leong, 2018).

4.6 Opportunities and Threats for the Reactionaries

The previous section highlighted how the injured Leviathan came about as the Malaysian state capacity to extract symbolic power was impaired under Abdullah administration. It was a punishment for BN's failure to push through reforms following years of Dr Mahathir's authoritarianism. Although the injured Leviathan was still a strong state with its coercive power intact, the declining capacity to extract resources for symbolic and remunerative powers put a strain on the state. The loss of symbolic power decreased BN's appetite for hard repression and motivated Najib to opt for persuasion (by promising more reforms) and patronage to stay in power. As an electoral authoritarian regime, BN derived its legitimacy from competitive elections. So, the state cannot simply flex its coercive muscle without consensus from society and the ruling elites became more averse to reasserting authoritarianism after BN lost its supermajority in Parliament.⁴⁷ It was BN's own discourses of state reforms and promises of liberalisation that fundamentally altered the POS in Malaysia. Both Abdullah and Najib might be failed reformists but they tipped the state-society power balance in favour of civil society. As mentioned in Chapter 2, my understanding of POS follows Tarrow's definition of "a consistent – but not necessarily formal or permanent – dimensions of the political environment or of change in that environment that provide incentives for collective action by affecting expectations for success or failure" (2011, p.163).

⁴⁷ Without a two-thirds majority in Parliament, the BN also could no longer amend the Federal Constitution as it did under Dr Mahathir's administration.

Likewise, the injured Leviathan also represents a “consistent but not necessarily permanent dimension of the political environment” in Malaysia, which opened up spaces for SMs from both liberal and conservative persuasions to emerge after 2008. It was Abdullah who started the ball rolling for in creating the injured Leviathan by promising reforms and becoming more tolerant of dissent. While Abdullah’s achievement of reforms can be debated, I propose that his articulation of state liberalisation was powerful enough to trigger a spiral of opportunities and threats in Malaysia as the pent-up energy in society was released following decades of state-led conservatism, authoritarianism and Islamisation. Under a less repressive political environment, there were more leeway for societal forces to emerge and to challenge the state. Besides becoming more accommodating towards liberal opposition, the POS was also conducive for the reactionaries to start their own movements. As discussed in the previous sections, an injured Leviathan came into being when a new habitus shifted legitimation away from the views justifying protection pacts offered by the robust Leviathan. However, BN was simply stuck as it could not pacify the non-Malays without provoking conservative Malays. In the following sections, I will examine how the reactionaries’ cognitive liberation came about and discuss their perceptions on the major opportunities and threats that triggered their SM.

4.7 Cognitive Liberation of the Reactionaries

According to McAdam (1999), POS is just one of the three components in his political process model to explain movement emergence and development. The other two are cognitive liberation and organisational strength. While POS and the availability of SMOs are important structural

factors, it is cognitive liberation that holds the key to movement emergence. A movement will not exist if the relevant people do not see themselves as confronting an “unjust” situation and do not believe they can do something about it. Before activists can promote their struggles and organise activities that appeal to more people, there must be a degree of shared beliefs among them and their target audience (McAdam, 1999, p.51). Meanwhile, Tarrow (2011, p.163) said the attribution of opportunity and threat is one of the mechanisms in the immediate political environment that triggers mobilisation. According to him, there is no such thing as “objective” opportunities as they must be perceived and attributed to become the source of mobilisation. In this case, opportunity and threat are two sides of the same coin. Very often, opportunity is an unintended consequence because people are motivated to look for opportunity when perceiving a threat that they cannot ignore. As I will elaborate in the subsequent chapters, the reactionaries interpreted the new socio-political landscape in Malaysia after 2008 general election as detrimental to Malay interests. This section, however, will offer some observations on how those threat perceptions came about.

The potential liberalisation and reforms of the Malaysian state can affect both the abstract values and material interests of conservative Malays. In term of material interests, they fear the state will no longer implement affirmative actions to help them. The Malays are still not confident of competing with non-Malays in a free market based on meritocracy. In term of values, conservative Malays may hold different positions, depending on whether they subscribe to Malay ethnonationalism or Islamism, yet see themselves as belonging to the same *ummah* (Muslim community). Malays who are reactionary may want to continue entrenching Malay political dominance and cultural hegemony as well as advancing the position of Islam and implement Shariah laws. Liberalisation is a threat because its pluralism and multiculturalism entail cultural and religious equality between Malay and non-Malays as well as

between Muslims and non-Muslims. Equality is unacceptable to Malays who see themselves as rightful owners of the land. Realising the potential threats from liberalisation, they need a movement to defend the status quo. This explains the emergence of SMOs such as Perkasa in 2009 and ISMA in 2013. For decades, conservative Malays believed that UMNO alone could safeguard their interests but events after the 2008 general election shook their confidence. This cognitive liberation can be traced to a period after 2008 general election towards the end of Abdullah administration.

4.7.1 Ketuanan Rakyat's Threat Against Ketuanan Melayu

Conservative Malays experienced their first shock following 2008 general election when DAP leader Lim Guan Eng questioned NEP on the very day he was sworn in as Penang Chief Minister on 11 March 2008. Lim said his new government's administration would do away with NEP, claiming that it had bred "cronyism, corruption and systemic inefficiency" (Beh, 2008). The second shock was the formation of a multi-ethnic opposition coalition called *Pakatan Rakyat* (PR) on 11 April 2008, comprising of PKR, DAP and PAS. After parting ways in 2001, the predominantly Chinese DAP and Islamist PAS reconciled and join forces again. However, the biggest jolt came three days later when Anwar Ibrahim called for *ketuanan rakyat* (people's supremacy) to replace UMNO's *ketuanan Melayu*. Defying a police ban, he held a rally which was attended by 20,000 people in Kampung Baru at the heart of Kuala Lumpur to celebrate his return to active politics. Speaking to reporters later, Anwar said the time had come for new politics to take over Malaysia and to move away from UMNO's dominant ideology which only fought for Malay rights (Madzlan, 2008). What was more startling was his claim that he had enough defectors from the ruling coalition to topple BN rule under Abdullah administration (Cheah & Abdul Hamid, 2008). Even before Anwar's

pronouncement of *ketuanan rakyat*, some Malays were already unhappy as NEP was coming under intense criticisms.

In April 2008, a group called *Barisan Bertindak Perpaduan Melayu* was formed. Led by grassroot UMNO activist and former journalist Osman Abu Bakar, it was active between 2008 and 2010 before it was overshadowed by Perkasa's emergence. Together with other Malay groups such as *Gabungan Persatuan Penulis Nasional*, it organised forums on Malay unity in the immediate period after 2008 general election. On 12 April 2008, they invited Kelantan Crown Prince Tengku Faris Petra to deliver a keynote speech at their events. Speaking to a crowd of about 1,000 people, Tengku Faris urged Malaysians not to raise issues regarding Malay special rights because it was *quid pro quo* for the granting of citizenship to 2.7 million non-Malays at independence. He said the 2008 general election results showed that Malays were being "challenged". The prince, who later ascended the throne as Sultan of Kelantan in 2010, called for Malay unity to defend their constitutional rights (Ong, 2008). In another event jointly in May 2008, ABIM president Yusri Mohamad told Malays to not just depend on political parties to defend their interests (Sabri, 2008). All of these reflected the nascent awareness among conservative Malays that they needed a new political approach beyond institutional and partisan politics.

4.7.2 Ahmad Ismail's "Pendatang" Racial Slur

Conservative Malays experienced another reactionary surge of cognitive liberation during the by-election campaign for Permatang Pauh parliamentary seat in August 2008. Anwar was seeking to return to parliament several months after calling for the replacement of *ketuanan Melayu* with *ketuanan rakyat*. Even though he won the by-election, one incident relating to the Malay

cognitive liberation stood out during the campaign. A local UMNO politician Ahmad Ismail created an uproar among non-Malays by describing ethnic Chinese as “*pendatang*” who should not be given the same rights as Malays. He allegedly made this statement when campaigning for BN candidate against Anwar. Even though some BN leaders called upon him to apologise, Ahmad stood by his remark and UMNO grassroots members rallied behind him. All 13 party divisions in Penang, including those from Abdullah’s own division in Kepala Batas, came out in full support of Ahmad’s position on the matter (Veerangan, 2008). The grassroots leader claimed that it was the Chinese-language newspaper *Sin Chew Daily* which triggered the controversy by reporting his speech during by-election campaign out of context (ibid).

Without denying that he had referred to the ethnic Chinese as *pendatang*, Ahmad explained that his speech was a historical account on many things, including the British divide-and-rule policy, Chinese and Indian migration to the country, 13 May Incident, Malay special rights, social contract, citizenship for non-Malays and NEP. He said: “What I said was a statement of facts which no one can refute... So, it’s not wrong if I were to mention those historical facts in public” (Veerangan, 2008). Ahmad also said he explained the content of his speech a day after the controversy erupted but no media reported his clarification (ibid). However, it was lost on the UMNO grassroots leader that the term *pendatang* itself is insensitive towards the feelings of non-Malays who are born and bred in Malaysia and do not identify with other countries. When their so-called “immigrant” status was brought up, Ahmad reinforced a sentiment among non-Malays of being treated as “second-class citizens.” Following the incident, both DAP and BN parties such as MCA and PGRM criticised him. A state youth wing member of MCA even urged the party’s leadership to consider leaving BN if UMNO refused to change. Prime Minister Abdullah also stepped in to advise Ahmad to apologise and urged Malaysians

to stop discussing race and religious issues to avoid chaos in the country ("PM orders," 2008).

4.7.3 Grassroots Revolt Against UMNO's Leadership

Ahmad Ismail's controversy was symbolic because he showed a utter disregard for UMNO's top leadership and got away with only a slap on the wrist. Things were getting out of hand to such an extent that party elites almost lost control over the grassroots, who were on the verge of an open revolt. Things came to head when Ahmad held a press conference on 8 September 2008, during which he said: "While it is not difficult to say sorry – for the sake of my Malay dignity, I resolve not to apologise no matter what others may say. I am willing to take the risk (for not doing so) ("Ahmad did it," 2008)." He also told ethnic Chinese not to "mimic the Jews in the US" in wanting to control both the country's economy and politics. Warning them not to hurt the feelings of Malays, he said:

I want them to know, I want them to take this as a warning from the Malays... Malays and Muslims have been provoked many times... We have been patient because we want to maintain stability in the country... Remember! The patience of Malays and Muslims has its limits. Do not push us to the wall, where we will be forced to reject the Chinese for the sake of our survival... If what I say sounds too strong for BN, take this as a warning from the Malays and Muslims as this has nothing to do with Umno. Do not pressure Umno leaders until they are caught in a dilemma (ibid).

Calling upon Malays to hold a gathering of the ummah, Ahmad added:

Let us not let it go to waste as the flames of anger among Malays and Muslims has reached new heights. Let us take embrace this anger and come together as Malays and Muslims throughout the land so that we can turn the voices of the Malays into one that will unite all Malays and Muslims into one single movement ("Ahmad did it," 2008).

After the press conference ended, one of Ahmad's supporters took down a photo of the previous Penang Chief Minister Dr Koh Tsu Koon, who was also PGRM president, and tore it into pieces. Following the incident, Penang PGRM immediately severed ties with UMNO Penang. Ticking off Ahmad for making disparaging remarks against the ethnic Chinese, Dr Koh said the former was turning a "personal mistake into a conflict and crisis among BN component parties" ("Penang Gerakan", 2008). He said: "The action of his supporters to take down, tear and step on my photograph was seen and felt not only as an act of disrespect and humiliation to me personally, but also to the whole party and BN" (ibid). On the following day, Abdullah had to give a public assurance that the BN ruling coalition would not be torn apart and promised "stern action" against Ahmad. He insisted that BN would remain united and face the challenges together" ("Malaysia faces," 2008). However, Ahmad remained defiant. Claiming that the Malays were frustrated as their "dignity" was at stake, he said:

Half the Chinese say I'm a racist but most Malays say I'm a nationalist defending my race... What I see now is a rise of the Malay people, and I feel we should capitalise on the strength, the support we get from the Malay people... I know they are with me (ibid).

In the end, the grassroots leader was suspended from UMNO for three years but still insisted that he did no wrong. Mocking Abdullah for being “brave” in suspending him, Ahmad said: “This decision may not be in favour of UMNO... They did it anyway because it is for national security” (Ong & Wong, 2008).⁴⁸

4.7.4 Creeping Liberalisation in UMNO?

Some people may interpret Ahmad Ismail’s racial slur as another UMNO attempt at manipulating ethnic sentiment but it was reflecting a real grievance at grassroots level. Together with Anwar’s rejection of ketuanan Melayu, some Malays became reactionary as they believe that UMNO could no longer protect their interests anymore. At the same time, they could not turn to PAS because the Islamist party was working with PKR and DAP. Kikue Hamayotsu (2013) captured this sentiment in her research. According to her, there was a perception that UMNO and PAS were conceding too much to non-Malays (ibid, p.73). Traditionally, these parties were expected to fight for Malay causes but they paid more attention to the interests of other communities instead (ibid). Non-Malays were also becoming more vocal in their demands as BN was under pressure to regain support from them (ibid, p.74).⁴⁹ Hamayotsu revealed that many government officials felt that UMNO was too lenient with the non-Malays and had given up too much to them at the Malay expense (ibid, p.67).

⁴⁸ Perkasa president Ibrahim Ali cited Ahmad Ismail’s case as one of the incidents in which UMNO took action against its own members who were too vocal in highlighting Malay issues (personal communication with Ibrahim Ali in Kuala Lumpur on 15 August 2016). He also pointed out that Najib’s own political secretary Datuk Nasir Safar was also sacked for allegedly making racist remarks (ibid).

⁴⁹ In my interviews with Ibrahim Ali on 15 August 2016 at Perkasa’s headquarters in Kuala Lumpur, he told me that one of his motivations in setting up Perkasa was due to the changes in the country’s political landscape. He said the non-Malays were abandoning the BN while DAP and PAS were working together.

Indeed, the immediate tone among UMNO elites after 2008 general election was conciliatory and apologetic towards non-Malays.

Meanwhile, UMNO's partners from MCA, MIC and PGRM, who bore the brunt of the election upheaval, attempted to become more vocal in criticising anything they perceived as discriminatory towards the non-Malays. To their credit, UMNO leaders realised how much their past actions affected non-Malay sentiment towards BN. More than a month after 2008 general election, UMNO Youth chief Hishammuddin Hussein openly apologised to non-Malays for the party's *keris* ceremony (Chan, 2008). Speaking to reporters after a BN Youth conference, he said: "The struggles of BN are ultimately more important than myself and we cannot indulge in actions which will frighten other races... This is a realisation that we've come to today in our meeting after one-and-a-half months of soul-searching" (ibid). However, Hishammuddin was put in a spot when a reporter asked how he could contest for the party's vice-presidency if he could not even defend the *keris* in UMNO Youth. A stunned Hishammuddin then turned around to other youth leaders to ask them if he had failed and then laughed off the matter by saying: "It's just a matter of perception" (Chan, 2008).

Nevertheless, perception does matter because cognitive liberation hinges on how the Malays feel about UMNO's ability to protect their interests. The *keris* poser, presumably from a Malay journalist, highlighted the dilemma confronting UMNO elites in balancing competing ethnic expectations. Even though Hishammuddin went on to win UMNO's vice presidential race,⁵⁰ the reactionaries did not want UMNO to liberalise. They waited to see how Najib would steer UMNO after he took office in March 2009 and were disappointed

⁵⁰ Hishammuddin received the highest number nominations of 109 for the position of UMNO vice-president in November 2008. When the party poll was held on 26 March 2009, he was elected as one of the party's three vice-presidents with the second highest number of votes of 1,515 ("Orang Najib," 2009).

with some of his policies which were deemed as too liberal. Instead of running the country according to Dr Mahathir's playbook, Najib appeared to be following Abdullah's footsteps by promising reforms. Besides liberalising the services sub-sectors from Bumiputera requirements, he came up with the 1Malaysia concept, the GTP and ETP. Hamayotsu said Najib faced intense pressure from Malay groups who wanted to see an exclusionary Malaysia based on Malay special rights (2013, p.75). However, he ignored their demands and emphasised inclusiveness and fairness for all Malaysians as hallmarks of 1Malaysia (ibid). While touting the 1Malaysia slogan, Najib however caved in to reactionaries from time to time as he wanted to maintain their support for UMNO. Like his predecessor Abdullah, Najib also backtracked on his initial reform agenda when the going was tough.

4.8 Networks of Allies for the Reactionaries

Besides POS and cognitive liberation, the availability of influential allies, particularly those from within the state itself, is another factor to explain the reactionary SM emergence in the post-2008 era. Influential allies are an important source of organisational strength. As the Malaysian state was trying to recover its capacity to extract symbolic power from the middle-class and communal elites, some former UMNO politicians and bureaucrats openly supported Perkasa. While some state reformists wanted to make the regime more inclusive, the party's conservatives plotted against them. Using their influence in UMNO and other state institutions, they provided human resources, networks, financial support and most importantly, an ideological basis for the reactionaries to thrive. Despite allegations that Malay-Muslim SMOs such as Perkasa and ISMA had enjoyed a cozy relationship with UMNO, their movement benefitted from elite division within the party. Even before Perkasa came into the media limelight in 2010, there was a stiff competition

between the reformist (Abdullah) and conservative (Dr Mahathir) camps during UMNO Youth elections in 2009. Abdullah's son-in-law, Khairy Jamaluddin emerged victorious and became UMNO Youth chief after defeating Dr Mahathir's son, Mukhriz ("Khairy Jamaluddin," 2009). Khairy was often critical of Perkasa and Ibrahim Ali even though some UMNO leaders were supportive of the organisation. In the following sections, I will discuss three categories of allies for the reactionaries in the post-2008 era: politicians, civil servants and religious scholars/intellectuals. They included UMNO activists, civil servants, Malay intellectuals and Islamic religious figures.

4.8.1 Politicians

The most prominent supporter of the reactionary SM in the post-2008 era was former prime minister Dr Mahathir Mohamad. Due to his lingering influence in UMNO, Perkasa attracted many of the party's disgruntled members, especially those at the grassroots level, to join the SMO. The former prime minister was often referred to as Perkasa's patron but he denied a direct role in the organisation. However, Dr Mahathir was still Perkasa's most influential partner and had defended the SMO and its leaders. In fact, he was Perkasa's guest-of-honour in its first annual general meeting in 2010, where he received the *Bintang Peribumi Perkasa Negara* (Perkasa Native Warrior's Award) award. Furthermore, Ibrahim Ali, who is Perkasa's co-founder, was also a staunch ally of Dr Mahathir.⁵¹ In his memoir, *A Doctor in the House*, Dr Mahathir mentioned Ibrahim Ali on three occasions (Mohamad, 2011). Even though Ibrahim Ali was acquainted with Anwar Ibrahim as both of them were student

⁵¹ Dr Mahathir was described as "incredibly fond" of Ibrahim Ali, who "adulates" the former (Tan, 2010a).

leaders detained under ISA in the 1970s,⁵² he supported Dr Mahathir's decision to sack Anwar in 1998. It was Ibrahim Ali who suggested for Anwar to be expelled from UMNO during an UMNO supreme council meeting (ibid, p.688).⁵³ When Dr Mahathir announced his retirement during the UMNO general assembly in June 2002, Ibrahim Ali was among those who rushed up to the podium where Dr Mahathir was speaking to persuade him to reconsider his decision (Mohamad, p.760).

Dr Mahathir also alluded to his own influence over Perkasa ("Dr M to UMNO," 2010). On 2 November 2010, he wrote in his blog that Perkasa had "a big enough following which could do damage to UMNO and the BN in the next election if they want to". In view of this, he decided to stay close with Perkasa to "ensure that it does not swing over to the opposition" and "supports BN in the next election" (ibid). In the same blog, Dr Mahathir argued that BN risked losing Malay support without regaining Chinese votes in 2013 general election. He claimed that many Malays and UMNO members flocked to Perkasa because Abdullah and Najib were allowing non-Malays to challenge pro-Malay policies. Defending Perkasa, he asked: "Is Perkasa racist? If anyone cares to study the statements by Perkasa, he will not fail to note that it has confined itself to rebutting allegations that the non-Malays have been discriminated against, that the Malays need to retain their present position." Mahathir said it was illogical for Malays to remain silent when Chinese and Indians demanded the removal of policies to help Malays. "Surely the natural thing for them to do is to defend themselves. If their anointed protector, UMNO, refuses for whatever reason to

⁵² Ibrahim Ali was detained under the ISA for about two years until he was released in 1977. As an ISA detainee, he shared the same block with Anwar Ibrahim in the Kamunting Detention Centre. For a full account of his experience under ISA, refer to Ali (2016, pp.222-231).

⁵³ Ibrahim Ali's memoir provides more details on what transpired before, during and immediately after the UMNO Supreme Council meeting in which Anwar was sacked as the deputy prime minister on 2 September 1998. Prior to the meeting, Ibrahim claimed that Anwar had requested him to plead with Dr Mahathir on Anwar's behalf. However, Ibrahim sided with Dr Mahathir and lashed out at Anwar instead during the meeting. Before Anwar returned home that night, he allegedly told his supporters that Ibrahim was "the rudest of them all" and this invoked their anger. See Ali (2016, pp.373-378).

voice disagreement against the demands of the Chinese and Indians, then the beleaguered Malays will have to find a champion elsewhere” (ibid).

4.8.2 Civil Servants

Another category of Perkasa’s allies was retired civil servants. Among the ranks of Perkasa’s leaderships, a number of them were former military and police officers. In fact, the person who gave Ibrahim Ali the idea to form Perkasa was retired general Ibrahim Ismail (2016, pp.484). From the documents that I obtained from fieldwork in 2016, I counted there were at least three retired army generals (two of them lieutenant generals) and one navy vice-admiral in Perkasa’s Supreme Council line-up for the year 2013 until 2016 (See Appendix 2). Besides military officers, Perkasa also enlisted the support from former Inspector-General of Police Rahim Noor, who was the guest-of-honour at its second AGM in October 2011. Like Dr Mahathir, Rahim was awarded the *Anugerah Pahlawan Peribumi Perkasa* (Aw, 2011b). The former police chief, who was jailed for beating up Anwar Ibrahim when he was under detention, claimed that the founding principles of Malaysia were being threatened by a “human rights wave.” This eroded the so-called social contract between the different races which were said to have been agreed upon at independence. Urging the Malays to stand united in facing the “human rights wave,” Rahim said it was comparable to the previous “communist wave,” in reference to the communist insurgency that lasted from 1948 until 1989 (ibid).

Apart from members of security forces, Perkasa was also supported by other state bureaucrats. Among them was Fuad Hassan, who was one of Perkasa’s co-founders and served briefly as its deputy president. Fuad resigned from Perkasa upon his appointment as the director-general of *Jabatan Hal Ehwal*

Khas (Special Affairs Department) in the Ministry of Information in 2009. Active in *Persatuan Kebangsaan Pelajar-Pelajar Islam Malaysia* (PKPIM) and ABIM when he was younger, Fuad was previously Anwar Ibrahim's supporter. His elder brother is Musa Hassan, a former IGP who was also the investigation officer in Anwar Ibrahim's sodomy case in 1998 (Yatim, 2012). Another notable Perkasa activist was Zubir Harun, who was one of Perkasa's vice-presidents before he became *Amanah Ikhtiar Malaysia* chief executive officer. AIM is a state-linked private trust body involved in poverty eradication programme. Prior to his appointment in AIM, Zubir was an outspoken opponent of the NEM.

As Perkasa grew, several high-ranking former judges also gave their support to Perkasa. For example, former Chief Justice Abdul Hamid Mohamad headed a coalition of NGOs called *Penggerak Perpaduan Nasional* (National Unity Movement) initiated by Perkasa in 2014. Abdul Hamid was among those who opposed Najib's National Unity Consultative Council (NUCC) (*Penggerak Perpaduan Nasional*, 2014; "To helm unity," 2014). Another ex-judge who supported Perkasa was former Court of Appeal Judge Mohd Noor Abdullah who believed that Najib made a mistake in abolishing ISA and urged the government to retain the Sedition Act (Shuib, 2014). The former judge also courted controversy for allegedly warning ethnic Chinese to be prepared for a backlash from Malays for their "betrayal" in 2013 general election (Aw, 2013).⁵⁴

⁵⁴ NGOs led by GPMS would later come out in support of Mohd Noor Abdullah by claiming that Malaysiakini's coverage of the former judge's remarks was "malicious and intended to threaten racial harmony in Malaysia ("Malay NGOs defend," 2013)." They said the news portal gatecrashed the forum where Mohd Noor was a speaker and alleged that his hour-long speech was manipulated by the journalist, who "only lifted small portions of the speech" (ibid).

4.8.3 Academicians and State Religious Authorities

By looking at the composition of *Majlis Ulama ISMA* (ISMA Ulama Council or MUIS),⁵⁵ it is clear that ISMA had a close working relationship with some university professors, the Malaysian Department of Islamic Development (JAKIM) and Perak Mufti Department. For a long time, MUIS was chaired by Dr Aznan Hasan from the International Islamic University of Malaysia. He was the head of IIUM's Islamic law department and sat on Bank Negara Malaysia's Shariah Advisory Board for two terms. He also served as a Shariah consultant for several local banks (IIUM Staff Directory, n.d.). The council also listed academicians from other public universities such as Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia and Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia as well as religious scholars associated with JAKIM.

Among the most outstanding Perkasa activist is Perak Deputy Mufti Ustaz Zamri Hashim, who is also ISMA chief in Ipoh. Among others, he had spoken out against the dangers of liberalism during Friday sermon ("K-Pop concert," 2015). He claimed that liberalism had succeeded when Korean idols were seen hugging and embracing hijab-wearing Muslim girls during a K-Pop concert in Malaysia (ibid). In fact, former Perak Mufti Harussani Zakaria was well-known for making controversial statements which appealed to conservative Malays. In 2006, he made an unsubstantiated claim that 100,000 Muslims had converted out of Islam (Saat & Mohd Taufek, 2021).⁵⁶ Harussani also called for unity between UMNO and PAS and offered himself as a mediator in forging peace and cooperation between the two Malay-based

⁵⁵ During my fieldwork, I attended one of MUIS' events called *Muzakarah Ulama: Aplikasi Maqasid Siyasah Syar'iyah Dalam Konteks Malaysia* (Ulama Discussion: The Application of Maqasid Siyasah Syar'iyah in the Malaysian Context) in Putrajaya on 12 November 2016. From this event, I became acquainted with some young ISMA activists and developed some understanding of the NGO's networks in local universities.

⁵⁶ For further discussions on Harussan's statements on apostasy, refer to Hoffstaedter (2011 p.145-147, p.205-207, p.212).

parties (Tan, 2010b). He also agreed with the designation of DAP as “*kafir harbi*” (warring infidels) that Muslims should not support (“PAS mahu,” 2012).

Besides a direct link with individuals in Islamic religious authorities at the state level, ISMA also worked closely with federal religious bodies such as JAKIM and *Yayasan Dakwah Islamiah Malaysia* (YADIM). The ISMA-JAKIM nexus is reflected in their joint opposition to the Coalition of Malaysian NGOs (COMANGO). The episode pitting ISMA against COMANGO started when JAKIM claimed that there was a global liberal conspiracy to challenge the position of Islam in Malaysia during a sermon in October 2013. JAKIM singled out COMANGO as one of the local groups acting as agents of the global conspiracy. On the very next day, ISMA cooperated with YADIM to organise a forum on the threats of liberalism and started agitating against COMANGO from then onwards.

Established in 1974, YADIM is a government-linked entity registered under the Trust Incorporation Ordinance 1952 and reports directly to the prime minister. It was set up to coordinate activities of Islamic *dakwah* organisations and NGOs. At the height of the COMANGO controversy in late 2013, YADIM was helmed by Asyraf Wajdi Dusuki, who later became UMNO Youth chief in 2018. Other interesting personalities who helmed YADIM are former ABIM president Yusri Mohamad and politicians such as Nik Omar Nik Aziz and Nasharudin Mat Isa, both of whom were once affiliated with PAS. Forums and public discussions highlighting the threats of liberalism against Islam are usually not a one-time event. With the cooperation of various state religious authorities and universities, ISMA organised them on a regular basis until today. ISMA’s framing of liberal threats from COMANGO to mobilise conservative Malays will be discussed in Chapter 6.

4.9 Conclusion

In in this chapter, I have analysed the POS in Malaysia to show how the weakening of Malaysian state capacity allowed a reactionary SM to emerge after the 2008 general election. I also discussed how the injured Leviathan came about when the elites became reluctant in using hard repression against opponents. The “protection pacts” that previously characterised the state’s relationship with society collapsed when UMNO inadvertently ruptured the habitus of both Malay and non-Malay middle classes in supporting BN. Under the robust Leviathan, Malays were staunchly behind UMNO and non-Malays would retain some measure of support for BN’s non-Malay component parties even though they were unhappy with the government. This was because many of them feared ethnic conflicts like the 13 May Incident would happen again if BN is voted out. However, non-Malays no longer have any qualms of totally abandoning BN for opposition parties since 2008 general election. As electoral pressure intensified, UMNO elites became more amicable towards the non-Malay sentiment and a prospect for liberalisation dawned in Malaysia. The liberal discourses of state reforms under the injured Leviathan were the most important catalyst that altered the POS for a reactionary SM to emerge and develop in the post-2008 era.

Since 1957, the state has a challenging task in balancing demands from both Malays and non-Malays and it can be torn apart by societal resistance from either one or both communal segments. After 1969, the state became a robust Leviathan that fully dominated society and charted a decisively conservative pathway in nation-building. Under successive administrations of Abdul Razak, Hussein Onn and Dr Mahathir Mohamad, the state carried out its pro-Malay agenda and Islamisation policies without much hindrance. However, this situation started to change not long after Dr Mahathir stepped down in 2003. Realising the need for reforms, Abdullah Badawi (2003-2009) and Najib Razak

(2009-2018) did not and could not dominate society with the same vigour as Dr Mahathir. This opening in POS was supplemented by a cognitive liberation and the availability of allies for their movement. There were several incidents that brought about a cognitive liberation during the twilight months of Abdullah administration in 2008. Among others, Anwar called for an egalitarian *ketuanan rakyat* to replace *ketuanan Melayu* as non-Malays became more uninhibited in expressing their discontent. With UMNO appearing hapless, some reactionaries believed it was failing to defend *ketuanan Melayu*.

Looking beyond UMNO as the sole Malay protector, the reactionaries organised themselves under a new movement. There were no shortages of allies because many UMNO members were disgruntled when Najib promised more reforms. They sprang into action not long after Najib took over from Abdullah in 2009. Thus, Najib's reform plans were met with opposition from the reactionaries. This thwarted BN's efforts in regaining legitimacy from the non-Malays. Nevertheless, the injured Leviathan is still a strong state in the Weberian sense because its coercive capacity remains intact. What altered the balance of power between state and society was the erosion in other dimensions of state power, particularly symbolic power which is crucial for legitimacy. Apart from a "freak election" that jolted BN, the state did not experience any extraordinary political shocks. The economy might have fallen into a middle-income trap but there was no outbreak of violent conflict or severe economic crisis. Yet, BN could not depend on repression alone and Najib tried shoring up support for BN with patronage. However, this only further strained the state's fiscal power. Hence, the injured Leviathan is a unique situation that happens when a strong state unwittingly shoots itself in the foot to a point that it is unable to exercise its coercive power effectively. As repression declines, societal forces are emboldened to challenge the state. In the following chapters, we will look at how Perkasa and ISMA mobilised conservative Malays.

CHAPTER 5 Ketuanan Melayu and Islamic Populism as Collective Action Frames

5.1 Introduction

After examining the political opportunity structure (POS), in which the Malaysian state is characterised as an injured Leviathan, this chapter this chapter will look at how the reactionary Malay-Muslim social movement (SM) was further developed through the agency of its social movement organisations (SMOs) in the post-2008 era. Two of the leading organisations that brought about this SM were *Pertubuhan Pribumi Perkasa* (Perkasa) and *Ikatan Muslimin Malaysia* (ISMA). Both social movement organisations (SMOs) have been singled out as belonging to the three most notorious Malay-Muslim groups in that period (Funston, 2016 p.100). Based on a resource mobilisation logic, some scholars insinuated that these two SMOs derived their organisational strength and mobilisation capacities from UMNO (Lim 2010; Chin, 2016 p.201). While UMNO members might have constituted a large segment of Perkasa's supporters and ISMA's networks of sympathisers to a lesser extent, RM-based arguments cannot fully account for their movement's popularity. It also does not capture an accurate picture of how they were able to mobilise supporters.

Actually, Perkasa and ISMA were neither lackeys of UMNO nor components of a state-sponsored movement.⁵⁷ These two reactionary SMOs not only grew out of the POS created by the injured Leviathan but they put in much

⁵⁷ A state-sponsored SM refers to a popular movement initiated and endorsed by the state leadership and organised by government apparatuses. Even though ordinary citizens participate in collective action events of the movement, the main source of claims, leadership, and organisational resources come the state itself, and state actors serve as main organisers. The Cultural Revolution in China is an example of a state-sponsored movement (Su, 2013).

of their own effort to win supporters. By using framing theory to analyse their discourses, this chapter will demonstrate how they constructed meaning to mobilise their conservative Malay-Muslim constituents. While structural factors created the opening for their emergence, how they navigated the post-2008 political terrain is equally important. No amount of resource from state sponsorship could guarantee success if they were unable to make themselves appealing to conservative Malays in the first place.

According to Tarrow, scholars of SM and contentious politics realised that SMs do not simply seek instrumental goods but make and manipulate meaning (2011, p.143). Following the “cultural turn” in movement studies, he identified “three mechanisms” for SMs to produce meaning. They are framing, identity construction and emotion work. We can debate which element is the most important but all three should be present. To understand the efficacy of these meaning-making mechanisms for the reactionary SM, I will show how Perkasa and ISMA came up with their collective action frames (CAFs) that deeply resonated with the Malays. After providing an overview on Perkasa and ISMA, this chapter will explain the framing processes that occurred. My discussion will highlight the influence of Perkasa’s discourses on ketuanan Melayu and ISMA’s invocation of the ummah by developing its own brand of Islamic populism. While some scholars may view them as ideologies (Chin, 2021) or discourses that may become an ideology of legitimation (Ting, 2009), ketuanan Melayu and Islamic populism are better conceived as frames, which explains the power behind Perkasa and ISMA’s rhetoric and performances.

5.2 Background on Perkasa

Perkasa was founded in late 2008 following a chance meeting between Ibrahim Ali and retired general Ibrahim Ismail, who had the distinction of being a “World War Two superspy” and a former Malaysian Chief of Defence Forces (Ali, 2016, pp.483-485).⁵⁸ General Ibrahim Ismail was also the Chief of the Army when the 13 May Incident happened. After talking to the latter and learning more about the incident, Ibrahim Ali invited 30 Malay leaders for a meeting and they agreed to form Perkasa. Apparently, it was the former general who suggested the idea of establishing Perkasa to Ibrahim Ali as a way to “fend off attacks from the non-Malays.” For this, he was given the honour of becoming Perkasa’s first member in October 2008 (ibid, p.484). Perkasa’s founding members and pro-tem committee members also comprised of various other colourful personalities. Besides Ibrahim Ali as the founding president, Syed Hasan Syed Ali, who was a Chedet Club activist, was appointed as the secretary-general. Chedet Club is basically Dr Mahathir’s fan club.

Even though Perkasa was set up in 2008, it only started becoming more active after Najib Razak succeeded Abdullah Ahmad Badawi as Malaysia’s prime minister in April 2009. Due to the forceful and controversial remarks from its activists, Perkasa received a lot of media limelight even though it was not the only reactionary Malay SMOs that emerged in the post-2008 era. The organisation came into prominence in 2010 and gained notoriety when it

⁵⁸ As a young soldier, Ibrahim Ismail served as an officer in the British Special Operations Executive (SOE), which was better known as “Force 136”. During World War Two, he succeeded in pulling off an extraordinary “triple cross” on the Japanese. In October 1944, he and two colleagues were parachuted into Terengganu as part of “Operation Oatmeal” but they were captured by the Japanese. After a month of interrogations, they agreed to become double agents yet managed to inform SOE of their situation and went on to become triple agents. Due to Ibrahim Ismail and his colleagues’ disinformation, the Japanese was led to believe that the British’s invasion on Malaya known as “Operation Zippier” would take place more than 1,000 kilometres away from its actual location. Ibrahim Ismail’s (1984) exploits as a secret agent can also be found in his memoir, *Have You Met Mariam?*

fiercely opposed Najib's New Economic Policy (NEM) and vehemently fought against the Christian's use of the Arabic word for God during the Allah row. The framing analysis of Perkasa's discourses during these two episodes of contention will be further discussed in Chapter 6.

As a case study for the reactionary SM, Perkasa is significant for two reasons. Firstly, it was reportedly able to mobilise up to 700,000 members at its height in 2014 (Tan, 2014). Between 2010 and 2014, Perkasa's rise was meteoric as branches after branches were established in almost every state and parliamentary constituency in Malaysia. At one point, Perkasa was processing tens of thousands of new applications for membership every month.⁵⁹ Secondly, it diverted a lot of conservative Malay support away from UMNO. For the first time since 1946, there was a parallel Malay nationalist movement that could displace the party as the foremost protector of Malay interests. Perkasa's allies such as Dr Mahathir was instrumental in setting up *Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia* (PPBM), which splintered from UMNO. PPBM can be viewed as another form of Malay reactionism to challenge Najib administration when UMNO became divided again following the 1MDB expose in 2015.

In the immediate post-2008 period, most observers thought Perkasa was complementing rather than competing against UMNO. PKR leader Anwar Ibrahim was among those who claimed that Perkasa was outsourced by UMNO "to fend racist and religious bigotry" at the party's behest (Zurairi, 2013). Some political analysts who followed this line of argument suggested that UMNO was Perkasa's "main sponsor" (Yap & Chi, 2014). However, Perkasa claimed that it was "not racist" and that its objective was to safeguard the Federal Constitution, particularly Article 153, which provided a special position for

⁵⁹ Based on the internal organisation documents that I obtained during my fieldwork, Perkasa's youth wing or "Wira Perkasa" alone had as many as 201,500 registered members (Perkasa, 2016a) while its young women's wing or "Wirawati Perkasa" had 111,200 members as of October 2016 (Perkasa, 2016b).

Malays and natives from Sabah and Sarawak (Loh, 2010a). Ibrahim Ali said Perkasa wanted to act as a government “watchdog” to ensure that its policies adhered to the constitutional framework (ibid). In a sense, the formation of Perkasa reflected the cognitive liberation among reactionaries who believed they could no longer rely on UMNO as the sole protector of Malay interests as discussed in Chapter 4.

5.3 Background on ISMA

ISMA, which stands for *Ikatan Muslimin Malaysia* since 2005, is an Islamist organisation founded in 1997. Previously known as *Ikatan Siswazah Muslim Malaysia*, it was one of the many Islamic mission or dakwah organisations in the country. However, it had also been described as a “conservative Islamist” organisation due to its “uncompromisingly Malay-Islamist rhetoric” (Abdul Hamid & Che Mohd Razali, 2016 p.6). Like other Muslim organisations such as *Jemaah Islah Malaysia* (JIM) and Islamic Representatives’ Council (IRC), ISMA is linked to the MB which influenced many Malay-Muslim students in the 1970s and 1980s (ibid). These two decades were characterised by a steady growth of Islamisation in state and society, leading to an increase of religiosity among Malays and stronger attachment to Islam (Nagata, 1984; Muzaffar 1987; Anwar, 1987).

According to Abdul Hamid and Che Mohd Razali (2015, pp.316-320), ISMA took advantage of the opening up during Abdullah administration (2003–2009), before making their presence felt under Najib’s tenure (2009–2018). While JIM, which later became *Pertubuhan IKRAM Malaysia*, got involved in political activism during the Reformasi period between 1998 and 2001, those who did not want to get involved in politics organised themselves under ISMA

(ibid). Even though the slogan “*Melayu Sepakat, Islam Berdaulat*” (Malays Unite, Islam Reigns) came up during the Reformasi period in the late 1990s, ISMA only started advocating it more vigorously in early 2010s.⁶⁰ When ISMA was founded in July 1997, it had only 100 members for the first four years of its existence (Radhi, 2017). By end of 2016, it had 50,000 registered members with more than 30 branches nationwide. Though its membership was not as big as Perkasa, it has been punching above its weight in various controversial issues in the post-2008 era.

As discussed in the previous chapter, the reactionaries experienced a cognitive liberation when Anwar Ibrahim called for a more egalitarian and inclusive *ketuanan rakyat* to replace *ketuanan Melayu* after the 2008 general election. The feeling that the Malay interests were under threat became more acute when PAS joined forces with other opposition parties to challenge BN. PAS also downplayed its Islamic state rhetoric by turning to a new slogan of *negara berkebhajikan* (welfare state). Sensing that no credible parties were left to champion the Islamic cause, ISMA decided to put up its own candidates in 2013 general election and became more vocal in articulating its position on national issues. Even though ISMA was primarily an Islamic dakwah organisation, its leaders’ outspokenness after the 2013 polls entangled them in various episodes of contentious politics.

There were a lot of publicity when ISMA clashed with its liberal rivals from late 2013 onwards. Its former president Abdullah Zaik Abdul Rahman was denounced as a racist after writing a commentary in May 2014 labelling

⁶⁰ ISMA started organising a series of conferences from 2010 onwards which examined the relationships between Islam and nationalism. Among these were *Konvensyen Pemikiran Hassan al-Banna* (Convention on the Hassan al-Banna’s Thoughts) on 30 January 2010 in Putrajaya, *Konvensyen Memperingati 500 Tahun Kejatuhan Empayar Melayu Islam Melaka 1511-2011* (Convention to Remember 500 Years of the Fall of the Malaccan Malay-Muslim Empire 1511-2011) on 29 January 2011 in Melaka and *Konvensyen Memartabat Islam Memperkasakan Ummah* (Convention on Dignifying and Empowering the Ummah) on 9 June 2012.

ethnic Chinese in Malaysia as *pendatang* (immigrants). Thus, some people believed that ISMA was also funded by UMNO to shore up Malay support for the ruling regime. John Funston suggested that “UMNO gave much leeway to ISMA to expound its extreme views” (2016, pp.100-101). However, this could not satisfactorily account for ISMA’s development. If ISMA was propped up by UMNO, it would have faded away like the Red Shirts⁶¹ when BN lost power in 2018. Instead, ISMA became more active and even contributed to the reconciliation between UMNO and PAS, leading to the formation of *Muafakat Nasional* in September 2019.⁶²

5.4 Ketuanan Melayu as Perkasa’s Collective Action Frame

Despite allegations of UMNO’s sponsorship, Perkasa had a complicated love-hate relationship with the party. The BN, which included non-Malay component parties, was losing non-Malay votes and its perceived links with the “racist” and “extremist” Perkasa did not help.⁶³ It was no secret that non-Malay parties in BN and some UMNO leaders were frustrated with Perkasa for continuously sabotaging their efforts to regain non-Malay votes. Since Perkasa attracted up to 60% of its memberships from UMNO supporters, it might have appeared like UMNO’s “evil” twin in civil society. However, it was more of a distant cousin with a common ancestry. Unlike UMNO, Perkasa did not aspire

⁶¹ The Red Shirts refer to the supporters of the *Himpunan Maruah Melayu* (Malay Dignity Rally), which took place on 16 December 2015 in Kuala Lumpur. Led by an UMNO Youth leader Jamal Yunus, it was a counter-rally against the Bersih 4 rally to defend Malay rights and to support Najib’s administration following the 1MDB scandal.

⁶² Wai Weng Hew (2018) suggested that ISMA was “probably the key organisation that brought together UMNO and PAS” for *Himpunan 812*, in which 60,000 people took to the streets on 8 December 2018 to protest the PH government’s plans to ratify ICERD (the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination).

⁶³ A prominent UMNO politician, who was also a former Minister in the Prime Minister’s Department Nazri Aziz, said: “We should get rid of Perkasa. UMNO is against any form of racism... It is ridiculous for any ethnic group to form similar extremist groups as Perkasa (“Nazri attacks Perkasa,” 2010)”.

for state power and without the pressure to compromise for elections, it could exert maximum pressure on the state to extract concessions for the reactionaries.

However, Perkasa's political discourses were similar to UMNO because they both adhered to the idea of *ketuanan Melayu*. Translated as "Malay supremacy" or "Malay dominance", the phrase *ketuanan Melayu* originated from a speech by UMNO ideologue Abdullah Ahmad in Singapore on 30 August 1986. He argued that New Economic Policy (NEP) must continue beyond 1990 as a recognition of Malay supremacy, which he claimed is grounded in a social contract at the time of Malaya's independence in 1957. Abdullah Ahmad said: "Let us make no mistake, the political system in Malaysia is founded on Malay dominance." Dr Mahathir, who was the prime minister, endorsed the view and the phrase, "Malay dominance" in English was later translated as *ketuanan Melayu* (Funston, 2016, p.50). Following the *ketuanan Melayu* speech, the NEP, which was originally introduced as a temporary measure to address the country's socio-economic imbalances after the 1969 racial riots, became synonymous with the Malay special position which is enshrined in the Federal Constitution. Under a so-called social contract, the Malays got a special position in exchange for their consent to give citizenship rights to the non-Malays (ibid). The real or imagined existence of this *quid pro quo* exchange, which was often repeated by Dr Mahathir, and his statement was never publicly challenged or re-interpreted. Many Malaysians, especially Malays, assumed it was a historical fact and this piece of historiography remains as the basis for *ketuanan Melayu* until today.

While the meaning of *ketuanan Melayu* was said to be "factual enough" in the Malaysian cultural and historical context, Liow (2015) pointed out that a critical feature of its contemporary discourse is "how it frames the relationship between the Malays and non-Malays." For non-Malays, the phrase reminded them of their second-class status under Malaysia's differential categories of

citizenships. While Malays were assigned to the role of *tuan* (lords), non-Malays were consigned to being *pendatang* (migrants) or *penumpang* (temporary residents) in their own land of birth. However, different groups of Malays could still come up with their own interpretations on ketuanan Melayu and Liow (ibid) pointed out that there was a mistaken assumption on the “immutability” of Malayness. Therefore, the definition of what makes a person a Malay itself is political and contestable.

Based on my fieldwork observation of Perkasa and its emphasis on grassroots mobilisation, I realised that there was a subtle but important ideological difference between UMNO and Perkasa. For UMNO, ketuanan Melayu is a political concept implying the perpetuation of its rule over Malaysia. This is in tandem with the idea from the 1970s onwards which placed UMNO as the *teras* (core) in Malaysian politics (Funston, 2016 p.30). It is also in line with the party’s more recent slogan, “*Dulu, kini dan selamanya* (Then, now and forever).” By putting UMNO first, the original ketuanan Melayu upheld by the party can be considered as a neo-feudal ideology. The renowned sociologist Syed Hussein Alatas (1968) observed that feudalism persisted in the Malaysian society and political scientist Chandra Muzaffar (1979) wrote a classic text on UMNO as an aristocratic, neo-feudal institution which supplanted the Malay royalty as “protector” of Malays. Therefore, the *Melayu* in UMNO’s ketuanan Melayu refers to Malay elites (*Melayu elit*) more than the Malay masses (*Melayu marhaen*), who are supposed to be subservient towards to the elites.

However, Perkasa’s ketuanan Melayu has a different meaning even though some of its activists comprised of Malay elites. For Ibrahim Ali, it means the protection and furtherance of Malay rights for Melayu marhaen,⁶⁴

⁶⁴ When Ibrahim Ali resigned from Perkasa to set up Parti Bumiputera Perkasa Malaysia (PUTRA) in 2018, he described the new party as catering to the “*marhaen*.” He said: “*Kita adalah parti untuk golongan marhaen yang akan bersih dan bebas daripada politik wang*” (Abdul Hamid,

regardless of class and creed. Ibrahim himself came from a humble background in rural Kelantan with its own distinct local politics pitting UMNO and PAS.⁶⁵ Therefore, Perkasa's goal was to translate *ketuanan Melayu* into tangible benefits for the Malay masses as a whole rather than just to perpetuate the political dominance of certain Malay elites through UMNO. However, outsiders may find it difficult to see the class distinction between UMNO and Perkasa's notion of *ketuanan Melayu* due to their overlapping memberships.

Firstly, Perkasa's members included a number of ex-politicians from UMNO, party activists and civil servants. Thus, many people believed that Perkasa was beholden to UMNO. Farish Noor (2010) was the earliest to observe the class factor in Perkasa's emergence but his suggestion was promptly shot down by Teck Ghee Lim (2010). After that, there were no further discussions on the matter. Secondly, Perkasa leaders attracted too much controversies with their racial posturing. Many scholars and public intellectuals were put off by Perkasa and became more interested in countering its racist discourses instead of exploring other factors behind their racial logic. In my interactions with Perkasa activists, some said they could not understand why they were labelled as racists for merely defending Malay constitutional rights. Oblivious to the equally legitimate plights of other ethnic groups in Malaysia who were frustrated with their "second-class citizenship" status, they saw no reason for non-Malays to take offense at them.

2018). (Translation: We are a party for the masses who will be clean and free from money politics.)

⁶⁵ According to Ibrahim Ali's memoir, he was born in Tumpat, Kelantan as the fifth child of 13 siblings. He described his father as a *gedebe* (ruffian) and his mother as a typical rural Malay housewife (Ali, 2016, pp.156-157). Even though his father was a *penggawa* (headman) in Tumpat, his family fell into financial hardship when his father lost his job after being banished to Segamat, Johor under the Public Order Act in 1967 following intrigues involving the murder of local PAS politician (ibid, pp.164-167). Thus, the young Ibrahim Ali started working and his first job was planting watermelons and eggplants (ibid, pp.168).

Furthermore, politically incorrect, if not outright racist, languages were often used in Perkasa's discourses at the grassroots level. Having observed several Perkasa meetings, I realised that these gatherings were dominated by members from the lower middle-class or working-class backgrounds based on their appearance and demeanours (See Appendix 3). The venues for meetings also speak volume about the class distinction between Perkasa and UMNO activists. Unlike UMNO, which holds its general assemblies at the party's headquarters in Putra World Trade Centre (PWTC) with many party delegates staying at the posh five-star Seri Pacific Hotel next door, Perkasa's annual meetings were usually held at the Titiwangsa indoor stadium in Kuala Lumpur and a cheaper hotel near the Chow Kit area (not far from Titiwangsa).⁶⁶ In spite of their class differences, Perkasa appropriated *ketuanan Melayu* from UMNO as its CAF (Snow & Benford, 2000; Snow & Benford, 1988).

Using *ketuanan Melayu* as its overarching framing strategy, it justified the use of racially provocative statements to great effects as an emotive tool to produce the "frame resonance" (Snow, et. al., 1986) required to mobilise conservative Malays at grassroots level. *Ketuanan Melayu* became its "master script" in various "socio-dramas" (Benford & Hunt, 1992) that Perkasa activists enacted in staging claims against the injured Leviathan. While some of them would either mindlessly or calculatingly spew racist outbursts in appealing to their audience, there was no doubt that these messages were particularly effective in evoking the conservative Malay sentiment. As noted in Chapter 4, a cognitive liberation came about when they realised how enfeebled UMNO's response was to Anwar Ibrahim's public rejection of *ketuanan Melayu* in favour of *ketuanan rakyat*. Sensing threats to their cherished rights and privileges, they waited for a new political movement to emerge to perform a conservative

⁶⁶ The exception to this was Perkasa's inaugural AGM in 2010 which was took place in PWTC. During my fieldwork in 2016 and 2017, Perkasa's main events were organised in Stadium Titiwangsa while its youth and women's wings meetings held in Hotel Regency in Jalan Raja Alang in the Chow Kit district of Kuala Lumpur. It must be noted that the Chow Kit area is also synonymous with urban poverty, drug addiction and prostitution.

backlash. That vehicle was Perkasa and the timing of its arrival in civil society was perfect.

Besides UMNO, there were several other sources for Perkasa's conceptualisation of *ketuanan Melayu*. Among the documents obtained during my fieldwork, there are two which spelt out Perkasa's goals and aims. The first one is *Buku Perlembagaan Perkasa* (Perkasa's (n.d.-a) Charter Booklet) and the second one is *Pelan Strategik Perjuangan Perkasa* (Penyataan Dasar) (Perkasa's (n.d.-b) Struggle Strategic Plan – Policy Statement) (See Appendix 4). Together, they provided the basis for Perkasa's discourses on *ketuanan Melayu*. Although there was no mention of the exact phrase in these documents, they echoed the same sentiment as Abdullah Ahmad when he coined the term *ketuanan Melayu* to justify NEP's continuation in 1986. According to Clause 3 of Perkasa's Charter, the SMO has seven aims and purposes. The first five are related to the constitutional provisions relating to the Malays. Although *ketuanan Melayu* is not found in the Federal Constitution, the constitutional guarantees for Malay special position and the sovereignty of the Malay rulers are said to have provided the underlying logic for the concept (Tay, 2017; Liow, 2015).

Perkasa's charter should be read together with its strategic plan to understand its struggles for *ketuanan Melayu*. Besides these two documents, Perkasa activists also referred to the *Rukun Negara* (Malaysia's National Principles) and the *Tujuh Wasiat Raja-Raja Melayu* (Seven-Point Will of the Malay Rulers).⁶⁷ While *Rukun Negara* was introduced on 31 August 1970 to strengthen national unity following the May 13 racial riots in 1969, the *Tujuh Wasiat* is a document that apparently harks back to a period just before Malaya's independence in 1957. It is said to be the will of nine monarchs from four Federated Malay States (FMS) and five Unfederated Malay States when

⁶⁷ The document was not widely known until Perak Sultan Nazrin Shah, who was then the Raja Muda, reminded the Malay people about it in August 2009 ("Tujuh Wasiat," 2009).

they signed the Federation of Malaya's constitution on 5 August 1957 (See Appendix 5).

While Perkasa's Charter provided a brief outline of the SMO's aims and goals, the strategic plan contained more information about its specific objectives. The plan has four areas of concern – religion, education, economy and politics. Apart from a general statement on upholding the status of Islam as Malaysia's official religion, Perkasa did not have much to say about how it planned to promote the religion. While it called for the equalisation and synchronisation of roles between Shariah and civil courts in Malaysia, it did not go as far as to openly advocate for an Islamic criminal code (hudud) (Perkasa, n.d.-b, p.13). More contentious points were found in areas such as education. For example, Perkasa called for a single-language medium school system in Malaysia, which is highly controversial as ethnic Chinese have been fighting to defend their rights to mother tongue education since the British colonial era. Perkasa, however, argued that single medium schools would improve racial unity and national integration (ibid, p.15).

On the economic front, Perkasa called for a "Bumiputera Economic Agenda" to become the country's national agenda and listed ten recommendations. Among others, Perkasa wanted the Bumiputera share of the country's economy to rise to 67 per cent from about 19 per cent currently since the Bumiputera accounted for 67 per cent of Malaysia's population. It also wanted to see an increase in Bumiputera's share of property ownership in urban areas. However, Perkasa also recognised the widening gap between rich and poor Bumiputeras. Thus, its strategic plan called for "a fairer distribution of the economic pie among Bumiputeras themselves." Citing the erosion of Bumiputera rights after more than 20 services sub-sectors were liberalised in April 2009, it said the government should retain the existing protections for Bumiputera businesses. Perkasa was also concerned with the attrition rate of

Malay Reserve Land, which accounted for only 12 per cent of land area in Peninsular Malaysia. According to the Malay rulers' *Tujuh Wasiat*, up to 50 per cent of the country's land should be reserved for Malays (ibid, p.17-19).

Lastly, Perkasa's strategic plan also argued for Malay political dominance because it was the only means to safeguard the sanctity of Islam and protect Malay and Bumiputera interests. According to Perkasa, there would be stability and security in the country as long as the majority ethnic group remains in power. It claimed that "once the Malays lost their political power, it will be gone forever" (ibid, p.20).⁶⁸ Upholding the Malay monarchy as provided in the Federal Constitution was also important for Perkasa because the royalty is deemed as the last bastion in protecting Malay and Bumiputera interests. So, Perkasa would defend the constitution in its current form with provisions relating to Malay characteristics of the state and Bumiputera special position. Besides ensuring administrative continuity, political stability and loyalty of the people to the country, the SMO reckoned that the constitution "is very fair to all races" (ibid, p.21). However, Perkasa believed that some of the constitutional guarantees for Malays and Bumiputeras were not adequately pursued (See Table 8).

⁶⁸ Some Malays have lamented that Singapore, which previously came under the Johor Sultanate, is now controlled by the Chinese. In a speech during the Congress for Malay Survival in June 2022, Dr Mahathir was reported as saying that Malaysia should be claiming for the return of Singapore and Riau Islands to Johor ("Ex-PM Mahathir," 2022).

Table 8: Comparison of Perkasa's Objectives with the Federal Constitution

Perkasa's Aims/Goals	Constitutional Provisions/Influences
1) Empowering Islam as the religion of the Federation (Note: Empowering is translated from the Malay word <i>memperkasakan</i> .)	Article 3(1) stipulating Islam as the religion of the Federation
2) Empowering Malay as the national language	Article 152 stipulating Malay as the national language
3) Empowering the sovereignty of the Malay rulers	Article 181 guaranteeing the sovereignty, rights, powers and jurisdictions of each Malay Ruler within their respective states.
4) Defending Malay special rights	Article 153 safeguarding the special position of the Malays and natives of Sabah and Sarawak, as well as the legitimate interests of other communities.
5) Empowering the <i>Peribumis</i> (natives)	Same as Article 153
6) Empowering the Rukun Negara	Rukun Negara
7) Defending national sovereignty	Point 3 of Tujuh Wasiat Raja-Raja Melayu which mentioned the establishment of Royal Malay Regiment.

Sources: Perkasa (n.d.-a & n.d.-b) & the Federal Constitution of Malaysia

5.4.1 How Perkasa Attended to its Core Framing Tasks

Even before Najib took office in April 2009, Perkasa was already engaged in some core framing efforts. As mentioned in Chapter 2, a framing process is “complete” when it is able to mobilise supporters. To come up with an effective

CAF, framers must attend to the diagnostic, prognostic and motivational aspects of a frame (Snow & Benford, 1988). After appropriating *ketuanan Melayu* from UMNO, Perkasa realigned the CAF to mobilise support from conservative Malays. Here, I will show how former prime minister Dr Mahathir Mohamad played an important role in Perkasa's appropriation of the *ketuanan Melayu* frame in the early days of its establishment. By attending to some of the CAF's core framing tasks, he solidified the framing strategy for the SMO. Set up in a low-key manner in September 2008, Perkasa became more high-profile after organising a summit in March 2009 with Dr Mahathir as the keynote speaker.⁶⁹

There were strong elements of diagnostic and prognostic framings in Dr Mahathir's keynote address entitled, "*Menangani Masa Depan Pribumi Dalam Cabaran Politik Semasa* (Confronting the Natives' Future under Current Political Challenges)" (See Appendix 6). In his speech, Mahathir presented a new diagnostic frame that reinvigorated *ketuanan Melayu* by suggesting that Malays were facing an "unprecedented crisis" because other races were questioning their special rights and criticising them as "unfair"⁷⁰ after 2008 general election when BN lost its customary two-thirds majority in Parliament. According to him, Malays were labelled as "racists" for defending their rights. He struck a chord with participants who attended Perkasa's summit that day by suggesting that they were present as they also felt the Malays were in a

⁶⁹ The event was attended by about 200 participants and took place at the TNB Sports Complex in Bangsar, Kuala Lumpur on 22 March 2009. It passed a declaration with 10 resolutions, which among others, supported the 215th Conference of Rulers' special press statement in October 2008 relating to the position of royalty, Islam, Malay language, Malay special rights as well as the legitimate rights of other races (Sabri, 2009).

⁷⁰ While Dr Mahathir did not refer to any specific incident, this can also be related to BN's dismal performance in the 2008 general election when it lost substantial non-Malay votes. As mentioned in Chapter 3, there were many issues that alienated the Malaysian Chinese and Indians prior to the election. In a statement released by the Keeper of the Rulers' Seal Engku Tan Sri Ibrahim Engku Ngah on 16 October 2008, the rulers expressed concerned about some quarters who were questioning certain constitutional provisions and urged them to refrain from doing so in order to safeguard peace and harmony among the races in the country ("Kenyataan khas," 2008).

precarious situation. Then, he went on to describe the situation as “*cemas* (tense)”, “*merbahaya* (dangerous),” and “*terancam* (threatening).”

Dr Mahathir also presented a prognostic frame by suggesting that Malays must retain political powers to deal with the various socio-economic problems faced by the Malays. Only by retaining political powers would the Malays be able to prevent themselves from being “*dijajah* (colonised)” and “*dihina* (being looked down upon).” They could shape and change their own destiny only through political powers, he said. Looking back at the history of Malay struggles against the British’s Malayan Union plan, Dr Mahathir said Malays succeeded because they were united and aware that they could reclaim their “*maruah* (dignity).” While the speech did not offer a specific strategy for collective action, Dr Mahathir’s framing of a “new Malay dilemma” were parroted by Perkasa’s activists later.⁷¹

Following the March 2009 summit, the stage was set for Perkasa to make its next move. With Dr Mahathir’s ideological support for its core framing tasks, Perkasa started forming new branches throughout Malaysia in 2009 and 2010. By December 2009, Perkasa had set up an office in Perak before expanding to Penang, Perlis, Kelantan, Terengganu, Pahang, Johor and Malacca. Perkasa also formed overseas clubs for students in the UK, Egypt and Indonesia (“Perkasa tubuh kelab,” 2009). All of these show that its framing strategy was successful in mobilising supporters and growing membership. After Najib announced the liberalisation 27 services sub-sectors in April 2009, Ibrahim Ali issued a press statement expressing regret that the 30 per cent Bumiputera ownership requirements for these subsectors were abolished. He highlighted Perkasa’s

⁷¹ Not long after the May 13 Incident in 1969, Dr Mahathir wrote a book called *The Malay Dilemma*, in which he highlighted the plight of the Malays (Mohamad, 2015).

concern that more Bumiputera quotas would be dismantled in other sectors going forward (Ali, 2009).

This concern was not unfounded because the Malaysian state was working towards the NEM, which would be revealed in 2010. Najib had also introduced the *1Malaysia* concept to promote national unity among the different ethnic groups. Other changes were also taking place in the regime as UMNO Youth elected the Oxford-educated Khairy Jamaluddin as its new leader in March 2009. When the party's youth wing held its annual gathering in October 2009, Khairy pleaded with the Malays to embrace meritocracy and proposed for the concept of *keimpimpinan Melayu* (Malay leadership) to replace *ketuanan Melayu* (Shah, 2009). By end of 2009, the injured Leviathan was prepared to make some substantive market reforms, which can be interpreted as a concession for non-Malays.⁷² However, Perkasa was also ready to challenge the Malaysian state. When the first part of NEM report was released on 30 March 2010, Perkasa was the first to oppose it. Tagging on Perkasa's tailcoat were a myriad of major and minor Malay-Muslim NGOs⁷³ constituting the reactionary SM. For example, there were 96 organisations which joined the Bumiputera Economic Congress (BEC) spearheaded by Perkasa in May 2010. Among them were *Dewan Perniagaan Melayu Malaysia* (Malaysia's Malay Chamber of Commerce), *Gabungan Pelajar Melayu Semenanjung* (GPMS) and *Gagasan Melayu Perak*. Together with Perkasa, they not only framed *ketuanan Melayu* in term of Malay rights but highlighted the "injustice"⁷⁴ of meritocracy towards Malays.

⁷² One of the key elements for Najib's state reforms was the Malaysia's Performance Management and Delivery Unit (PEMANDU). Established on 16 September 2009 with Idris Jala as its chief executive and Minister in the Prime Minister's Office, PEMANDU was tasked to monitor the GTP and achievements of its seven National Key Results Areas that came under various ministries.

⁷³ One of these was a Penang-based NGO called Sedaq. On 5 February 2010, it organised a street demonstration against the state government by burning an effigy of then Penang Chief Minister Lim Guan Eng for allegedly discriminating against Malay traders.

⁷⁴ According to Gamson (2013), far-right discourses rely heavily on injustice framing strategy.

The news portal *Malaysiakini*'s exclusive interview with Ibrahim Ali, published on 8 March 2010 (Zakaria & Ahmad, 2010a), is an example of how Perkasa articulated the injustice frame. In opposing a market-driven economy, Ibrahim Ali said it would lead to concentration of wealth in the hands of a few big companies. Claiming that an open market without affirmative action would be "very dangerous" for Malays, he said: "They will be victimised [by the rich]... As of now, over 60 per cent of our national wealth is controlled by the Chinese. Bumiputeras have been left far behind, only controlling less than 20 per cent, and losing more ground by the day" (ibid). The interview also highlighted the similarities between Mahathir's diagnostic and prognostic framing with Ibrahim Ali's rights and injustice frames. Both claimed that Malays were facing a "dangerous" situation and they could end up being "colonised" or "victimised." Stopping short of saying that ethnic Chinese were oppressing the Malays, Ibrahim Ali criticised Chinese businessmen who were advocating for free market competition.

He claimed that these tycoons were also beneficiaries of "affirmative action" because they received generous government contracts. Comparing the "rich" Chinese with "poor" Malays, he said:

They (Chinese tycoons) talk about total equality and a level playing field, while they are already far ahead of us. How can this be? I'll explain in football analogy. The Chinese in Malaysia are like Manchester United. The Malays are not even amateur... We must let Malays (become) the likes of Manchester City or Tottenham Hotspur, only then can the Malays compete on equal footing with the Chinese. These people are arrogant, they forget themselves (probably translated from "*lupa diri*", which means forgetting one's roots) (Zakaria & Ahmad, 2010a).

On how Malays were being “threatened”, Ibrahim said they had been “insulted” and “derided” by certain quarters based on what were published online.

They all say the Malays are racist. But are they themselves not racist? They are the ones who are racist because their demands go against national policies... Look at their demands in issues relating to the Chinese education⁷⁵, this goes against the national education policy. That is racist! (Zakaria & Ahmad, 2010b)

Besides *Malaysiakini*, Ibrahim Ali was also interviewed by another news portal called *The Nut Graph* (Loh, 2010a; 2010b). Like previously, he continued to justify the needs of an affirmative action policy for Malays.⁷⁶ On motivational framing, Perkasa’s message was implicit with “Malay unity” presented as the solution with a slight twist. Instead of uniting under UMNO, the call-to-arms was for Malays to unite under Perkasa. More than six years later in August 2016 when I interviewed Ibrahim Ali, he repeated the same discourses employed in defending NEP. Oblivious to the opulent lifestyles of some Malay elites, Ibrahim Ali harped on the wealth disparity between Malays and ethnic Chinese. During my interview with him, I was told:

You see the expensive bungalow lots [costing] two million to three million ringgit [in] Seri Kembangan [and] Tropicana Golf Course? You count [out of] 100 units, hardly [any are] owned by the Malays. [Maybe] only five units.

⁷⁵ The Chinese community in Malaysia has insisted on retaining their mother-tongue education since the British colonial era. Even though the Chinese language is allowed to be used as a medium of instruction in “*national-type primary schools*,” the community is still trying to get state recognition of the independent Chinese high schools’ Unified Examinations Certificate (UEC).

⁷⁶ During the interview with *The Nut Graph*, Ibrahim Ali said he had been wrongly accused as being a racist and even claimed that Perkasa actually supports affirmative actions for all races. He was reported as saying: If free market capitalism is the order of the day, then there must always be affirmative action to follow through. So that’s what we are fighting for. Not that we want to deprive other races. Affirmative action will also benefit other races. The NEP clearly stated that poverty eradication is regardless of race (Loh, 2010a).

Ninety-five are Chinese and foreigners. The fact speaks by itself (personal communication in Kuala Lumpur on 15 August 2016).

However, Ibrahim Ali omitted the fact that many wealthy Malays also owned high-end residences in Malay-majority areas like those in Shah Alam. Although there are more well-to-do Malays nowadays, majority of the richest people in Malaysia is still ethnic Chinese. According to the Forbes' list of 50 richest Malaysians in 2023, nine out of ten wealthiest individuals and families in the country are Chinese. Only three Malays made the list and they are Syed Mokhtar Al-Bukhary, Syed Azman Syed Ibrahim and Azman Hashim with a respective net worth of US\$1.6 billion, US\$825 million and US\$575 million (Karmali & Ho, 2023). At the same, I noted that the Forbes' list of richest Malaysians may not include some of the wealthiest politically-linked Malays whose assets are hidden and undeclared. Nevertheless, Ibrahim Ali might have a point in suggesting that wealth was not evenly distributed among the economic elites from different ethnic groups considering that Bumiputeras made up more than 60 per cent of the population. Despite being labelled as a "political frog" for jumping parties, he was committed to the agenda to uplift the Malays. My informants in Perkasa told me that Ibrahim Ali steadfastly rejected any cooperation with DAP when Dr Mahathir decided to team up with the party in 2016. One Perkasa leader even told me: "If we need to work with the DAP, we'll work with the DAP." However, Ibrahim Ali refused to budge on the matter (personal communication, 15 August 2016).

Table 9: Perkasa's Diagnostic, Prognostic & Motivational Frames

Core Framing Tasks	Selected Discourses
Diagnostic	Malays are facing a “dangerous situation” because non-Malays started to question their special rights and criticising as them “unfair” after the 2008 polls. Malays are threatened by “colonisation” and risked being “victimised and “looked down upon” by other races.
Prognostic	Malays must unite again to reclaim their “dignity” and they can no longer just rely on UMNO.
Motivational	Malays should support or join organisations such as Perkasa that speak out fearlessly on their behalf.

5.5 Islamic Populism as ISMA's Collective Action Frame

ISMA's transformation into a “loud” from a “quietist” Islamist NGO can be traced to 2010 when its activists started working on the SMO's collective identity. There were two events which marked its emergence as a serious civil society actor. The first one was *Konvensyen Pemikiran Hasan Al-Banna* (Convention on Hasan Al-Banna's Thoughts) in January 2010, followed by *Konvensyen Memperingati 500 Tahun Kejatuhan Empayar Melayu-Islam Melaka* (Convention to Commemorate 500 Years of the Fall of the Malaccan Malay-Muslim Empire) in 2011. Following these events, ISMA officially adopted the slogan of “*Melayu Sepakat, Islam Berdaulat*” (Malays Unite, Islam Reigns). As Perkasa was basking in the limelight, ISMA worked behind the scene to realign its Islamist frame with *ketuanan Melayu*. Its former president Abdullah Zaik Abdul Rahman said ISMA had not formed an identity in a comprehensive way when he first joined in 2000. Hence, there was an opportunity for him and other

leaders to shape the SMO in the way they deemed fit (personal communication, 14 October 2016).

By latching its Islamist frame to *ketuanan Melayu* as the master frame, ISMA successfully developed its own brand of “Islamic populism,” which broadened its appeal to a larger segment of conservative Malays. No longer confined to the social dimension of *dakwah* activities, this CAF allowed ISMA to enter into new areas encompassing political activism. Believing that the injured Leviathan was apparently succumbing to global forces of economic globalisation and local pressure for political and social liberalisation, ISMA attempted to unite the ummah divided by rivalry between Malay nationalists and Islamists. Unlike Perkasa, which self-styled as a primarily Malay nationalist group, ISMA is an Islamist organisation and it could not simply adopt *ketuanan Melayu* without strong justifications as it may contravene Islamic teachings. Some religious scholars, including PAS leaders had denounced UMNO for practising *assabiyah* (tribalism or racism), which is abhorred for undermining the unity of Muslims and their equality under Islam.

However, Strindberg and Warn pointed out that “Islamist speech and action is simultaneously local and global” (2011, p.62). Even Islamic concepts that are common and recognisable by Islamists globally can be subjected to different local interpretations. So, there were actually no restrictions on ISMA from revising the framing strategy in its discourses to allow Malay ethnic and Islamic religious interests to coincide. In term of framing strategy, this can be achieved through a frame alignment process (Snow et al., 1986) and Swart (1995) argued that a similar alignment can happen to master frames. According to him, a rise in the clustering of social movements into cycles of protests, leading to an increase in contentious political activities, is tied to master frame alignment (ibid). While an ummah conjures up the image of Muslim equality regardless of ethnicity, Malays can still be represented as the “first among equals” in the

ummah. This idea provides the underlying logic for ISMA to develop its own Islamic populist frame based on the Malaysian context. Even though some scholars viewed Malaysian politics as neither populist nor likely to veer that way (Weiss, 2020), there is value in reading ISMA discourses with relation to populism. Based on Mudde and Kaltwasser's definition, populism can be defined as "a thin-centred ideology" that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogenous and antagonistic camps, "the pure people" versus "the corrupt elite", and which argues that politics should be an expression of the "general will" of the people (2017, p.6). Scholars such as Bonikowski (2016) suggested that populism is a "discursive frame" while Aslanidis (2016) extended it further by proposing that populism can be a "collective action frame" for movements.

In relation to the above, Vedi Hadiz said Islamic populism can be broadly defined as a variant of populism where the concept of ummah substitutes for the concept of "the people" (2018, p.296). Even though the ummah is internally diverse,⁷⁷ it has been notionally homogenised by Indonesian Islamist groups through juxtaposing the Muslim community as a whole against a set of purported oppressors, made up of economically exploitative and culturally remote elites or even foreign interests. In Malaysia, ISMA employed the same Islamic populist framework by playing up the notion of the ummah against the powerful forces from outside and inside the country that are threatening the ummah's identity, values and material interests. Eschewing electoral politics,⁷⁸ ISMA is an SMO that participates in and leads social movements in Malaysia. So, its version of Islamic populism is best

⁷⁷ Like the concept of the people, the concept of a united ummah is more of an ideal than reality. Scholars have noted that contemporary Islamic civil society organisations represent a myriad of different religious orientations.

⁷⁸ Apart from the 2013 general election when ISMA fielded about a dozen candidates under the Berjasa ticket, the NGO has not participated in any other general or by-elections since. My discussions with ISMA activists indicated that it has no interest to capture state power, except to become a strong "*kumpulan pendesak* (pressure group)" (A.Z. Abdul Rahman, personal communication, 14 October 2016).

conceived as CAF. Mudde and Kaltwasser (2017, p. 47) also pointed out that “nothing keeps social movements from using populism to construct a frame” (2017, p.47).

Many populist elements are found in ISMA’s framing strategy and discourses which identified Malays as torchbearers of the Islamic religion in Malaysia. While Islamic populists in Indonesia ignored the homogeneity of the ummah by uniting them as one against outsiders, ISMA’s Islamic populism has a stronger Malay nationalist flavour. In differentiating the ummah in Malaysia into ethnic majority and minorities, Abdullah Zaik said it would still be “unreasonable” for non-Malays who are Muslims to lead the ummah if they are minorities despite practising the same religion as Malays (Abdul Rahman, 2011, p.16). Based on a populist logic, it can be said that ISMA sees Malays as the “pure people” in Malaysia. Meanwhile, the “corrupt elite” refers to members of ruling class who are considered “liberals”. These people are those who support globalisation and liberalisation domestically and abroad. Liberals can also be represented by non-Malays and non-Muslims who wanted Malaysia to embrace more liberal economic policies, multiculturalism and pluralism. ISMA considers all forms of economic, social and political liberalisation as potentially detrimental to the position of Islam in Malaysia. In fact, it would oppose regime change that brings about a more open and pluralistic Malaysian society that may put Islamic agenda on the backseat.

Not surprisingly, Abdullah Zaik characterised the cooperation between PAS and DAP in Pakatan Rakyat (PR) from 2008 until 2015 as “*haram* (forbidden in Islam)” because DAP openly opposed the implementation of Islamic laws. According to him, the “*tahaluf siyasi*” between DAP and PAS was invalid because it was incumbent upon the non-Muslim ally to accept an Islamic agenda under such an arrangement. *Tahaluf siyasi* is a concept in Islam that allows Muslims and non-Muslims to have a political alliance as long as it does

not violate the Shariah. By opposing the implementation of Shariah laws such as hudud, DAP was deemed to have unilaterally broken off its alliance with PAS. Abdullah Zaik commented on this issue in April 2014 because PAS wanted to implement hudud laws in Kelantan and was planning to bring a private member bill to Parliament. However, this created a friction between PAS and DAP and the latter warned that all of its MPs would not support the bill (“Haram PAS kerjasama,” 2014).

At the height of PAS-DAP crisis in August 2014, ISMA vice-president Abdul Rahman Dali suggested that PAS teams up with UMNO instead in order to sideline DAP and other “liberal Chinese extremists” (“ISMA: PAS-Umno,” 2014).⁷⁹ He said since both PAS and UMNO shared the agenda of preserving Islam and Malay supremacy, they would be powerful and unstoppable if they work together. Abdul Rahman also stressed that PAS must show a strong leadership by “defending Islam and Muslims in whatever condition possible” (ibid). Besides DAP, other political parties, organisations or individuals who are “liberal enough” to challenge the Islamic agenda may incur ISMA’s wrath and be considered as enemies of Islam. In 2022, Abdul Rahman produced a Malay film called *Mat Kilau: Kebangkitan Pahlawan* (Mat Kilau: Rise of a Warrior). While the film was a box-office hit, it was controversial for portraying non-Malays negatively as the “enemies” (Noorshahrizam, 2022).⁷⁹

⁷⁹ DAP and PAS relationship deteriorated further in July 2014 when a WhatsApp of PAS central committee members discussing the possibility of leaving PR was leaked. During this time, a screenshot showing central committee member Mohd Zuhdi Marzuki talking about teaming up with Umno was circulated on Facebook. During the *WhatsApp* group discussion, Zuhdi outlined a scenario on how PAS could defect from PR and form a simple majority government with UMNO in the Selangor state assembly while keeping Khalid Ibrahim as the Menteri Besar (Anand, 2014).

5.5.1 How ISMA Attended to its Core Framing Tasks

Even though ISMA only came into the limelight after 2013, its slogan, *Melayu Sepakat, Islam Berdaulat* is not something new and has been around for decades. I remember seeing a car sticker with the same phrase way back in the late 1990s at the height of Anwar's Reformasi movement. During this time, there was a deep schism in Malay community and the reactionaries were concerned about its effects on Islam. It is unknown who first came up with the slogan but ISMA officially adopted it in the early 2010s. A publication called *30 Soal Jawab Melayu Sepakat, Islam Berdaulat* (30 Questions & Answers on Malays Unite, Islam Reigns) written by Abdullah Zaik himself affirms this.⁸⁰ This book contains the latter's political thoughts and it is the most authoritative source on ISMA's ideology. Together with the interviews with ISMA activists, this document helped me make sense of their CAF.⁸¹

Like how Perkasa's worldview can be understood from the constitutional provisions relating to Malays and other Bumiputeras and the Tujuh Wasiat discussed earlier, the 30 Soal Jawab provided insights on key ideas guiding ISMA's Islamic populist struggles. Written in the form of a dialogue, Abdullah Zaik declared that Islam is a priority but ketuanan Melayu can fit into the larger scheme of things for ISMA and its supporters (Abdul Rahman, 2011). As mentioned earlier, the slogan *Melayu Sepakat, Islam Berdaulat* itself is the expression of ISMA's Islamic populism. As CAF, its underlying messages are "robust, complete and thorough" (Snow & Benford,

⁸⁰ The book was an outcome of a dialogue with Abdullah Zaik during the *Konvensyen Memperingati 500 Tahun Kejatuhan Empayar Melayu Islam Melaka* in Universiti Teknologi Melaka in January 2011.

⁸¹ Interestingly, this book was launched by former Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin, who was then Najib's deputy, in conjunction with *Konvensyen Memartabat Islam Memperkasakan Ummah*, in June 2012. Some may take this as a proof of state-sponsorship. However, Muhyiddin later fell out with Najib due to the 1MDB scandal. Sacked from UMNO and having lost his position as the deputy prime minister, Muhyiddin followed Dr Mahathir into the opposition camp to challenge Najib during the 2018 general election.

1988). This slogan is effective because it resonated with conservative Malays who believe that Islam is the most important element in being a Malay.

Following footsteps of Ibrahim Ali and Dr Mahathir, ISMA leaders successfully attended to the three core-framing tasks in their frame development through the *30 Soal Jawab*. Behind the slogan and its explications by Abdullah Zaik are: (i) a diagnostic frame that identifies a problem and assigns blame, (ii) a prognostic frame that suggests solutions, strategies and tactics to the problem, and (iii) a motivational frame that serves as a call to arms or provide the rationale for action. In a nutshell, its diagnostic framing posited a “foreign agenda” threatening the Malay-Muslim community with “globalisation” assaulting the “*keperibadian*” (character) and “*jatidiri*” (identity or “essential self”) of Malays while its prognostic frame pointed to the envisioned outcomes of the slogan itself, in which Malays are united for the sake of Islam. The motivational frame was implicit but Malays were encouraged to return to the teachings of Islam.

According to Abdullah Zaik’s diagnosis of Malaysian politics, the Malay-led ummah in Malaysia were facing a number of threats due to the “unseen forces of liberalism brought about by globalisation” (Abdul Rahman, 2011, pp.24-25). In highlighting threats against Malay-Muslim identity (*jatidiri Melayu-Islam*), he claimed that Malaysians were being influenced by foreign agendas such as liberalisation, normalisation, pluralism and other ideologies (ibid). The usage of the Malay term “*jatidiri*” (rather than the more common term, *identiti*, which is borrowed from English) as synonymous with identity highlighted Abdullah Zaik’s essentialism in seeing Malay-ness as imbued with natural or original qualities. He claimed that the effects of foreign influences on Malay-Muslim identity were so detrimental that *jatidiri Melayu-Islam* became “almost melted and eroded” (ibid, p.24). In line with their reactionary cognitive liberation where all forms of liberalisation are perceived as a threat to Islam and

Malay interests, Abdullah Zaik said the foreign agenda to destroy *jatidiri Melayu-Islam* was supported and upheld by some local NGOs which promoted those foreign ideologies. Thus, he suggested that the “the real battlefield” was the struggle to develop and defend the Islamic identity among Malays because what the enemies of Islam really wanted to destroy was the essence of Islam, which served as the pillar of strength for Malays. Abdullah Zaik believed that even though Malays were the majority in Malaysia, they were facing all kinds of dangers internally and externally due to political manoeuvrings of those who wanted to subjugate Islam locally and abroad (ibid).

As a prognosis, Abdullah Zaik (ibid, p.20) said Malays need to fall back on their religious identity and take up the role as leaders of the Islamic faith in their own country. This was the *raison d’etat* for ISMA to adopt the slogan *Melayu Sepakat, Islam Berdaulat*. After all, ISMA’s own objectives are “to build, develop and defend the characteristics and identity of Muslims, especially in the Malay community and ethnic Malays in the region, particularly in Malaysia” (ibid, p.5). Abdullah Zaik also considered Islamic religious and Malay ethnic interests to be inseparable. Highlighting the Malay relationship with Islam, he said: “No one can deny the historical fact that the blood and soul of the Malays have been mixed with Islam, no matter what happened throughout the colonial period” (ibid). To elaborate the significance of the slogan that ISMA embraced, Abdullah Zaik said Malays would escape from this dangerous situation by returning to Islam (ibid, pp.5-6). In strengthening the Malay identity with Islamic characteristics, he hoped that they would become a community with strong faith and a sense of direction, which would allow them to find a way out of the predicament they face now (ibid). For him, Islam is the “last barrier” against the onslaught of globalisation. Since proponents of globalisation dominated every field from military to technology, and subjugated the Islamic world, he believed that there would be nothing left to defend if the original characteristics and identity of Islam were destroyed (ibid, p.25).

On ISMA's goal of bringing Malays back to Islam, Abdullah Zaik proposed for a unity between Malay nationalists and Islamists in Malaysia because "globalisation affects both sides" (ibid, pp.43-44). He said all Malay-based parties from both ruling or opposition coalitions must "see beyond their own narrow political interests and prioritise a broader Malay-Muslim interest" (ibid, p.34). Islam would be the beneficiary if all of them upheld the faith. However, if any of them brought agendas from outside of the Islamic framework such as "liberalisation" and "pluralism," it would be detrimental to Islam (ibid, p.36). Abdullah Zaik reckoned that when Malay parties agree to a common agenda, the "bargaining power of Malays will also increase" and this is how they can uphold and promote the position of Islam in Malaysia (Abdul Rahman, 2011, p.39).

ISMA displayed its Islamic populist frame when Abdullah Zaik suggested that there were "no contradictions between Islam and ketuanan Melayu" (ibid, pp.6-8). Although this was his personal view, other ISMA activists and members took the same position. By the time the book *30 Soal Jawab* was published in 2011, Abdullah Zaik had been ISMA president for six years and he was held in high esteem by members.⁸² Claiming that ketuanan Melayu was based on "historical facts," he explained that it was not a racist justification to deny other ethnic groups of their rights as citizens (ibid). As original inhabitants of the land, Abdullah Zaik said Malays are the rightful "tuan" (masters) of the land with "*siyadah*" - an Arabic concept meaning rights

⁸² From my interactions with the leaders in both ISMA and Perkasa, I found Abdullah Zaik to be an articulate but calm and soft-spoken person, a complete opposite in personality from Perkasa's fiery Ibrahim Ali, who cut his teeth in the rough and tumble world of UMNO politics. Part of Abdullah Zaik's charisma can be attributed to the fact that he was educated in the famed Al-Azhar University of Cairo, which produced many notable Islamists. He also served as the executive chairman of *Aman Palestin*, an organisation which raises funds from Malaysians for the Palestinian cause and helping the needy in Gaza and other places in the Middle East. In February 2024, Abdullah Zaik was charged in court for misusing funds collected to help the Palestinians ("Non-profit NGO," 2024).

to own, rule and decide the future of the country (ibid, p.6). He claimed that Malays have ruled the region with Islam as their religion for centuries and other ethnic groups were *pendatang* who came later (ibid, p.7).

Elaborating on *ketuanan Melayu*, Abdullah Zaik said the question of Malays dominating other races on the basis of ancestry, blood or skin colours did not arise (ibid, pp.6-8). Unlike the Jews, whom he described as proud of their ancestry, Abdullah Zaik pointed out that Malays had never claimed to be better than other ethnic groups. Hence, it was an error to view *ketuanan Melayu* as racist. Arguing that other ethnic groups in Malaysia were not oppressed, he said: "The non-Muslim people can live peacefully, earn a living, make progress and become successful in Malaysia... History has shown that the non-Malays are richer than the Malays" (ibid, p.8). In fact, the special rights accorded to Malays based on *ketuanan Melayu* were merely "affirmative actions based on constitutional guarantees" (ibid, p.7). In calling for unity between Islamists and Malay nationalists, Abdullah Zaik insisted that "race" was not the basis for ISMA's struggles but it could be a strategy or an approach due to the interconnectedness between Islam and Malays as an ethnic group (ibid, p.9).

He said although Islam is practised by diverse people, no races except Malays have a Muslim label applied on them (Abdul Rahman, 2012, pp.16-17). Referring to the constitutional definition of Malay as a person who is a Muslim, speaks Malay language and practises Malay culture, Abdullah Zaik said non-Malays could be assimilated over time (ibid, p.17). To further deflect the allegation of racism against *ketuanan Melayu*, he also highlighted that the famed Islamic scholar Ibnu Khaldun approved of a certain type of "*assabiyah*" (tribalism) with Prophet Muhammad interpreted as favouring the leadership of his own Quraisy tribe over others (ibid, pp.9-11). This is a novel argument because the Islamists are known to abhor the practice of *assabiyah* among Malay nationalists (Stark, 2004, p.52).

Table 10: ISMA's Diagnostic, Prognostic & Motivational Frames

Core Framing Tasks	Selected Discourses
Diagnostic	<p>Foreign agendas with local collaborators are eroding and melting away the essence of Malay-Muslim identity.</p> <p>These foreign agendas included (economic) globalisation, (political) liberalisation, (social) pluralism and (gender/sexual) normalisation.</p>
Prognostic	<p>Islam and Malay ethnic interests are “historically mixed” and inseparable.</p> <p>A return to Islam with the unity between Islamists and Malay nationalists to uphold Islam in Malaysia.</p> <p>Malays must see beyond their own narrow political interests and prioritise broader Malay-Muslim interests.</p>
Motivational	<p>To return to the teachings of Islam and to build, develop and defend an Islamic identity as their “essence”.</p>

Source: Abdul Rahman (2011)

5.6 Conclusion

This chapter has shown how Perkasa and ISMA developed their CAFs and used them to mobilise conservative Malays. As SMOs, they came up with framing strategies based on their respective conceptions of ketuanan Melayu and Islamic populism. By skilfully attending to the three core framing tasks required for mobilisation, Perkasa and ISMA leaders and activists were able to produce frames that resonated with conservative Malays. In tandem with their cognitive liberation, these framing strategies were interpretive schemes or master scripts that guided their discourses and performances in various

episodes of contentious politics in the post-2008 era. Perkasa was not original in appropriating ketuanan Melayu from UMNO but the former transformed an elitist idea for electoral politics into one that is grassroots-oriented in civil society.

Meanwhile, ISMA ushered in Islamic populism by latching its Islamist framework to ketuanan Melayu as the master frame. With Islamic populism as its CAF, it built a link between Islamism and Malay ethnonationalism. However, Perkasa and ISMA are fundamentally different. While Perkasa focused on *keperibumian* (nativism) and ISMA sees Islam as its core ideology, both subscribe to ketuanan Melayu. They belong to the same reactionary SM as they shared similar perspectives and discourses on national issues. In the Chapter 6, we will look at specific discourses in four cases of contentious politics in the post-2008 era. By identifying the frame alignment processes that occurred, we will understand how their ketuanan Melayu and Islamic populist frames became more appealing to conservative Malays, countered liberal discourses, and resisted the injured Leviathan.

CHAPTER 6 Frame Alignment Processes in Perkasa and ISMA's Discourses

6.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter, I have explained how Perkasa and ISMA developed their respective discourses on ketuanan Melayu and Islamic populism as collective action frames (CAFs). In this chapter, we will look at the frame alignment processes which helped both SMOs to connect these frames as the interpretive schemata to mobilise more supporters among conservative Malays in various episodes of contentious politics from 2008 until 2017. According to Snow, et al. (1986), frame alignment strategies allow individuals or groups to identify their own beliefs, values, and interests (or individual frame) with the CAF of an SMO. This theory suggests that the alignment of individual frames with a movement's frames, goals and ideology will bring more resources to the movement. Therefore, a social movement (SM) can be more successful when there is frame alignment as more people see the SM's goals as congruent with their own values and interests. However, different situations require different types of frame alignment strategy. To mobilise supporters, SMOs facilitate the frame alignment processes through social interactions and communication with their audience, allies and potential supporters to a point that they internalise or identify with a particular CAF under a specific context. These interactive and communicative activities are known as "micromobilisation" (ibid, p.464). Unlike CAF, which is the overarching sets of ideas and narratives that provide a shared understanding of issues, frame alignment strategies are somewhat different because they are a "deliberative, utilitarian and goal-directed" strategic process (Benford & Snow, 2000 p.624).

To understand Perkasa and ISMA's frame alignment strategies, I examined their discourses in four selected cases of contentious politics that happened between 2010 and 2017. These are related to the New Economic Model (NEM), the Allah row, the Coalition of Malaysian NGOs in the Universal Periodic Review Processes (COMANGO) and the Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement (TPPA). These discourses are chosen because these four cases were major events that involved Perkasa and ISMA as representatives of the reactionary SM. While Perkasa played a leading role in rejecting NEM and opposing the use of the word, Allah, to refer to God by Christians during the Allah row, ISMA was more active in protesting against COMANGO and TPPA. These four episodes of contentious politics provided the empirical evidence to explain Perkasa and ISMA's frame alignment strategies. Their discourses are unique for highlighting the reactionaries' effort to block reforms and to prevent the Malaysian state from liberalising. As mentioned in Chapter 2, there are four types of frame alignments (Benford & Snow, 2000 pp.624-625; Snow, et. al, 1986). To make sense of the framing strategies employed by Perkasa and ISMA, I grouped NEM and TPPA discourses under the category of economic globalisation. Meanwhile, discourses on the Allah row and COMANGO are considered as identity politics. By doing a frame analysis on Perkasa and ISMA's discourses in these two broad categories, I will show how both SMOs successfully employed specific frame alignment strategies to mobilise conservative Malays to challenge the injured Leviathan's liberalisation efforts.

6.2 Discourses on Economic Globalisation

The protest movement against economic globalisation is often seen as a domain of left-wing activism resisting foreign capitalist domination of local workers and resources. Due to this, it is sometimes viewed as a continuing struggle between different social classes facilitated by increased movements of

capital, labour, technology, information and goods and services across national borders. Since the late 2000s, some European movement scholars have noted the emergence of right-wing populism due to a new division in society due to globalisation. Among them were Hanspeter Kriesi (2014), who argued that “new populists from the right” have successfully articulated the conflict between winners and losers of globalisation. In the process, they influenced and transformed the established parties of several European countries to take up demands of the “losers.”

In his earlier works, Kriesi et al. (2008; 2012) highlighted that European “losers” of globalisation would often oppose the cultural dimension of globalisation such as those pertaining to ethnic and religious diversity and the formation of multicultural societies in their countries. This is done through xenophobic and anti-immigrant rhetoric culminating in exclusive forms of nationalism. Interestingly, a similar social phenomenon happened in Malaysia where reactionary SMOs engaged in their own struggles against economic globalisation. Perkasa came into the public limelight after 2008 general election for opposing the state-proposed New Economic Model (NEM) in 2010 while ISMA played an active role in protesting against the Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement (TPPA) in 2016. Even though these events took place six years apart, their occurrence highlighted the consistency and continuity of the reactionaries’ grievances against globalisation.

6.2.1 New Economic Model (NEM)

Prior to the 1MDB scandal and before the word “kleptocracy” became a pejorative for the high levels of corruption in the Malaysian government, “Najibonomics” and 1Malaysia were all the rave. Succeeding the “sleepy” and

“lethargic” Abdullah Ahmad Badawi was a younger and more dynamic Najib Razak (Noor, 2013). He entered the Prime Minister’s office in early April 2009 with a bang by announcing a slew of economic liberalisation measures. Almost immediately, the Malaysian state liberalised 27 services sub-sectors, covering health, social services, tourism, transport, business services, and computer and related services. The liberalisation included scrapping a 30 per cent Bumiputera ownership requirement for investments in some services sub-sectors. This policy was implemented to attract foreign investment and technology to create higher value employment opportunities and to enhance Malaysia’s competitiveness. One month later, he revealed that the government was working on a New Economic Model (NEM) to replace NEP and facilitate Malaysia’s transition to a high-income country. Its objective was to build a more competitive economy by introducing meritocracy.

Less than a year later, the NEM was unveiled and there was a lot of excitement in the business community. Non-Malays were hoping for a change in policy after almost four decades under NEP, which many had complained as discriminatory towards them. Produced by the National Economic Advisory Council (NEAC), a state body comprising of leading economists and thinkers, NEM was published in two parts. The first part, entitled *New Economic Model for Malaysia, Part One*, was released on 30 March 2010 and contained strategic policy directions. The second part, entitled *New Economic Policy for Malaysia, Concluding Part*, was launched on 3 December 2010 to outline NEM’s strategic policy measures. Immediately after the first part was launched, criticisms poured in from Perkasa and other Malay organisations. Their opposition to the NEM – which represented the injured Leviathan’s initiative to revitalise the economy and to regain non-Malay support – is a defining episode of contentious politics. It raised Perkasa’s profile as a protagonist defending Malay rights. As conservative Malays feared that the existing state protections for Malays and Bumiputeras might be eroded under NEM, Perkasa linked up

with other Malay groups to spearhead an umbrella body called *Majlis Perundingan Melayu* to confront the state. The duration from April 2010 until the second-part of the NEM report was released in December 2010 was a period of contentious politics between Perkasa and the injured Leviathan under Najib administration.

6.2.2 Frame Amplification in Perkasa's Discourses on the NEM

To oppose NEM, Perkasa carried out a frame amplification strategy which involves the idealisation, embellishment, clarification and invigoration of existing values or beliefs among conservative Malays (Snow, et al., 1986 pp. 467-472; Benford & Snow, 2000 pp. 624-625). Since many of its leaders were former UMNO politicians and civil servants, frame amplification was Perkasa's natural choice as a frame alignment strategy because it already had strong networks in the Malay community and access to the state. Perkasa became more well-known as Malay grievances against NEM were given extensive media coverage. The Malay-language press, especially *Utusan Malaysia*, which is considered as UMNO's mouthpiece, was supportive of Perkasa. By early 2010, English-language press and online media also became interested in Perkasa. These media reports showed that Perkasa not only framed ketuanan Melayu as Malay rights but focused on the injustice that NEM would do to Malays. Perkasa organised various public forums to amplify its ketuanan Melayu frame and its inaugural AGM on 27 March 2010 was one of such platforms.

The event, held at the Putra World Trade Centre (PWTC) in Kuala Lumpur, attracted over 4,000 participants and was a showcase of the political drama that Perkasa could perform. As a mechanism for frame amplification, the AGM sent a loud and clear message to its audience. It was a colourful

display of Malay nationalism with various cultural performances, including *silat* (Malay martial arts). In his opening speech, Ibrahim Ali praised *Utusan Malaysia* as the only newspaper that “protects the Malays and Bumiputera’s struggle” (Zakaria & Othman, 2010d). He also lambasted news portals such as *Malaysiakini* and *The Malaysian Insider* for allegedly causing Malay disunity. The real star of the event, however, was Dr Mahathir. He officially launched Perkasa and was awarded the *Bintang Pahlawan Pribumi Perkasa* (Perkasa’s Native Warrior Star). The event’s symbolism with its “plethora of *keris* (Malay daggers)” speaks volume. During the award ceremony, Ibrahim Ali gave Mahathir a “*tengkolok*” (Malay headgear) and a red sash, in recognition of the latter status as a Malay hero. Mahathir then passed a “*keris*” to Ibrahim Ali, who unsheathed and kissed it before raising the weapon in the air as the crowd chanted “*Hidup Melayu*” (Long Live the Malays). Next to the stage was a giant *keris* replica with the words “*Tak Melayu Hilang di Dunia* (Malays shall not vanish from the world)” (ibid).

The *keris* waving ceremony was significant because it symbolised Perkasa’s defiance at a time when UMNO Youth under Khairy Jamaluddin’s leadership had abandoned the ritual. Dr Mahathir also used the occasion to warn Najib of dire electoral consequences if the latter refused to listen and address the Malay plight. According to him, the Malays’ faith in UMNO as their “protector” had eroded. He claimed that the party was unable to promote the conditions for Malays because BN had grown weaker following its disastrous electoral outing in 2008. Dr Mahathir said:

I would like to remind the current leadership to listen to the Malay NGOs. They represent the Malays. He should be mindful of the Malays for they are his constituents. They hold the votes (in their hands)... The Malays are flocking to Perkasa because UMNO has failed to promote and fight for the Malay cause (Zakaria & Othman, 2010e).

The one-day AGM concluded with resolutions telling Najib not to bow to pressure from Chinese-based political parties and organisations into sacrificing Bumiputera rights. Perkasa claimed that the Chinese believed they were kingmakers in determining whether BN could win the 13th general elections due in May 2013. Responding to the growing Chinese demand, Perkasa called upon the government to increase the ratio of Bumiputera ownership of the economy to at least 67 per cent to reflect the composition of Malaysia's native population, instead of just 30 per cent as stipulated under NEP previously (Othman, 2010). Just two days after Perkasa's high-profile launch, Ibrahim Ali was in the limelight again when he appeared in a news programme on *Al Jazeera English*. Denying the allegation of discrimination against non-Malays, he claimed that Malays were the ones who "sacrificed a lot of their interests" ("Ibrahim Ali blows," 2010).⁸³

A clash between Perkasa and the injured Leviathan was no longer inevitable when the Malaysian state revealed that Bumiputera ethnic quotas would be gradually phased out to promote Malaysia's economic competitiveness. NEAC as the state advisory body responsible for NEM was not in favour of retaining racially discriminatory policies and wanted to replace them with capacity-building measures to help Bumiputeras increase their competitiveness. Even though NEM was touted as a "market-friendly affirmative action,"⁸⁴ Perkasa was totally against the abolition of ethnic quotas. The proposed Equal Opportunity Commission (EOC) under NEM to address

⁸³ During the interview, which was originally aired on 29 March, a visibly upset Ibrahim Ali captured public imagination by using the expletive "shit" three times when asked to comment on the allegation that non-Malays in the country had been discriminated. However, the utterances were bleeped out during broadcast ("Ibrahim Ali blows," 2010).

⁸⁴ Speaking at the launching ceremony of the NEM on 30 March 2010, Najib said affirmative action programmes and institutions would continue but revamped to remove rent-seeking and market-distorting features. He also said the affirmative action under the NEM would consider all ethnic groups fairly and equally as long as they come under the lowest 40 percent income category.

the issue of racial discrimination was another sore point. Ibrahim Ali claimed that EOC violated the constitutional provisions guaranteeing special privileges for Bumiputeras and warned that Perkasa would challenge it (Zakaria, 2010d). Two months after its inaugural AGM, Perkasa and other Malay groups under MPM organised the BEC. It took place on 29 May 2010 and became another platform for the amplification of Perkasa's ketuanan Melayu collective action frame. The event saw an outpouring of reactionary grievances. Online news portal, *Malaysiakini* described it as an "arena for NEM-bashing" (Zakaria, 2010a).

Spearheaded by Perkasa, BEC attracted about 1,000 participants and became a stage for the reactionaries to display their unity in opposing economic liberalisation. MPM was only representing 86 Malay NGOs at that time but 126 organisations turned up. The discourses on NEM and the framing employed by BEC speakers followed a familiar script that invoked both Malay rights and injustice frames. One of the outspoken personalities during the congress was the former Universiti Putra Malaysia's (UPM) deputy vice-chancellor, who later became Biro Tata Negara (National Civics Bureau) director-general, Professor Kamaruddin Kachar. When chairing a talk during the meeting, he encouraged other speakers to be "courageous" in criticising the NEM. Kamaruddin said:

This is our country, pioneered by our ancestors 2,000 years ago, and defended with their blood in countless battles against invaders. Why should we be afraid? The sultans are our protectors. The Royal Malay Regiment is for the Malays... Should we be afraid of [former MIC president] Samy Vellu's son? Don't let [DAP leaders] Lim Kit Siang and Karpal Singh belittle us. The Malays are not weak (ibid).

Speaker after speaker highlighted the “injustice” that Malays would face under the proposed NEM during the congress. One speaker claimed that Malays still needed protection from other races who made more headways in the economy. He doubted NEM’s ability to uplift the Malays without any clear mechanism to help them. Another speaker said the government’s proposal for NEM and its misgivings against NEP were insults to Dr Mahathir, who presided over the latter’s implementation for more than 20 years (ibid). By end of the day, BEC passed 33 resolutions urging the government to retain its “Malay economic agenda” (Zakaria, 2010b).⁸⁵ The amplification of ketuanan Melayu as “Malay rights” and “injustice” frames put Najib in a bind. On one hand, he wanted BN to regain non-Malays’ confidence by putting Malaysia on a stronger economic footing. On the other hand, he had to pacify Perkasa which was agitating conservative Malays to abandon UMNO. When Najib attended BEC’s closing ceremony later that night, he was unceremoniously presented with the resolutions passed during the congress. In front of a cheering crowd, Ibrahim Ali told the prime minister point blank that BEC delegates had rejected NEM. Besides those resolutions, Najib was inundated with over 30 separate petitions by Malay NGOs representing various economic sectors.⁸⁶ On that very night itself, the injured Leviathan appeared to have capitulated to Perkasa when it was revealed that the government had not finalised NEM even though economic experts recommended it to make Malaysia more competitive. Najib told the crowd that principles behind NEP and Malay interests would not be forsaken (Zakaria, 2010c).

⁸⁵ Among others, the resolutions urged all state governments and local councils to withdraw licenses for massage parlours, gambling and lottery outlets, and liquor shops (Zakaria, 2010b).

⁸⁶ Among others, the Malaysian Association of Malay Automobile Importers (Pekema), which was a main sponsor of the BEC, highlighted its concern that the government was planning to stop issuing Approved Permits (AP) for vehicle imports. AP is a form of ethnic quota which allows Bumiputera dealers to import cars at a lower cost while non-Bumiputera dealers are subjected to high taxes.

6.2.3 Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement (TPPA)

The Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement (TPPA) was a multilateral free trade agreement (FTA) involving 12 countries mooted in 2008. Together, the economies of these countries accounted for almost 40% of the world's gross domestic product (GDP). Therefore, it was a very significant FTA for all countries involved. Covering 30 chapters, it had five areas of focus: comprehensive market access, regional approach to commitments, addressing new challenges, inclusive trade and platform for regional integration (Office of the US Trade Representative, 2015). Proponents of the TPPA touted it as an important milestone towards achieving more open trade and regional integration in the Asia-Pacific region. Besides offering new market access for exporters and investors in the markets of 12 countries, TPPA would reinforce these countries' commitment to a rules-based trading system by updating international rules that apply to cross-border trade and investment. It would also encourage the development of digital economy and innovative industries while companies and workers compete fairly in global marketplace. As such, Malaysia would be able to enjoy a bigger market access, enhance its competitive advantage, attract investor confidence, and attract more foreign investments (SME Corporation Malaysia, 2016 pp.108-113).

The TPPA evolved from the Trans-Pacific Strategic Economic Partnership Agreement, with Brunei, Chile, New Zealand and Singapore being the original signatories in 2005. Joining TPPA negotiations in October 2010, Malaysia was one of the eight new countries brought into the discussion for a broader agreement with the original four countries. Trade deals were becoming more important for Malaysia as the country's competitiveness was eroding, which was a reason why NEM was introduced. Najib administration actively sought and concluded a number of FTAs (See Table 11). Furthermore, there was a global recession not long after BN lost its supermajority in Parliament in 2008

and Malaysia's GDP contracted 1.5 per cent year-on-year in 2009 (World Bank Open Data, 2022f). The worst impact of recession was felt in first quarter of 2009 when Malaysia's economy declined by 6.2 per cent as the collapse in global demand and world trade led to double-digit decline in Malaysian export and industrial production (Bank Negara Malaysia, 2009). Besides a global recession, Malaysia was facing a "middle income trap" as it could not move up the economic value chain while new foreign direct investments (FDI) were diverted to other countries with lower production cost. However, protests erupted in early 2016 as BN was pushing TPPA through Parliament. Despite the opposition, Malaysia signed the TPPA with 11 other countries on 4 February 2016 in Auckland, New Zealand after five years of intense negotiations. Like NEM, the reactionaries perceived the reforms resulting from TPPA as a threat to conservative Malay values and material interests. Although many groups protested against the trade deal, ISMA stood out as one of the most vocal opponents of TPPA among Islamist organisations in Malaysia.

Table 11: Free Trade Agreements (FTAs) under Najib's Administration

Free Trade Agreements	Date of Entry into Force
ASEAN-Australia-New Zealand Free Trade Agreement (AANZFTA)	1 January 2010
ASEAN-India Free Trade Agreement (AIFTA)	1 January 2010
Malaysia-New Zealand Free Trade Agreement (MNZFTA)	1 August 2010
Malaysia-India Comprehensive Economic Cooperation Agreement (MICECA)	1 July 2011
Malaysia-Chile Free Trade Agreement (MCFTA)	25 February 2012
Malaysia-Australia Free Trade Agreement (MAFTA)	1 January 2013
Malaysia-Turkey Free Trade Agreement (MTFTA)	1 August 2015

Source: Ministry of Investment, Trade and Industry (2023)

6.2.4 Frame Amplification in ISMA's Discourses on TPPA

ISMA started opposing TPPA when news started swirling that Malaysia could reach a deal by end-2013. The SMO was an important component of an umbrella movement called *Bantah TPPA* (Protest TPPA) through its leadership of an Islamist coalition known as *Pertubuhan-pertubuhan Pembela Islam*. During the first Bantah TPPA event in July 2013, ISMA took its own initiative to distribute thousands of flyers nationwide to raise public awareness on the matter. Handing out flyers around the vicinity of mosques after Friday prayers was ISMA's preferred tactic because it could easily reach its conservative audience as Muslim men are obligated to perform Friday prayers in mosques. ISMA's frame alignment strategy was the amplification of its Islamic populist CAF. ISMA produced a number of documents on TPPA. Its news portal, *ISMAWeb*, reported that ISMA branches distributed 40,000 copies of one flyer nationwide ("ISMA edar 40 ribu risalah," 2013). The content of this flyer was a simple message from ISMA president Abdullah Zaik expounding on the so-called dangers that TPPA would bring to Malaysia. He claimed that the trade deal was "a shrewd US strategy to control the economy of other countries to ensure that these countries would also bow to American interests." Urging Malaysians to rise up against this "economic colonisation," he said such a struggle should not be left to governments but a "*kefardhuan*" (religious obligation) for every Muslim to break free from colonisation (See Appendix 7).

As TPPA could not be concluded in 2013, ISMA was not involved in further anti-TPPA campaign until it launched its another campaign called *Rakyat Bersatu Tolak TPPA* (People Unite Reject TPPA) on 10 July 2015. The message in this campaign is a clear example of ISMA's frame amplification strategy. Like previously, ISMA printed and distributed more than 200,000

flyers throughout the country (Ishak, 2015a; 2015b). It also set up a website called *Jangan Jual Negara* (Don't Sell the Country) to collect signatures from the public (ISMA, 2015). The campaign also had a Facebook account and became an impressive online campaign that combined the use of modern technology and eye-catching graphics that attracted younger supporters to the cause. Reinventing its July 2013 discourses on how TPPA would affect Malaysia's sovereignty, ISMA came up with a list of 10 reasons why the trade deal must be rejected from the reactionary perspective.

If the populist message from its 2013 campaign positioned Muslims as oppressed people who need to rise up against a faceless enemy in the guise of US multinational companies (MNCs), the 2015 campaign identified Jews as hidden hands behind those American corporations. ISMA claimed that "Jewish-owned MNCs" were carrying out "economic colonisation" of other countries for the US (See Appendix 8). From an emotional perspective, the efficacy of a Jewish conspiracy among Malay conservatives cannot be understated because Malaysia is considered as one of the most anti-Semitic countries in the world. Until today, the country does not recognise Israel. It even went to the extent of barring Israeli athletes from entering Malaysia for international sporting competitions ("Malaysia imposes ban," 2019).

Furthermore, Malay politicians such as Dr Mahathir had singled out Jews as "hook-nosed" (Mohamad, 2015, p.110) and suggested that they "ruled the world by proxy" ("Malaysia defends," 2003). During his second term as prime minister from 2018 and 2020, Dr Mahathir famously defended his right to speak out against Jews in the name of free speech during a visit to New York's Columbia University in September 2019 (Koh, 2019). According to University of Nottingham academic Mary Ainslie, anti-Semitism in Malaysia has become "so potent that it is now considered wholly normal and even morally desirable for a good citizen to hate and oppose Israel and Jews (2019,

p.32).” Her work highlighted the various prejudices that Malaysians have against the Jewish people as there was no opportunity for them to learn more about the history of Judaism, the Holocaust and the historical presence of Jewish people in Malaysia and Southeast Asia (ibid, p.61). While there is a need to distinguish between anti-Semitism and legitimate criticism of Israel’s actions, she pointed out that this distinction is blurred in Malaysia with strong anti-Semitic beliefs underlying the negative portrayal of Israel (ibid, p.33-37).

There are various examples of how ISMA amplified its Islamic populist frame by painting Jews as a bogeyman. According to *ISMAWeb*’s report on 23 July 2015, ISMA vice-president Abdul Rahman Md Dali warned that only “traitors” would sign TPPA. He claimed that the trade deal would allow the US with *kapitalis Yahudi* (Jewish capitalists) working behind the scene to interfere with the Malaysian economy. Abdul Rahman said:

Bumiputera rights, the Malays’ (special) position, will be eliminated. Malay entrepreneurs would be the worst off taking up the risk of being affected by a shrewd policy that tends to protect the interests of foreign companies... Imagine foreigners being allowed to buy Malay Reserve Land without any hindrance from anyone, including the government... Muslims and Malays should feel threatened as the special rights that they have and which are guaranteed under the Federal Constitution will soon be buried... That’s why for me, the leader who signs the agreement is a traitor to race and country (Ishak, 2015c).

Abdul Rahman’s discourse shows how ISMA applied the populist definition of “corrupt elites” on UMNO leaders. They were deemed as betraying Malaysia’s interests for allegedly allowing American-Jewish capitalists to dictate the economy.

Besides playing up the so-called Jewish conspiracy, ISMA amplified its Islamic populist frame by embellishing other issues concerning the conservative Malays. As anti-TPPA protests were reaching a climax in January 2016, Abdullah Zaik issued a challenge for UMNO to shed its pro-colonialist image. He said:

“Everyone knows that the TPPA is not a wish of the Malaysian people and the agreement is not developed in the country’s national interests. What more, by signing the TPPA, it will just prove (UMNO’s) continuous loyalty and compromises to Western interests that are controlled by multinational corporations dominated by the Jews... Even though UMNO is a Malay party in name, they are known for their pro-colonialist image since independence. So, this TPPA is a new test for UMNO on whether they will take a stand to side with the national interest or maintain their pro-colonialist image (Ishak, 2016).”

ISMA also highlighted the issues of *Tanah Rizab Melayu* (Malay Reserve Land) and halal certification standards. It claimed that the land reserved for Malays would be depleted if foreigners were allowed to buy them while halal standards could be compromised if Malaysia had to adhere to different standards of best practices under TPPA. It even suggested that “pornographic films” would make their way into Malaysia under the guise of free trade. Claiming that TPPA was unacceptable for a Muslim-majority country, ISMA Youth chief Muhammad Lukman Al Hakim Muhammad said the trade deal would further compromise the power of religious authorities such as JAKIM if they were no longer be empowered to carry out enforcement on halal standards and other Islamic moral codes (Zalhe, 2016).

6.3 Discourses on Identity Politics

Identity politics refers to politics based on interests and perspectives of specific social groups with shared characteristics such as race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, religion, disability, or other aspects of a social identity (Bernstein, 2005). Without losing sight of intersectionality between different identities, I conceive identity politics as those focusing to achieve non-materialistic, intrinsic and symbolic values more than other forms of contentious politics that struggle for instrumental benefits like class conflicts and partisan politics. Hence, the discourses and end goals of identity politics are typically different from those struggling against economic domination, even though identity politics also permeates the resistance against globalisation. Despite the intersections, Perkasa and ISMA's discourses on identity politics can be viewed separately from their discourses on economic globalisation.

Furthermore, the resistance against economic globalisation cuts across different identities and encompasses both left-wing and right-wing proponents. In Malaysia, identity politics generally revolves around the discourses on ethnicity and religion. Perkasa's framing of *ketuanan Melayu* are representative of discourses on ethnicity while ISMA's Islamic populism is a discourse based on religion. Even though there are important overlaps between Malay-ness and Islam, these two identities were different at the level of collective action as Malay nationalists competed against Islamists for support from the same constituency. Nevertheless, this section will show how the frame alignment processes that occurred in Perkasa and ISMA's discourses can bring activists with competing identities together and galvanise more support for the reactionary SM.

6.3.1 Allah Row

The Allah row refers to contentious politics surrounding the legal battles between the Cabinet or executive branch of the Malaysian state and the Roman Catholic Church. It was a socio-political drama that lasted from 2007 to 2014 and Perkasa did not even exist when the issue first emerged. Straddling two highly competitive general elections, it was an explosive issue involving many players in both state and society. It began in December 2007 when a Roman Catholic weekly publication, *The Herald* was reported as having problems renewing its yearly newspaper license. To put the issue into context, *The Herald* was carrying political news that were critical of the government even though it was supposedly a religious publication. When the Catholic Church tried to renew its license, it was revealed that the snag was due to the word “Allah” being used to refer to God in its Malay-language section.

According to the Home Ministry, the word Allah was exclusive to Muslims only. As mentioned in Chapter 3, there was already a blanket ban on non-Malays using the word since the 1980s under Mahathir administration. However, the government later allowed the weekly to continue printing without any condition.⁸⁷ Around the same time, the *Sidang Injil Borneo* (SIB) Church in Sabah initiated a legal suit against the government for not allowing the import of Christian literature from Indonesia containing the word Allah (Soon, 2007). Perkasa only came into the picture in late 2009 after the Catholic Church won a judicial review against the government’s blanket ban on the use

⁸⁷ Secretary of the Catholic Bishops' Conference, Augustine Julian said no reasons were given for the extension but suggested the government would not want to alienate Malaysia's two million Christians ahead of a general election. Since the permit was given for all four sections – English, Malay, Tamil and Chinese – Julian assumed that *The Herald* was allowed to continue using the word Allah in its Malay-language section. The weekly is published in Malay to cater to Christian natives in the Bornean states of Sabah and Sarawak.

of the word Allah for non-Muslims. In a landmark judgment on 31 December 2009, the Kuala Lumpur High Court ruled that the word Allah was not exclusive to Islam and allowed *The Herald* to continue using the word (Zakaria, 2009). In its submission, the Home Ministry cited national security concerns and claimed that the ban was enforced to avert any confusion that could ensue should non-Islamic publications use the word Allah as a substitute for God. It said Allah was exclusive to Islam as a term for “one true God” and other religions could not use it as a generic term.

The Catholic Church, however, disputed this and argued that the word Allah predates Islam as a generic term for God and was used in many places, including the Middle East. The term Allah is widely used among Christian indigenous people in Sabah and Sarawak. According to the church, the prohibition goes against the principles of freedom of religion and religious practices according to the Federal Constitution. In December 2009, High Court Judge Lau Bee Lan ruled that all Malaysians have the constitutional right to use the word Allah under Article 11 of the Federal Constitution, which guarantees the freedom of expression and religion (ibid). As the government appealed against the judgment, the Allah row was later escalated to the Court of Appeals and Federal Court. During the legal tussle, Perkasa would come forward to support the position that the word Allah should be exclusive to Muslims.

6.3.2 Frame Bridging in Perkasa’s Discourses on the Allah Row

Frame bridging is an effort to bring two ideologically congruent but structurally unconnected frames together and the Allah row provided Perkasa activists with an avenue to reach out to Islamists. While ketuanan Melayu was clearly embedded in the discourses on NEM due to its direct link with Malay

special rights, it was less obvious in the Allah row discourses. However, elements of *ketuanan Melayu* were still present because Perkasa actually wanted to reserve the Arabic word Allah exclusively to Muslims on behalf of conservative Malays. Islam may be a universal religion open to all ethnic groups but Malays have a strong attachment to Islam because their personal and social identities are intertwined with the religion. Under Article 160 of the Federal Constitution, a Malay is defined as a person who professes Islam, habitually speaks the Malay language and conforms to the Malay custom. In fact, a non-Malay person who converted to Islam is often referred to as someone who “*masuk Melayu*” (becoming a Malay) instead of “*masuk Islam*” (becoming a Muslim). When a Malay converts out of Islam, the person not only “*keluar Islam*” (exiting the religion) but will also “*keluar Melayu*”, which means losing his or her ethnic identity as a Malay with special rights under the Federal Constitution.

While Muslims are allowed to propagate Islam to non-Muslims, it is an offence for non-Muslims to propagate other religions to Muslims. Hence, defending Islam in Malaysia is synonymous with protecting the Malays. Not surprisingly, Perkasa was among the first Malay-Muslim group to react strongly to the court judgment on the Allah row in late 2009 (“Muslim activists,” 2010). Its activists protested in three mosques in Kuala Lumpur and Shah Alam.⁸⁸ Despite its outspokenness in defending Islam for the Malays, Perkasa was not an Islamist organisation and was not popular among Islamists due to the political rivalry between UMNO and PAS. So, we can surmise that there were basically two major factions of conservative Malays. Despite Islamisation

⁸⁸ Several hundred people gathered at the National Mosque with banners that read: “Do not belittle Islam” and “We vow to defend Islam and the Malay rulers.” In Shah Alam, protesters targeted Selangor Menteri Besar Khalid Ibrahim and PAS MP for Shah Alam, Khalid Samad, who was accused of “conspiring with non-Muslims” in the Allah row. While the protests during the day were described as a “tame affair” (“Friday protests,” 2010), four churches in Kuala Lumpur and Selangor were firebombed by unknown assailants that night. By month-end, eleven churches, a Catholic school, a Sikh temple, two mosques and two Muslim prayer rooms were hit by arson and vandalism. Severed pig heads were also found near some mosques (“Pig heads,” 2010).

of state and society, traditional Malays tend to be more nationalist and will support UMNO while Islamists are more likely to support PAS (Khoo, 2006; Nagata, 1984). Like UMNO, Perkasa appealed more to traditional Malays.

To mobilise support from a larger segment of conservative Malays, Perkasa needed to reach out to Islamists and this required a frame alignment strategy known as frame bridging. This framing strategy refers to “the linking of two or more ideologically congruent but structurally unconnected frames regarding a particular issue or problem” (Benford & Snow, 2000 p.624). The opportunity came in March 2011 when Christian groups complained that the government impounded about 35,000 copies of Malay-language bibles. As Sarawak state election was looming, the Cabinet came up with a 10-point solution to resolve the issue.⁸⁹ Some Muslim groups were unhappy and protested against the new government directive (Pathmawathy, 2011).⁹⁰ When Utusan Malaysia carried a far-fetched story that Malaysia was being “Christianised” on its front page, Perkasa seized on the issue to attack the predominantly Chinese DAP which controlled the Penang state government.

In the polemic that ensued, DAP was allegedly conspiring with Christian leaders to make Christianity the country’s official religion. Since DAP was cooperating with PAS at that time, Perkasa’s frame alignment strategy can be read as an attempt to bridge with Islamists to undermine the opposition’s unity. Discursively, Ibrahim Ali used an adversarial frame in attacking DAP (“Is Ibrahim’s speech,” 2011) by identifying DAP and Christian missionaries in Penang as “enemies of Islam.” He said: “If there are those in Penang, especially

⁸⁹ Sarawak is a state with a majority Christian population and they may vote against the BN. On 2 April, Minister in the Prime Minister’s Department Idris Jala, who is a Sarawakian Christian, announced that the government would allow the import and local printing of Bibles in all languages, including those in Malay or Indonesian languages without restriction.

⁹⁰ Even before 2008, the Islamists already believed that there was a conspiracy to convert Muslims to Christianity. Refer to Hoffstaedter (2011, pp.136-138) and Lee (2010).

among Christian priests, backed by Penang DAP, continue with their agenda which we know, their intentions, this is my offer... we can have a “*Perang Salib*” (Crusade). This is the “*Saladin*” of Malaysia” (ibid). Saladin was a famous Muslim warrior-king who fought and defeated medieval Christian crusaders. Ibrahim Ali’s statement calling for a holy war against Christian Malaysians resonated with conservative Malays because it tapped into their larger belief systems. Conservative Malays often stand in solidarity with their Muslim brethren worldwide and some even saw themselves as “victims” of “Western-Christian-Jewish oppression”. It was shrewd and populist rhetoric for Ibrahim Ali to position himself as a “Malay-Muslim warrior” fighting against “evangelical Christian” Chinese in DAP.

For a while, Islamists had kept a distance from Perkasa due to the latter’s reputation and for perceived links with UMNO.⁹¹ However, Ibrahim Ali was a persistent man. His efforts paid off when several Islamists eventually joined and cooperated with Perkasa. For example, Perkasa recruited Kulim-Bandar Baharu MP Zulkifli Noordin and appointed him as a vice-president on 26 October 2011 (Aw, 2011a). Before joining Perkasa, Zulkifli was a PKR politician and close associate of Anwar Ibrahim but had been sacked for rebelling against the party’s stand on the Allah row in March 2010.⁹² Perkasa also found a new ally in Hasan Ali, a disgruntled former PAS politician, who founded a Malay-Muslim NGO called *Jalur Tiga* (Jati). Like Zulkifli, Hasan was booted out from PAS for contradicting the party’s stand on religious policies in 2012. Prior to that, he was a Selangor state executive councillor. Among others, Hasan had criticised then Penang Chief Minister Lim Guan Eng for urging the federal government to permit the word Allah for Malay bibles in Peninsula Malaysia

⁹¹ Even though Ibrahim Ali supported the anti-apostasy HIMPUN rally in October 2011, they did not invite him as a speaker because Perkasa was seen as being too close to UMNO (“5,000 turn up,” 2011).

⁹² Introducing Zulkifli as a candidate for Perkasa vice-president, Perkasa supreme council member Muhammad Zahid Md Arip described him as “someone who had seen the light.” He said: “We have a new leader who dare to speak the truth and voice out on matters concerning Islam, Malay and Malay rulers” (Aw, 2011).

in the latter's 2012 Christmas message. He claimed that Lim was manipulating the Allah row to get support from Christians in Sabah and Sarawak and lambasted PAS for acceding to DAP's wishes ("Perkasa urges," 2013).

Frame bridging strategy was also found in Perkasa's discourses in another incident in which Ibrahim Ali allegedly called upon Muslims in Penang to seize and burn Malay bibles containing the word Allah. Responding to an allegation that bibles were distributed to Muslim students at the entrance of a secondary school on the island, he was reported as saying: "Muslims must unite to protect their religion. They must seize those bibles, including the Malay editions, which contained the term Allah and other Arabic religious terms, and burn them... This is the way to show our anger against disrespect to our sensitivity" (Shankar, 2013). Ibrahim claimed that "certain non-Muslim groups" (inferring to DAP) were trying to divert public attention away from 2013 general election. After the polls, Perkasa continued reaching out to Islamists by rallying conservative Malays to gather at the Court of Appeal and Federal Court during hearings for the Allah row. It also targeted liberal Malays who defended Christians. Among others, Wira Perkasa (Youth) chief Irwan Fahmi Ideris criticised prominent social activist Marina Mahathir for leading a group of 40 people to show solidarity with Christians by visiting a church in Klang. Irwan said: "As a Muslim and a daughter of a former prime minister who has done much to champion Islam and our race, (Marina's) actions have raised a thousand questions for Malaysians, especially the Muslims... Where is her *akidah* (Islamic faith) and does she agree with the use of 'Allah' by non-Muslims?" ("Marina flayed," 2014).

6.3.3 Coalition of Malaysian NGOs in the UPR Process (COMANGO)

COMANGO is a coalition of 54 Malaysian NGOs formed in 2008 to engage in the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) of the United Nations. Among these NGOs are Women's Aid Organisation, Sisters-in-Islam, Era Consumer, Pusat Komas and the Centre for Independent Journalism. UPR started with the establishment of Human Rights Council (HRC) by UN General Assembly in March 2006. It is a unique process under which HRC conducts a periodic review of human rights records for all 193 UN member states.⁹³ Every member state has the opportunity to declare the actions that they have taken to improve the human rights situations and to overcome the challenges they face in this respect. The documents on which the UPR for each country will be conducted are based on three sources, namely the information provided by the state under review, that comes in the form of a "national report"; the reports of independent human rights experts and groups, known as the "special procedures", human rights treaty bodies, and other UN entities; and the information (or reports) from other stakeholders such as national human rights institutions and NGOs.

Besides submitting reports for UPR, related NGOs can attend UPR Working Group sessions and make statements during the HRC session when state reviews are being considered. In other words, this new global context – UPR and Malaysia's inevitable engagement in the process as a UN member state – created new opportunities for COMANGO to push for social and political reforms. By 2022, Malaysia had experienced three cycles of UPR, with the third review completed in November 2018. From 2009 onwards, many UN member states that participated in the process have called upon Malaysia to ratify a number of human rights treaties such as the International Convention

⁹³ The reviews are carried out by a UPR Working Group which consists of the 47 members of the HRC. However, any UN member state can take part in the dialogue with any of the states under review. Each state review is assisted by groups of three states, known as "troikas" (SUHAKAM, 2019 p.6).

on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD) and the Rome Statute to recognise the International Criminal Court (ICC).⁹⁴ Table 12 shows that the list of UPR recommendations for Malaysia grew over the years from 103 in 2009 to 268 in 2018. Out of 268 recommendations, Malaysia accepted more than half (SUHAKAM, 2019 pp.10-15).

This trend represented the pressure Malaysia was facing at the UN and COMANGO tried to harness this new global force to push for social change at the national and local levels. After all, liberal activists in COMANGO viewed the Malaysian state as authoritarian and repressive. Since UPR processes allow CSOs and NGOs of a country to directly lobby members of UPR Working Group, comprising of representatives from other UN member states, COMANGO became empowered as there was a new arena to bring local state-society contentions that were previously confined within national borders to the global level. This added to the injured Leviathan's dilemma because the Malaysian state had to muster its remaining energy to resist the scrutiny from other countries. While the Hobbesian understanding of Leviathan implies the state is a force that cannot be destroyed by society, an injured Leviathan can be put at the mercy of the international order. This provided the context for ISMA to emerge as a countermovement to prevent this scenario from happening.

⁹⁴ Among UN member states that urged Malaysia to adopt international treaties in 2009 were South Korea, Finland, Canada, Lithuania, Belgium, Mexico, Ukraine, the United Kingdom and France (United Nations, 2009). Chile suggested that Malaysia adopt measures to guarantee freedom of religion while the Holy See (the Vatican) called for the same "by taking away any impediment to the full enjoyment of this basic human rights" (ibid, p.18).

Table 12: Recommendations for Malaysia under the UPR, 2009-2018

First Review (11 February 2009)	Second Review (24 October 2013)	Third Review (8 November 2018)
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• 103 recommendations• 62 accepted• 19 noted• 22 rejected	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• 232 recommendations• 113 accepted in full• 22 accepted in principle• 15 accepted in part• 82 noted*	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• 268 recommendations• 147 accepted in full• 37 accepted in part• 84 noted*

Source: SUHAKAM (2019, p.10)

*Note: Recommendations that were noted in the second and third reviews are usually those which would be rejected.

6.3.4 Frame Bridging in ISMA's Discourses on COMANGO

From a relatively unknown Islamist organisation, ISMA rose to prominence following its vociferous opposition to COMANGO. As COMANGO tried to push for more social and political liberalisation in Malaysia through a global mechanism, it facilitated ISMA's development by enhancing the latter's appeal among the nationalist segment of conservative Malays. ISMA developed into a leading proponent of a countermovement against COMANGO in part because of its frame alignment strategy. Like Perkasa's discourses in the Allah row, ISMA's discourses against COMANGO employed a frame bridging strategy. While Perkasa reached out to Islamists during the Allah row, ISMA's discourses during the COMANGO debacle resonated with both Malay nationalists and Islamists. Prior to that, ISMA had never directly challenged an opponent in civil society until it crossed paths with COMANGO. This was the moment where ISMA took off as an SMO and put its Islamic populist slogan of "*Melayu Bersatu, Islam Berdaulat*" (Malay unites, Islam

reigns) into action. As explained in Chapter 5, ISMA's Islamic populism was latched to *ketuanan Melayu* as the master frame. So, its frame was already imbued with a dose of Malay nationalism. Based on its Islamic populist frame, ISMA started taking on COMANGO in October 2013 after JAKIM claimed that a global liberal conspiracy was threatening the position of Islam in Malaysia. JAKIM also issued a nationwide sermon calling upon Muslims to defend Islam and for the government to take action against COMANGO.

Portraying COMANGO as a threat to conservative Malay religious values and traditional norms, ISMA co-organised an event called "*Seminar Ancaman Liberal*" (Liberal Threat Seminar) with YADIM on 18 October 2013. Although a small event, it attracted a lot of media attention. Through this event, ISMA stumbled upon a publicity jackpot. The more provocative its statement, the more media attention it garnered. During the seminar, ISMA deputy president Aminuddin Yahya called upon the Malaysian state to replace all its civil laws with Islamic Shariah laws under the concept of "*ketuanan Syarak*" (Shariah supremacy) (Zurairi, 2013b).⁹⁵ According to him, Islamic laws had been practised during the time of the Malaccan sultanate hundreds of years ago but were replaced by secular laws introduced under British rule. The seminar participants adopted a number of resolutions, including a rejection of "Western-interpreted democracy" and for its replacement with *ketuanan Syarak* in dealing with the problem of "political liberalism."

Aminuddin claimed that the Malay community was "overly tolerant" and "submissive," to the point of jeopardising their Islamic faith. He also said they had given in to the whims and fancies of non-Muslims. Urging Malay-Muslim lawmakers to champion *ketuanan Syarak*, he said they should not only

⁹⁵ This is another spin on *ketuanan Melayu* after Anwar called for *ketuanan rakyat* in 2008. Politicians often played with the word *ketuanan* to imply the group which should hold power in the country.

influence government policies but amend the Federal Constitution, if necessary, to bring back Islamic laws. He added: "Fairness in Islam does not mean equality. If we say everybody is equal, that is communism. Fairness means Islam must be number one" (ibid). ISMA also played an active role in a coalition called the Muslim NGOs in the UPR Process (Muslim UPRo), which was formed in 2012 to offer counterproposals to the government as an alternative to COMANGO's report. Among others, Muslim UPRo organised workshops and seminars to create awareness on UPR and its effects.⁹⁶ The coalition became sufficiently influential to the extent that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Wisma Putra) invited it for consultation. Besides views from COMANGO, the Malaysian government also sought Muslim UPRo's recommendations to be incorporated into the national report to UPR.⁹⁷

From the outset, the UPR is undeniably a liberal mechanism. Its goal of bringing about a global regime to govern human rights and rule of law is very much predicated upon liberalism. Hence, there was a real fear among the reactionaries on its legal ramifications on their interests at the local level. According to sociologists David Meyer and Suzanne Staggenborg (1996, p.1639), a countermovement can attract a broader range of constituencies if the issues it champions symbolise larger value cleavages in society. There were three of such cleavages in the COMANGO controversy – the religious cleavage between Muslims and non-Muslims, the ethnic cleavage between Malays and non-Malays, and the ideological cleavage between conservatives and liberals. Since COMANGO's report had alarmed the reactionaries and ISMA took the opportunity to galvanise more people to oppose COMANGO. As Islamists,

⁹⁶ Some Islamic non-governmental organisations (NGOs) were planning to submit proposals to the government on human rights issues that can threaten the sovereignty of Islam in Malaysia for the UPR purposes. Among the proposals was to have a separate feedback note sent to the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation's Independent Permanent Commission on Human Rights ("Islamic NGOs to submit proposals," 2013).

⁹⁷ Today, Muslim UPRo is succeeded by MACSA, with CENHRA as one of the latter's members, to continue the efforts to engage in the UPR by submitting annual reports on Islamophobia to the UN body.

ISMA activists viewed COMANGO's call for religious freedom and recommendation for Malaysia to ratify the ICCPR was akin to encouraging apostasy among Muslims. For the Malay nationalists, COMANGO's call for racial equality could spell an end to affirmative action for Bumiputeras.

Meanwhile, the recommendation for Malaysia to ratify ICERD was seen as a form of neo-colonialisation that allows foreign domination of Malaysia through the adoption of Western values. The reactionaries loathed what they perceived as a push for Malaysia to recognise the rights of sexual minorities. As a state religious body, JAKIM was particularly offended by the staging of an event called *Seksualiti Merdeka*, which was an annual sexuality rights festival held in Kuala Lumpur from 2008 until it was banned in November 2011.⁹⁸ The reactionaries believed *Seksualiti Merdeka* organisers were backing COMANGO. These liberals were not only demanding for the freedom of religion but recognition for lesbians, gays, bisexuals, transgender, intersex and queer (LGBTQs) persons. Hence, COMANGO fitted nicely into ISMA's discourses portraying local liberal NGOs as enemies of Islam.

Following JAKIM's lead, ISMA urged the government to punish COMANGO for purportedly tarnishing Malaysia's image during UPR. It claimed that COMANGO was the culprit behind some European countries' call for Malaysia to recognise LGBTQs' rights, allow for the freedom of religion, including apostasy, and abolish Malay special rights. ISMA deputy president Aminuddin Yahya said: "They not only instigated the people [in Malaysia] to be anti-establishment, they also lobbied UN member countries to press

⁹⁸ Perkasa, the Allied Coordinating Committee of Islamic NGOs (ACCIN) and PAS Youth were among those who protested against *Seksualiti Merdeka* for allegedly promoting homosexuality. There were 154 police reports made against *Seksualiti Merdeka* (Ramendran, 2011). On the ban against *Seksualiti Merdeka*, then Deputy Inspector-General of Police Khalid Abu Bakar said the police were not against the freedom of speech or human rights but the event had created "uneasiness among the vast majority of the population" (Aw, 2011c).

Malaysia to acknowledge matters that are against Islam and our country's constitution... If they are not censured, Malaysia may suffer turmoil" ("Punish COMANGO," 2013). In early November, ISMA stepped up its confrontation against COMANGO by launching *Kempen Selamatkan Ummah* (Campaign to Save the Ummah) and distributed 70,000 flyers about COMANGO in mosques all over Malaysia (Boo, 2013).

Besides slamming COMANGO for advocating the freedom to renounce Islam, the protection of LGBT rights, the removal of Malay privileges, and the right for Catholics to refer to God as Allah, ISMA claimed that "liberal figures" such as Marina Mahathir and former Bersih 2.0 chairperson Ambiga Sreenevasan were the "*dalang*" (puppet masters) behind COMANGO. In retaliation, Marina threatened to sue ISMA for making the allegation ("Marina may sue," 2013). However, Aminuddin insisted that Marina, as a director of *Sisters-in-Islam* (SIS), should be accountable for her organisation's involvement with COMANGO ("Marina, resign," 2013). Claiming to have ample proof on her involvement, he said Marina was hypocritical in wanting to sue ISMA. Meanwhile, an ISMA-linked youth body called the *Persatuan Belia Islam Nasional* (Pembina) called upon Marina to resign from SIS if she was not involved with COMANGO. They questioned how Marina could be ignorant of SIS' decision to get involved with COMANGO (ibid).

ISMA also slammed politicians such as Anwar Ibrahim for allegedly harbouring "liberal views." In an interview with *Malaysiakini*, ISMA's president Abdullah Zaik said: "Anwar has admitted himself to be a liberal democrat activist. Look at his speeches, he supports those ideals... Pakatan's *Buku Jingga* (Orange Book) is based on liberal democracy. If we look at the DAP's agenda, it too is in line with the liberal democratic philosophy" (Sabri, 2013). He also slammed PAS for cooperating with DAP based on principles of liberalism and pluralism (ibid). With increasing publicity on the confrontation between ISMA

and COMANGO, major Malay-based political parties also joined the fray. UMNO, PAS and PKR all rejected COMANGO's report. As a co-founder of ABIM, PKR leader Anwar Ibrahim was previously known to be a staunch Islamist and he could be sensitive to being labelled as a "liberal Muslim." During the COMANGO controversy, he claimed that PH was "consistent" in its stand against the COMANGO report ("Anwar: BN keeps raising," 2013).

However, it was becoming clear that ISMA had found new allies beyond state Islamic bodies such as JAKIM and YADIM. Among these allies were UMNO MP Noh Omar who brought an urgent motion to debate the COMANGO report in Parliament on 27 November 2013. However, his motion was rejected by Deputy Speaker Ronald Kiandee, who is a Christian lawmaker (Anand, 2013).⁹⁹ Emboldened by the support it received, ISMA launched another campaign called *Kempen Sejuta Ummah Menolak COMANGO* (One Million Ummah Reject COMANGO Campaign) in December 2013. Despite legal threats from Marina Mahathir, it distributed even more flyers, of up to 80,000 copies nationwide, including in Sabah and Sarawak.¹⁰⁰ This eventually pushed the government to ban COMANGO on 8 January 2014. The Home Ministry said all social organisations must be registered with the Registrar of Societies (ROS) under Societies Act of 1966 and claimed that COMANGO was illegal because only 54 of its 69 organisations were registered with ROS ("COMANGO banned," 2014).¹⁰¹

⁹⁹ There are possible contradictions among BN elites on the COMANGO report. BN was not monolithic and comprised of Christian non-Muslim Bumiputera MPs from Sabah and Sarawak.

¹⁰⁰ Under this campaign, ISMA collected signatures from the public to petition the government to take action against COMANGO. It also organised talks and seminars.

¹⁰¹ Bar Council Human Rights Committee co-chairperson Andrew Khoo said COMANGO had engaged with the Malaysian government since 2008. "Nothing happened until hardline Muslim conservative organisations highlighted aspects of COMANGO's submission, which they did not agree with, and demanded that action be taken against COMANGO. ("COMANGO banned," 2014)."

6.4 Conclusion

In this chapter, I identified two major frame alignment strategies that Perkasa and ISMA employed to mobilise conservative Malays from 2008 until 2017 (See Table 13). In campaigning against economic globalisation, both SMOs used a frame amplification strategy. In discourses on NEM, Perkasa invigorated *ketuanan Melayu* to stake a claim against the injured Leviathan. It was no longer just an elitist slogan to justify UMNO's rule but a battle cry among reactionaries to prevent the state from dismantling a long-standing affirmative action policy. In amplifying Malay grievances against meritocracy, Perkasa played up "Malay rights" and "injustice" frames to ignite Malay sentiment. Due to massive opposition, the government was forced to water down the NEM and maintained NEP's ethnic quota system. ISMA also used frame amplification to oppose Malaysia's decision to pursue the TPPA. Its Islamic populist frame portrayed UMNO leaders as "corrupt elites" selling out the country to the US while conservative Malays were posited as "virtuous people" fighting against the elites and outsiders. It also amplified a "Jewish" bogeyman as masterminds behind TPPA. ISMA claimed that the Jews would be the biggest beneficiaries of the trade deal. This strategy is in line with research highlighting the relevance of frame amplification for SMs relying on support from "conscience constituents" motivated by a sense of injustice (Paulsen & Glumm, 1995). Elsewhere, Berbrier (1998), who analysed the racist rhetoric of White separatists in the US, found that those who were stigmatised by their use of racist rhetoric also tend to employ a frame amplification strategy.

Meanwhile, frame bridging was the most dominant alignment strategy in Perkasa and ISMA's discourses on identity politics. Elements of frame amplification were also present in these discourses but a frame bridging strategy was more prominent as they were reaching out to a larger Malay audience. During the Allah row and COMANGO controversies, their frame

bridging alignment strategy created a united front between Malay nationalists and Islamists. Though a Malay nationalist organisation, Perkasa tried to get support from Islamists during the Allah row. Among others, Perkasa leader Ibrahim Ali used Islamic imagery to portray himself as a Muslim warrior fighting Christian crusaders. Likewise, ISMA, an Islamist organisation, tried to shore up its Malay nationalist credentials by picking a fight with the liberals in COMANGO. Although Perkasa and ISMA did not have formal ties, they were on the same wavelength. ISMA had no problem concurring with Perkasa's stance on the Allah row and Perkasa cheered for ISMA during its clashes with COMANGO. Taking a leaf from ketuanan Melayu, ISMA even proposed for ketuanan Syarak by using a nationalist narrative of the Malaccan Sultanate to justify the implementation of Islamic laws. In a nutshell, the reactionaries had reinforced a "us-versus-them" mindset between conservative Malays and non-Malays as they targeted the injured Leviathan to deter it from liberalising.

Table 13: Discourse Types, Frame Alignment Strategies & Purposes

Type of Discourses	Dominant Frame Alignment Strategies	Purposes for Mobilising Conservative Malays
<p>Economic Globalisation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • NEM • TPPA 	Frame Amplification	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To oppose state policies that promote economic liberalisation. • To preserve and perpetuate Malay special privileges in the economy
<p>Identity Politics</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Allah row • COMANGO 	Frame Bridging	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To block reforms that may undermine the status of Islam and Malay interests in the religion. • To prevent the state from capitulating to demands for social and political liberalisation.

CHAPTER 7 The Injured Leviathan and Populist Framing in Malaysia's Contemporary Politics

7.1 Introduction

The concept of “injured Leviathan” as elaborated in Chapter 3 and 4 and findings from my framing analysis in Chapter 5 and 6 can help us to make sense of Malaysian politics today. Even though they were attempts at explaining a peculiar situation in Malaysia in the first decade following the watershed 2008 general election, my findings can become a framework to assess the development of contentious politics in the country beyond 2017. By using the concept of injured Leviathan and analysing the reactionary SM's populist frames, this chapter aims to answer why meaningful reforms could not be implemented despite the government turnover in 2018.¹⁰² I will argue that all three subsequent governments – PH from May 2018 to February 2020, PN coalition government from February 2020 to November 2022, and the current “Madani” or PH-BN unity government – have been affected by the injured Leviathan. This condition was not unique to Abdullah and Najib administrations. Even Dr Mahathir, who led a robust Leviathan for 22 years, had to contend with the injured Leviathan during PH's two-year rule. This condition became more acute when PN tried to revive a robust Leviathan. The experiment ended when Muhyiddin was ousted in 2021. I will also argue that the injured Leviathan remains a challenge for the current Anwar administration.

¹⁰² Freedom House (2024) has classified Malaysia as “partly free” in its annual Freedom in the World report despite the change of government in 2018. Other global organisation also gave a similar assessment for the country. The Civicus Monitor report said Malaysia's civic space has been “obstructed” since 2018 (“Report: M'sian,” 2024). Civic space is defined as the respect in law, policy and practice for freedoms of association, peaceful assembly and expression and the extent to which states protect these fundamental rights (Civicus, 2024).

Besides the injured Leviathan, the reactionary SM, as explained in my earlier accounts on Perkasa and ISMA from 2008 to 2017 in Chapter 5 and 6, is still alive today. The reactionaries are always ready to challenge the injured Leviathan using the *ketuanan Melayu* and Islamic populist frames. In Chapter 5, I have elaborated on the efficacy of these two CAFs in heightening Malay grievances. In Chapter 6, I proposed that the choice of their framing strategy in the period under review depended on the type of contentious politics – whether it is related to economic globalisation or identity politics. In this chapter, I will analyse the activism among reactionaries after 2018. Like previously, their framing continued to bridge the differences between Malay ethnonationalists and Islamists to support their efforts to mobilise a larger constituency of conservative Malays for new episodes of contentious politics. While Perkasa is no longer active, ISMA carried the torch for the reactionaries in articulating threats from the so-called liberals against Malay interests. This led to a mass rally to protest against the PH government's plan to ratify the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD) in 2018. For a while, their efforts even contributed to closer ties between UMNO and PAS. After the 2022 general election, ISMA continued to amplify its Islamic populist frame to challenge Anwar's Madani government.

7.2 Inheriting the Injured Leviathan

As discussed in Chapter 4, the injured Leviathan refers to a strong state that lost its iron will to use repression to fully dominate society. The “protection pacts” (Slater, 2010) between the Malaysian state and societal elites, as discussed in Chapter 3, have become ineffectual since 2008. For almost four decades after 1969, the Malaysian state was a robust Leviathan with immense capacity to extract coercive, remunerative and symbolic resources from society.

However, a “freak” election in 2008 put an end to this. When BN lost its supermajority in Parliament, the strong state was fractured. Due to the injured Leviathan, BN ruling elites voluntarily restrained their use of hard repression to avoid further electoral or economic fallout. Since BN had a long-term view to stay in power, the ruling elites calculated that it was better to moderate repression against opponents compared to the risks of cracking down hard on them. A regime that requires legitimation through elections could never use repression alone to justify its rule. Put simply, the BN regime’s “mentality” (Linz, 2000) in governing Malaysia precluded a brutal rule by violence. Its susceptibility to electoral pressure prevented the state from unleashing the full force of repression to control society. So, BN relied more on patronage and put a strain on the state’s remunerative power. Since this peculiar political condition was not exclusive to Abdullah and Najib administrations, the following sub-sections will discuss how the subsequent governments in Malaysia were affected by the injured Leviathan.

7.2.1 PH Government under Dr Mahathir Mohamad (May 2018 – February 2020)

While there was an initial euphoria when the PH, comprising of PPBM, PKR and DAP, unexpectedly won the May 2018 general election, the mood was substantially dampened when it became apparent among political observers that the so-called “new Malaysia” ushered in by BN’s defeat would not bring about the reforms envisioned by many people. Quoting Elina Noor (2019), who said that “not much is likely to change” even as Malaysia “faced myriad challenges”, Ross Tapsell said many people were despondent when discussing national politics after just one and a half years of PH rule. The economy was also lacklustre (2020, pp.191-192). It was becoming apparent that PH would

renege on its 194-page election manifesto that promised broad reforms with 60 pledges (Pakatan Harapan, 2018). In justifying PH's lack of reforms, Dr Mahathir said the manifesto was not a "bible" (Fadli, 2018). He also claimed that its electoral promises could not be delivered without a two-thirds majority in Parliament ("Difficult to fulfil," 2020). While Tapsell offered some insights on why PH failed to reform the country, he said other social scientists should also interrogate this puzzle (2020, p.192). Hence, the concept of injured Leviathan is my small contribution to answering this question.

Even though there was a change of government in 2018, the Malaysian state's capacity to extract symbolic powers was still impaired and its remunerative power was limited. Under this situation, the state could not crackdown on the reactionaries without risking a backlash from conservative Malays. Overwhelmingly supported by non-Malays, its capacity to extract symbolic power was also limited due to a lack of Malay support for PH. This was in contrast to Najib administration who wanted more non-Malay votes to bolster BN's legitimacy from 2008 onwards. According to pollster Merdeka Centre, PH received up to 95% of the ethnic Chinese votes but only garnered 25% to 30% of the Malay votes in the 2018 general election. Meanwhile, between 65% to 73% of the Malays voted for BN and PAS ("Report: 95% Chinese," 2018). Unlike the Malay-led multiracial PKR and Chinese-dominated DAP, PPBM was established by conservative UMNO leaders and right-wing Malay activists. Since its political appeal was confined to Malay constituencies, the lack of Malay support was a major concern for Dr Mahathir and PPBM. Tapsell (2019, p.198) believed that this was a reason why Dr Mahathir backtracked from his initial plan to ratify ICERD. This is symptomatic of an injured Leviathan held ransom by societal forces due to its weak capacity in extracting symbolic resources for regime maintenance.

Like how Najib tried to sway non-Malays voters, particularly ethnic Chinese, to return to BN with his inclusive 1Malaysia slogan, PH under Dr Mahathir wanted more support from conservative Malays and pandered to their demands. Among others, PH increased funding for the Department of Islamic Development (JAKIM) to RM1.3 billion under the government's 2020 budget from RM1.2 billion previously. Financial assistance for Bumiputera entrepreneurs was also increased to RM8 billion compared to RM7.6 billion in 2019 and the government pledged to reserve 30% of its tenders for Bumiputera contractors ("Full budget 2020," 2019). These were proposed on the back of a sluggish economy.¹⁰³ Furthermore, the Malaysian state's capacity to extract remunerative power did not improve much during PH's two-year rule because the goods and services tax (GST) was abolished at a time when national debt had ballooned to over RM1 trillion ("Finance Minister," 2018). Although unpopular among Malaysians, the GST might relieve some of the government's financial burdens. PH's inability to keep a promise in its manifesto of giving 20% oil royalty to Sabah and Sarawak was another sign of fiscal weakness. Blaming its predicament on the previous BN administration for wasting funds, Finance Minister Lim Guan Eng said PH government could not afford to provide up to RM150 billion to the two Bornean states (Loh, 2019). Malaysia's dependency on petroleum-related revenue, which made up about 23% of the federal government's coffer in 2018, can also be viewed as a fiscal vulnerability because petroleum prices are subjected to market fluctuations ("Fiscal Updates," 2018).

There were other incidents in which PH pandered to the reactionaries. In August 2019, Islamic preacher Dr Zakir Naik, who is a Malaysian permanent resident, caused a controversy by suggesting that ethnic Chinese in Malaysia

¹⁰³ Malaysia's GDP grew only 4.3 percent in 2019, which was the slowest in 10 years, down from 4.8 percent in 2018 (Kumar, 2020). It was also reported that the Malaysian economy had been affected by the US-China trade war (Iwamoto, 2019).

should go back to China first in rebuffing calls for him to leave the country.¹⁰⁴ He also claimed that Malaysian Hindus trusted the Indian government more than Dr Mahathir (“Zakir: You want,” 2019). The Indian government was seeking Zakir Naik’s extradition from Malaysia for alleged money laundering and terrorism but Dr Mahathir stood firm in not wanting to deport the preacher. DAP politicians such as Penang’s Deputy Chief Minister P. Ramasamy were among those who called for Zakir’s deportation (Nambiar, 2018). After the controversial remarks, at least four PH ministers – two from DAP and one each from PKR and PBBM– also publicly called for his expulsion (Chew, 2019). More frictions emerged when Dr Mahathir attended the Malay Dignity Congress in October 2019. Defending his participation, he said it was necessary for Malays to take action and improve their situation. He claimed that Malays was fighting among themselves until they have to rely on non-Malays to win elections. “We become afraid if we don’t get their support and cannot win. We have gambled the power given to us... That’s why our dignity is mocked and we are looked down upon (Augustin, 2019).” By then, the political contradictions between PPBM’s Malay-centrism and PKR and DAP’s multiracialism were sharpened. Together with PKR’s own internal factionalism,¹⁰⁵ the PH government could no longer be held together and collapsed in February 2020.

¹⁰⁴ The Indian government has been seeking for the extradition of Dr Zaik Naik from Malaysia for alleged money laundering and terrorism but Dr Mahathir stood firm in not wanting to deport the preacher.

¹⁰⁵ PKR deputy president and Economics Affairs Minister Azmin Ali and 10 members of parliament resigned from the party on 24 February 2020 (“Azmin quits PKR,” 2020). This was the climax of the rivalry between Azmin and PKR president Anwar Ibrahim which was gradually heating up after the latter was accused of undermining his deputy following the expose of a sex video allegedly involving Azmin was leaked in June 2019 (Soo, 2019).

7.2.2. PN Government under Muhyiddin Yassin (February 2020 – August 2021) and Ismail Sabri Yaakob (August 2021 – December 2022)

Following an event known as the “Sheraton Move” on 23 February 2020, PPBM, PAS and 11 PKR turncoats led by the party’s deputy president Azmin Ali came together with BN and several parties from Sabah and Sarawak to form a new coalition government. Formalised as the PN government, the new government was predominantly Malays with PPBM’s Muhyiddin Yassin as the new prime minister.¹⁰⁶ Even though his administration lasted for only 18 months, Muhyiddin tried to revive the robust Leviathan. The Covid-19 pandemic gave him an upper-hand in using coercion as a part of the strategy to contain infections. Barely three weeks in power, he put Malaysia’s state capacity to test by invoking the Prevention and Control of Infectious Diseases Act 1988 and the Penal Code to promulgate a nationwide lockdown known as the Movement Control Order (MCO), effective from 18 March 2020. Spanning over eight weeks, tens of thousands of military and police personnel were deployed to enforce curfews and interstate travel bans all over Malaysia. Despite a comical blunder by PN Health Minister Dr Adham Baba and the lack of coordination between government agencies,¹⁰⁷ the MCO was a success. The World Health Organisation (WHO) even praised Malaysia for its strong capacity in outbreak preparedness and response to Covid-19 pandemic (“WHO praises Malaysia,” 2020). Though an injured Leviathan, it is an example of how Malaysia could still muster a strong capacity, particularly its coercive power, in the times of crises.

¹⁰⁶ Out of 32 ministerial posts in Muhyiddin’s Cabinet, there were only five non-Malay ministers – one each from MCA and MIC and three others from Sabah and Sarawak.

¹⁰⁷ Dr Adham Baba became a laughing stock after he was accused of spreading misinformation by suggesting that drinking warm water would prevent Covid-19 infection (“Health minister,” 2020). There were also conflicting directives on interstate travel ban due to a lack of communication between the police and the National Security Council (NSC) which caused overcrowding in both police stations as many people attempted to get travel permits to return home (Lim, 2020).

Besides authoritarian measures under the MCO, Malaysia's strong state characteristics were reflected by the professionalism of medical frontliners in the Ministry of Health. Under the able leadership of Director-General of Health Dr Noor Hisham Abdullah, the pandemic came under control from mid-April onwards. The number of daily infections that reached three digits in March were reduced to only 16 cases on 12 May, the last day of the MCO. This boosted PN's legitimacy in spite of its power grab in February 2020. Using the pandemic as an excuse, Muhyiddin could even bypassed parliamentary scrutiny. For example, the first Parliament session under PN was limited to just one day on 18 May, which allowed Muhyiddin to avoid motions of no-confidence. Nevertheless, the injured Leviathan lurked in the background due to PN's severe lack of legitimacy. Eager to use the state apparatus to extract more symbolic power to legitimise his administration, Muhyiddin became lackadaisical when the Sabah state government was dissolved on 31 July. As a consequence, the PN government allowed a two-week campaigning period for the state election without imposing mandatory screenings and quarantines for those travelling to and from Sabah. Hence, there was a drastic increase in daily new infections immediately after the polling day on 26 September. From a low of double digits at the end of MCO in May, cases of Covid-19 infections spiked up to 1,228 on 24 October (Adam, 2020).

Things went downhill for Muhyiddin from this point onwards as the nascent robust Leviathan transformed into an injured Leviathan again.¹⁰⁸ In the run-up to Sabah's state election, Anwar Ibrahim constantly harassed Muhyiddin by claiming that he had secured enough numbers in Parliament to bring the PN government down (Chung, 2020).¹⁰⁹ In response, Muhyiddin used

¹⁰⁸ Concurring with my "injured Leviathan" thesis, political scientist Por Heong Hong who studied Muhyiddin administration using Migdal's "state-in-society" approach also observed that strong state capacity can be undermined by intra- and inter-party rivalry as well as the ruling government's politics of survival (2023, p.472).

¹⁰⁹ This defection rumour was not unfounded since UMNO has always been uncomfortable with PPBM, which splintered from the former at the height of the 1MDB scandal in 2016. Moreover, UMNO leaders facing court cases such as Ahmad Zahid Hamidi could have struck a deal with Anwar (Hutchinson and

the rising cases of Covid-19 infections as a justification to sought for a declaration of emergency. He knew that his government would collapse if it fails to secure parliamentary approval for its 2021 budget due in November. The move was opposed by civil society and opposition parties and even politicians from Muhyiddin's own government. On 25 October, the Malaysian king rejected the request and reminded all parties to stop politicking. On 15 December, Muhyiddin's budget was passed with a razor-thin majority with only 111 out of 220 votes in Parliament. By this time, Covid-19 infections had spiralled out of the control. The survival of PN government was only prolonged when Muhyiddin successfully obtained the king's consent in his second attempt to proclaim a nationwide emergency. As such, Malaysia came under a state of emergency and Parliament was suspended from 13 January to 1 August. Unlike the 1969 emergency, which gave rise to a robust Leviathan, the 2020 emergency only perpetuated the injured Leviathan. Instead of strengthening his position, Muhyiddin administration was widely seen as "kerajaan gagal" (failed government) in this period.

There were another two rounds of lockdowns in the seven-and-a-half-month emergency in 2021. Unlike the first round in March 2020, the subsequent ones were not strictly enforced because PN was concerned about reviving the economy. Furthermore, the people were getting restless and starting to show signs of defiance against the government. On 16 April, the hashtag #KerajaanGagal trended on social media with many Malaysians venting their frustration against the PN government ("#KerajaanGagal," 2021). This came just four days after Muhyiddin claimed that the government was running out of money (Adam, 2021). To deal with the economic impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, he came up with the Prihatin Rakyat Economic Stimulus Package

Zhang, 2021). The events immediately after the 2022 general election gave some credence to this rumour when Zahid Hamid helped Anwar to get BN's backing to form a PH-BN coalition government. Zahid Hamidi was also Anwar's protégé in UMNO before the latter was sacked by Dr Mahathir from the government in 1998.

worth RM250 billion in March 2020, followed by various other stimulus packages such as Prihatin SMEs (RM10 billion), Penjana (RM35 billion), Kita Prihatin (RM10 billion) and Permai (RM15 billion). A year later, he introduced a new economic stimulus package called Pemerkasa that cost RM20 billion. While some think-tanks dismissed Muhyiddin's claim as overstatement, there is no doubt that the Malaysia's fiscal position has grown weaker and its capacity to extract remunerative power was breaking down.¹¹⁰ On 13 May, which is also the first day of Hari Raya Aidilfitri, a protest took place in Batu Pahat Johor where a group of 40 youths unfolded a "kerajaan gagal" banner while burning flares and firecrackers ("'Kerajaan Gagal' banner," 2021). Three weeks after the emergency ended, Muhyiddin tendered his resignation on August 16 as his position became untenable.

Muhyiddin was replaced by his deputy Ismail Sabri Yaakob, who managed to get the support from 114 out of 222 members of parliament. He was sworn in as the new prime minister on 21 August 2021. However, Ismail Sabri also inherited an injured Leviathan with weak symbolic power and a mediocre economy.¹¹¹ Like his predecessors, he could not arbitrarily use the tools of state repression at his disposal even though Malaysia's coercive power remained strong. So, he tried to boost the state's capacity to extract symbolic power by launching the concept of "*Keluarga Malaysia*" (Malaysian Family) to promote inclusivity across ethnic and religious boundaries. More importantly, Ismail Sabri had the foresight to reach out to opposition parties by offering them a list of parliamentary and governmental reforms in exchange for their support. On

¹¹⁰ According to Bank Negara Malaysia (2021, p.25), the Malaysian economy contracted by 5.6 percent and entered a recession in 2020 while the unemployment rate rose from 3.3 percent in 2019 to 4.5 percent of the labour force, the highest in 30 years (ibid, p.32).

¹¹¹ Although the Malaysian economy posted a strong GDP growth of 8.7 percent in 2022, critics claimed that Ismail Sabri administration was not doing enough to contain rising cost of living as inflation rose 4.4 percent year-on-year in July 2022 (Sipalan, 2022). In August, Malaysia's inflation rate went up to 4.7 percent (Ikram, 2022). Despite an expansionary budget, the government managed to reduce its fiscal deficit but the national debt rose to RM1.08 trillion (Zalani, 2023).

13 September 2021, his government inked a memorandum of understanding with PH to strengthen political stability amid the pandemic through bipartisan cooperation (Tan, 2021). Among others, the government promised to table an Anti-Party Hopping Bill to prevent politicians elected on one party's platform from defecting to another party. It also proposed to ensure equal membership in parliamentary special committees for both government and opposition lawmakers and granting the Opposition Leader's office with the same remuneration and amenities as a minister (ibid). With PH's cooperation, Ismail Sabri's administration lasted until the general election in November 2022.

7.2.3 Madani Government under Anwar Ibrahim (November 2022 – present)

Nothing epitomised the injured Leviathan better than the general election result on 19 November 2022, which produced a hung Parliament for the first time in Malaysian history. Even though PH won the most seats at the coalition level with 82 seats, it was still short of the 112 required to form a simple majority government. PN was not too far behind with 74 seats and BN won only 30 seats. Hence, there was a mad scramble between PH's Anwar Ibrahim and PN's Muhyiddin Yassin to cobble together a coalition government with BN and other parties from Sabah and Sarawak. It was only with the king's intervention that Anwar prevailed and an unlikely PH-BN coalition government (later rebranded as Madani government in January 2023) was formed.¹¹² Besides producing a coalition government comprising of strange bedfellows and an exclusively Malay-Muslim opposition, the 2022 general election has made Malaysian politics more complicated and polarised (Weiss, 2024; Ostwald and Nadzri, 2023). Despite initial concerns on possible defections

¹¹² Madani is the acronym for ke(M)ampanan (sustainability), kesej(A)htraan (prosperity), (D)aya cipta (innovation), horm(A)t (respect), keyaki(N)an (trust), and (I)hsan (compassion) ("What is Malaysia Madani," 2023).

among BN MPs, the Madani government stayed together throughout 2023. However, the Malaysian state's capacity to extract symbolic powers for the regime remains weak. This can be gleamed from the August 2023 election results in six states (See Table 14).

Table 14: Results of elections in six states, 2023

State	Madani (PH + BN)		PN	
	Before election	After election	Before election	After election
Kedah	12	3	20	33
Kelantan	7	2	37	43
Terengganu	10	0	22	32
Penang	35	29	1	11
Selangor	45	34	5	22
Negeri Sembilan	36	31	0	5

Table 14 shows that the Malays were staunchly behind PN. This is evident from the increased number of seats that PN gained in the Malay heartlands of Kedah, Kelantan and Terengganu. All of Madani candidates lost in Terengganu and PN even denied the PH-BN coalition a two-thirds majority in Selangor by winning 22 seats. Prior to the 2023 state election, PN had only five seats in the Selangor state legislative assembly. PN also made inroads in the DAP-led state of Penang and PKR-led state of Negeri Sembilan by winning 11 and 5 seats respectively. Even though the results did not alter the status quo as all six states remained under incumbent governments, it put more pressure on Anwar Ibrahim to win back conservative Malay votes. Due to the symbolic power deficit, Anwar wavered on its commitment to reforms. Instead, his government mirrored Mahathir administration from 2018 to 2020 in trying to shore up Malay support. Among others, it increased funding for JAKIM ("RM2

bil allocated," 2024), banned Swatch watches with pro-Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) theme ("Malaysia bans," 2023), and cancelled a musical festival after its lead singer challenged Malaysia's restriction on LGBT rights by kissing his male guitarist on stage (Lee, 2023). Following the Hamas-led attack on Israel in October 2023, Anwar reiterated his support for Palestine and resisted Western pressures to condemn Hamas (Azmi & Sipalan, 2023). Even non-Muslim PH leaders wore the keffiyeh (Arabic scarf) and spoke in solidarity with the Palestinians (KiniTV, 2023).

At the same time, the Malaysian state has not regained much of its capacity to extract remunerative power. In an Asian Survey's review on Malaysia in 2023, Meredith Weiss (2024, p.288) said Anwar administration has a "constrained room for manoeuvre" due to fiscal pressures. From a high of 8.7 percent GDP growth in 2022, on the back of a post-Covid recovery, the economy only grew 3.7 percent under Anwar administration in 2023. The problem of inflation, which started in 2022, persisted with cost of living rising due to a weak exchange rate. With the exception of the Japanese yen, the Malaysian ringgit was the worst-performing currency in Asia throughout 2023. Like its predecessors, the Madani government has to deal with high national debt and debt-servicing fees while its extractive capacity is limited.

According to the Auditor-General's report, the federal government's debt rose by 8.6 percent to RM1.173 trillion in 2023 from RM1.08 trillion previously (Khoo, et. al., 2024). To relieve the government's fiscal pressure, the Madani government was urged to revive the GST. However, Anwar rejected this option, knowing all too well that it would be very unpopular among Malaysians. So, he raised the sales and services tax (SST) instead to 8 percent from 6 percent (Carvalho, et. al., 2023). Besides increasing the SST, the Madani government also removed diesel subsidy from 1 June 2024. This move may have an inflationary impact on the poor, many of whom are Malays (Rahman,

2024). Together with a lack of symbolic power, these fiscal challenges show how much the Madani government is plagued by the injured Leviathan. However, it is still too early to tell whether Anwar administration can reverse the situation before the next general election in 2027.

7.3 POS under the Injured Leviathan after 2018

In the recent period, the POS shaped by the injured Leviathan is evident from the government's continuous pandering to societal segments which it lacked support. As an almost all-Malay government, Muhyiddin administration suffered from a lack of symbolic power because the Malaysian state could not extract symbolic resources from the non-Malays. When his management of the Covid-19 pandemic faltered in 2021, the PN government's legitimacy was further eroded due to constant threats of defection from UMNO. Like the ideological contradictions between PPBM and PKR and DAP under the previous PH government, there was intense rivalry between PPBM and UMNO within the PN government. Furthermore, Malaysia was facing a fiscal crisis due the economic impact of the pandemic. All of these eventually led to Muhyiddin Yassin's resignation. Ismail Sabri Yaakob who succeeded Muhyiddin as the prime minister had to seek a compromise with the opposition to stabilise the political situation until a general election was called. When Anwar Ibrahim became the prime minister in December 2022, it was turn to face the problem of symbolic power deficit which all of his predecessors had contended since 2018. After more than 16 years of injured Leviathan to various degrees, it is fair to say that this POS has become a rather consistent dimension in Malaysian politics. Table 15 is a summary of my qualitative assessment on Malaysia's state extractive capacity. In essence, the lack of symbolic power is the key feature of every government since 2008.

Table 15: Qualitative Assessment of Malaysia's State Strength, 1981-present

Administration	Coercive Power	Remunerative Power	Symbolic Power
Mahathir (BN) 1981-2003	Strong	Strong	Strong
Abdullah (BN) 2003-2009	Strong	Strong	Strong (2003-2007) Weak (After 2008)
Najib (BN) 2009-2018	Strong	Mediocre	Weak
Mahathir (PH) 2018-2020	Strong	Mediocre	Weak
Muhyddin (PN) 2020-2021	Strong	Weak	Weak
Ismail Sabri (PN) 2021-2022	Strong	Mediocre	Weak
Anwar (Madani) 2022-present	Strong	Mediocre (as of end-2023)	Weak (as of end-2023)

If there is a silver lining, it is the fact that any government operating under the injured Leviathan is more easily swayed by the loudest voice in civil society. Due to the state's lack of symbolic power and weaker fiscal position, the elites are deterred from using harsh repression as it may affect poll results. However, this also discouraged the ruling elites from pushing through state reforms and widens the spaces for societal forces to exert themselves. This is why civil society in Malaysia has become more vibrant, active and vocal. The problem is civil society is still inherently divided with progressive and conservative social forces (some reactionary and louder than others) contending against each other. Under this situation, whoever controls the Malaysia state must have enough legitimacy (derived from symbolic power and economic performance). Regardless of whether PH, BN or PN coming to power, they must pacify both the Malays (Muslims) and the non-Malays (non-Muslims). What complicates matter is the fact that opposing coalitions will agitate their respective ethnoreligious bases when competing for power. In the

following sections, I will discuss how the reactionaries' framing strategies have also evolved in recent years.

7.4 Framing of Populist Discourses Beyond 2017

Some Malaysians were hopeful that the transition of power from BN to PH in 2018 would usher in a period of institutional reforms and liberalisation. Besides a reduction in corruption, non-Malays wanted government policies which are not discriminatory against them. As mentioned in Chapter 4, they had much pent-up frustration against UMNO for haunting them with memories of ethnic violence. Anwar Ibrahim's promise of an egalitarian *ketuanan rakyat* to replace UMNO's *ketuanan Melayu* in 2008 gave them a new hope. Hence, they have voted for PH and its predecessor PR ever since. Nevertheless, few expected such a strong backlash against PH from the Malay-Muslim society. For the reactionaries, removing *ketuanan Melayu* is not just a threat to their material interests but an affront to their dignity as indigenous population. Matters are complicated by the Islamisation process which has been taking place since the 1970s. The Malay perception of their ethnic identity has become more intertwined with Islam. Their insecurity is also heightened by globalisation, which put pressures on the Malaysian state to liberalise. This brought about a reactionary Malay-Muslim movement that is active since 2008.

In Chapter 5, I argued that *ketuanan Melayu* and Islamic populism were not merely ideologies but collective action frames (CAF) to mobilise conservative Malays. In Chapter 6, I used frame analysis to show how Perkasa and ISMA appealed to their Malay-Muslim audience. It was found that they used frame amplification and frame bridging strategies to align their CAFs for greater resonance. For contentious politics relating to globalisation such as

NEM and TPPA, their preference was frame amplification. For identity politics like Allah row and the COMANGO controversy, they used frame bridging strategy. Both were effective in getting conservative Malays to support Perkasa and ISMA. Due to their opposition, Najib administration backtracked on his reform plans. In the following sub-section, I will argue that the reactionary movement has been using the same framing strategies until recently. As a case study, I looked at the anti-ICERD rally co-organised by ISMA in 2018.¹¹³ We can assess its framing efficacy by comparing it with a protest movement called “Aksi 212” in Indonesia. In recent years, ISMA has also stepped up its online media presence to amplify its Islamic populist frame. This effort is supported by an “ecosystem” of social media contents that serve as “echo chambers” in reinforcing ISMA’s framing strategy.

7.4.1 The Indonesian Connection of the ISMA’s Anti-ICERD Rally in 2018

According to Temby (2020, p.2), the anti-ICERD rally on 8 December 2018 was “the defining moment of anti-pluralist backlash during the Pakatan Harapan period.” Jointly organised by UMNO and PAS with ISMA activists playing a key role, the protests attracted more than 50,000 people to rally in Kuala Lumpur to protest against the PH government’s decision to ratify the ICERD. In the eyes of the protestors, ICERD was a threat to Malay special rights and Islam’s position in Malaysia. Better known as Himpunan 812 (812 Gathering), it has striking similarities with an Indonesian protest movement called Aksi 212 which took place two years earlier in Jakarta on 2 December 2016 (Hew, 2018). During the event, hundreds of thousands of people flooded

¹¹³ Perkasa has become inactive since 2018. PPBM, co-founded by Dr Mahathir, has absorbed many of Perkasa’s leaders and activists. Perkasa’s foremost leader Ibrahim Ali also founded a new party called PUTRA, which Dr Mahathir would later join. As a result, the nationalist segment of conservative Malays is scattered across different parties instead of being united under a single organisation.

the streets to protest against Jakarta governor Basuki Tjahaja Purnama or “Ahok” following accusations that he had committed blasphemy against Islam. Hew (2018) even suggested a possibility that the anti-ICERD rally in Malaysia was called Himpunan 812 by its organisers because they were inspired by the Aksi 212 movement in Indonesia. He also said that ISMA itself was not shy about drawing explicit links between the two protests at a convention two weeks before the rally. The event called *Konvensyen Pertahankan Wilayah Islam* (Pertiwi) (Defending Islamic Territory Convention), which was held on 24 November 2018, featured one of Aksi 212’s leaders, Muhammad Bachtiar Nasir as a speaker.

Since the ICERD controversy in Malaysia and Ahok’s blasphemy case in Indonesia were related to identity politics like the earlier cases of Allah row and the COMANGO controversy, I have identified bridging as the most important frame alignment strategy in both protests. In this respect, observers have noted how Himpunan 218 and Aksi 212 rallies were successful in bringing groups with different political worldviews together (Temby, 2020; Hew 2018, 2016). Temby said both protests began with a specific identity-based grievance but grew into platforms to unify the opposition to defeat the government (2020, p.3). He also pointed out that both were activated by a loss or perceived loss of political power and sought to demonise minorities in government. Particularly relevant to my analysis is the fact that both saw an alliance between nationalists and Islamists with protestors waving their respective national flags alongside the black Ar-Rayah flag.¹¹⁴ The cooperation between UMNO and PAS, which competed against each other for years, was difficult to imagine previously. While there were political overtures on UMNO-PAS unity over the years, nothing had materialised until Himpunan 812 took place. So, there is a need to understand what I will describe as a “populist bridging mechanism” in

¹¹⁴ Based on the Hadith, the Ar-Rayah was one of the flags flown by Prophet Muhammad. Many Islamists identified with a black banner with the shahada (Muslim declaration of faith) in white.

producing solidarity between conservative Malays who previously opposed each other.

Scholars have found evidence of “populist framing mechanisms” in the discourses right-wing grassroots activism against left-wing Brazilian President Dilma Rousseff (Dias, et. al., 2021) and I propose that the same devices were employed in the framing strategy for Himpunan 812 and Aksi 212.¹¹⁵ Dias, et. al. (ibid, p.70) identified “antagonism” and “reductionism” as the two populist framing mechanisms used to oust Rousseff. While antagonism establishes of a boundary between the virtuous people and their enemies, reductionism subsumes differing demands into one overarching grievance. These two framing mechanisms were present in the frame bridging process of Himpunan 812 and Aksi 212. In Himpunan 812, ISMA’s Islamic populist frame helped UMNO and PAS activists to draw a boundary between the Malay-Muslim (as virtuous people) and the PH government allegedly dominated by DAP, comprising of mostly non-Muslim (as the corrupt elite).

By opposing PH’s plan to ratify the ICERD, both UMNO’s desire to perpetuate ketuanan Melayu and PAS call for an Islamic state was reduced to a single grievance because ICERD allegedly could affect both demands. For Aksi 212, the boundary was between the majority Muslim Indonesians against the “arrogant” minorities as represented by Ahok, who is ethnic Chinese and Christian. The reductionism in their framing lies in the question of whether a non-Muslim political candidate is acceptable for a Muslim-majority population¹¹⁶ – a concern shared by both mainstream and radical Islamists in

¹¹⁵ For Dias, et. al. (2021), the populist framing mechanisms are found in the core framing tasks (i.e., diagnostic, prognostic and motivational frames). However, these mechanisms can be used in frame alignment processes.

¹¹⁶ While the PH, which was overwhelmingly supported by the non-Malays, won the 2018 general election in Malaysia, Ahok was seeking election as Jakarta’s governor in 2017. Previously, Ahok was a vice governor who replaced Joko Widodo as Jakarta’s governor when the latter became Indonesia’s president in 2014.

Indonesia (Fanany and Fanany, 2020). Through the use of antagonism and reductionism in their frame bridging efforts, the Islamists successfully reached out to the nationalists to achieve intergroup unity. However, there was one major point of departure between Himpunan 812 and Aksi 212. Even though ISMA played an important role in Himpunan 812, it stayed mostly behind the scene. ISMA's framing of "Melayu sepakat, Islam berdaulat" was effective for bridging purposes but its mobilisation capacity (with only about 50,000 members) was limited. So, it encouraged larger organisations such as UMNO and PAS to get together in mobilising their bases for the Himpunan 812 instead.¹¹⁷ While myriads of smaller Malay groups also attended Himpunan 812 in December 2018, Hew (2018) observed that the majority of protestors were PAS and UMNO activists.

Meanwhile, the Aksi 212's populist bridging in Indonesia was more bottom-up with smaller Islamist groups mobilising their own constituencies. Instead of mainstream political parties, the main organisers were *Gerakan Nasional Pengawal Fatwa-Majelis Ulama Indonesia* (GNPF-MUI) and *Front Pembela Islam* (FPI). The latter is a radical Islamist group while the former is more moderate due to its association with MUI – a mainstream Muslim body comprising of Islamist organisations such as *Muhammadiyah* and *Nahdlatul Ulama*. Mainstream politicians, particularly the secular nationalists, only coopted Aksi 212 leaders for their own electoral purposes after seeing their success in organising the largest protest rally in Indonesian history. Furthermore, Himpunan 812 and Aksi 212 looked at different targets. Realising its own constraints as a smaller organisation, ISMA rode on the strengths of major political parties. By getting UMNO and PAS to unite under Himpunan 812, it paved the way for a stronger cooperation between these two parties which culminated in the formation of Muafakat Nasional in September 2019.

¹¹⁷ As of 15 March, 2022, UMNO was reported to have over three million members (Mohamed Radhi & Povera, 2022) while PAS has about 800,000 active members in August 2020 (Muhamad, 2020).

For ISMA, the Malay-Muslim unity under MN's banner reflected its aspiration of "Melayu Bersepakat, Islam Berdaulat".

The prospect of UMNO-PAS unity added pressure on PH which was also seeing a struggle brewing between Dr Mahathir and Anwar Ibrahim over their succession plan.¹¹⁸ The situation made PPBM more anxious about its prospects of winning Malay votes in future elections and encouraged its defection from PH. Although MN lasted only until December 2022, it was still an important factor that contributed to the PH's government downfall in February 2020. ISMA's ability to bring UMNO and PAS together testified to its growing influence in mainstream politics. In contrast, Aksi 212's bridging strategy was appealing directly to the Muslim masses at the grassroots level in Indonesia. The Islamists' cooperation with nationalist politicians in mainstream politics only came later.¹¹⁹ According to Rozy (2024), Prabowo Subianto engaged Aksi 212 leaders to support his 2019 presidential election campaign after seeing how they helped Anies Baswedan won the 2017 Jakarta gubernatorial election. However, Prabowo did not win and Jokowi eventually banned one of Aksi 212's co-organisers FPI in December 2020. Despite Aksi 212's initial successes, FPI lacked the mainstream status of ISMA.¹²⁰

¹¹⁸ There was a consensus that Dr Mahathir would step down as prime minister after two years in office and Anwar's faction in PH was agitating for a handover of power (Kannan & Harun, 2019).

¹¹⁹ According to Indonesian news portal *DetikNews*, the close relationship between Prabowo and Aksi 212 only started in late July 2018 when the latter endorsed the former for president ("Riwayat Hubungan," 2020).

¹²⁰ ISMA has links to some Aksi 212 activists but they were those considered as "moderates" among the Islamic populists in Indonesia. For example, Bachtiar Nasir who spoke at ISMA's Pertiwi Convention on 24 November 2018 was a leader of GNPf-MUI.

7.4.2 Frame Amplification through Online Journalism and Internet Activism

Besides using frame bridging strategy, the Malay-Muslim reactionaries have become more astute in using new information technology to disseminate their messages. In discussing ISMA's campaign against the TPPA in Chapter 6, I mentioned that it was accompanied by an impressive online campaign website with eye-catching graphics. There was even a website and Facebook account called *Jangan Jual Negara* (Don't Sell the Country). I have also proposed that amplification was the preferred frame alignment strategy for issues relating to globalisation. Hence, amplification is the best frame alignment strategy to heighten the awareness among conservative Malays on a particular issue as means of mobilising them towards collective actions. Since as much as 74 percent of Malaysians get their news from social media, researchers have suggested social media has become a platform to manufacture Malay-Muslim insecurity (Hew and Chan, 2023). Therefore, understanding how the reactionaries tapped into the power of social media to amplify their messages from 2018 inwards is another aspect that we should look into when discussing the relevance of my earlier findings from 2008 to 2017.

Between 2008 and 2017, *ISMAWeb – Portal Melayu dan Islam* (Malay and Islam Portal), was the primary medium for ISMA to disseminate local and international news as well as information on its activities. Building on the success of its online campaign in 2016, ISMA launched TV Pertiwi under a company called Kerengga Merah Sdn Bhd, which was set up in July 2018. Its chairperson is Dr Norzila Baharin, who previously headed ISMA's communication and multimedia bureau and its women wing deputy chief. Meanwhile, TV Pertiwi chief operating officer is Mohd Firdaus Salleh Hudin (n.d.). After graduating from Al-Azhar University in Egypt, he worked as ISMA research officer before becoming the editor of ISMAWeb editor in 2012. A

member of ISMA Gombak branch, he has been TV Pertiwi COO since 2018 (ibid). The name TV Pertiwi is connected to the Pertiwi Convention held in Putra World Trade Centre (PWTC) on 24 November 2018, just two weeks prior to Himpunan 812 discussed in the previous sub-section. Since then, TV Pertiwi, which is a multiplatform content provider, had produced many news programmes, documentaries and talk shows for its own website as well as on popular social media such as YouTube, Facebook, TikTok, Instagram and Telegram. At one point, it even had its own mobile applications that could be downloaded from Apple Store and Google Play Store.

Most of TV Pertiwi contents were critical of PH, particularly DAP, which was accused of dominating the coalition and threatening ketuanan Melayu. With more than 150,000 subscribers as of May 2024, TV Pertiwi's YouTube channel can be considered as quite popular (VidIQ, 2024). While the current TV Pertiwi's Facebook account has only 450 followers as of December 2024, my Google search indicated that its previous Facebook account, which is now locked, has more than 240,000 followers. Coinciding with the state elections in August 2023, YouTube statistics and analytics provider VidIQ (2024) showed that TV Pertiwi's monthly gained video views spiked up to more 2.4 million in August 2023 from an average of below one million between January and July the same year. The figures peaked at almost three million in September 2024 after the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (MCMC) banned TV Pertiwi's website. Among TV Pertiwi's most popular news documentary programmes was *Bongkar* (Expose). These documentaries propagated not only discussed sensational topics and conspiracy theories but contained racial overtones. Among *Bongkar*'s headlines were *Pulau Pinang: Tanah Dipijak Kini Milik Orang* (Penang: The land (we) stand upon now belongs to others), *Ratusan Ribu Warga China "Hilang" di Malaysia* (Hundreds of thousand Chinese citizens "disappeared" in Malaysia) and *Sejarah Hitam 22 Bulan PH Memerintah* (22 months of dark history under PH rule). Premiered

between November 2019 and May 2020, these videos went viral as many people shared them on different social media platforms during the Covid-19 pandemic. Effects of their frame amplification on these issues are palpable as rumours of that millions of Chinese mainlanders getting Malaysian identity cards were swirling until recently (“Cops to probe,” 2023).

The intense competition between Madani government and PN against the backdrop of a so-called “green wave”¹²¹ sweeping Malaysia drove a higher traffic for TV Pertiwi’s channel, which also echoed its reactionary views on YouTube. TV Pertiwi was identified as one of the “right-wing news portals” that spread unsubstantiated rumours of a government-sponsored interfaith programme was trying to convert Muslim to Christianity in March 2023. The reactionaries alleged that a programme called *Jom Ziarah Gereja* was a “Christian evangelist” programme (Hew & Chan, 2023; Nagotra 2023), which led its cancellation (Yamin, 2023). However, TV Pertiwi’s luck was also running out. On 15 August 2023, its TikTok account was allegedly banned for its commentary on the state elections (Zulkifli, 2023). TV Pertiwi’s Tik Tok account had over 63,000 followers and 600,000 likes (ibid). Two days later, TV Pertiwi website itself became inaccessible from certain Internet service providers. MCMC later came up with a statement saying that “it is obliged under the Communications and Multimedia Act (CMA) 1998 to prevent any attempted offences, particularly pertaining to misinformation (Alhadjri, 2023).” Apparently, MCMC wanted TV Pertiwi to remove six pieces of content found to be inciting hatred towards the royal institution and touched on the issues of ethnicity and religion (“Blocked online,” 2023).¹²² MCMC also criticised TV Pertiwi for refusing to remove those contents (“TV Pertiwi,” 2023).

¹²¹ Following the 2022 general election, some political observers claimed that a “greenwave” was sweeping over Malaysia when PAS became the largest single political party in Parliament by winning 43 seats (Teng & Hilmy, 2022)

¹²² The six contents were *DAP sambung usaha hapus ketuanan Melayu* (DAP continues to eliminate ketuanan Melayu); *Kit Siang dapat anugerah tanpa jasa, pancing undi Melayu* (Kit Siang gets awards without merit, fishing for Malay votes); *DAP mahu sebar agenda liberal dan Kristianisasi*

7.5 Analysis of Reactionary “Echo Chambers” on YouTube

Since frame amplification can be done using social media such as YouTube, Facebook, Twitter (now X), Tik Tok, Telegram, WhatsApp and Instagram, this section will analyse YouTube contents to identify “echo chambers” of the reactionaries. According to Cinelli, et. al., (2022), echo chambers can act as a mechanism to reinforce an existing opinion within a group and move it toward more extreme positions. They may exist in various forms of online media such as blogs, forums, and social media sites (ibid). Due to limited time and resources, I will primarily discuss YouTube channels in this section. Although this analysis is far from comprehensive, it can provide a primer into some key actors. After surveying dozens of these contents, I found that there are two categories of “echo chambers”. Some are linked to larger organisations but most are private channels which showcase video compilations of religious talks imbued with socio-political messages. After TV Pertiwi’s was banned by MCMC, YouTube removed many of TV Pertiwi’s old videos which allegedly violated community guidelines, but other channels continue to feature talks by Islamic preachers who oppose secularism, liberalism and pluralism.¹²³

The most popular among organisation-linked YouTube channels that amplify ISMA’s discourses is TV PPIM (2016) with over 290,000 subscribers. Set up in 2016, the channel was the idea of *Persatuan Pengguna Islam Malaysia* (PPIM)

(DAP wants to spread liberal and Christianisation agenda); *Kerajaan dan penyokong Anwar takut Melayu bangkit?* (Government and Anwar supporters afraid of Malay uprising?); *Jom Ziarah Gereja: Anjuran NGO di bawah KBS sasar belia Muslim* (Come Visit Church: NGO sponsored by Ministry of Youth and Sports targets Muslim youths); and *Perkahwinan antara orang Islam dan bukan Islam tidak dibenarkan* (Marriage between Muslims and non-Muslims not allowed).

¹²³ These compilations of religious talks can be found on YouTube channels such as Al Irsyad Studio (over 75,000 subscribers) (2020), Ar-Rahman TV (over 900,000) (2015), Calipha Channel (over 310,000) (2014), Media AlFaizin (over 120,000) (2015) and TVSunnah (110,000) (2009).

chief activist Nadzim Johan. In November 2018, he participated in ISMA's Pertiwi convention. Together with UMMAH led by ISMA activists, PPIM was a key organiser of the Buy Muslim First (BMF) campaign launched in April 2019 (Zurairi, 2019). BMF's objectives included countering irresponsible non-Muslim producers who create fake halal logo and certificate, and ensuring the authenticity of ingredients in halal food products (Wan Omar, et. al., 2022). As PPIM leader, Nadzim built a fearsome reputation as a defender of the downtrodden among Muslims against what they perceived as unscrupulous business practices. To promote the BMF campaign, TV PPIM posted a video called *Malaysia bukan negara Islam?* (Malaysia not an Islamic state?) (2020). In this video, the main character lamented how Muslim businessmen were lagging behind in Malaysia. However, the channel's most popular videos with millions of views are those showing how Nadzim and his fellow activists confronted loan sharks and vehicle repossessioners (TV PPIM, 2020, 2018, 2017). There is a racial dimension to PPIM's activism because loan sharks and vehicle repossessioners are often non-Malays while their victims are Malays.

Nevertheless, some of the most articulate individuals with popular videos on YouTube are actually non-Malays who reverted to Islam. Apart from well-known PAS-leaning preachers like Azhar Idrus and Abdullah Khairi, more reactionary and controversial ones such as Ridhuan Tee, Firdaus Wong and Zamri Vinoth also made their presence felt on YouTube. Due to their active participation in the larger media ecosystem that supports ISMA's amplification of reactionary messages, these non-Malay Islamic preachers play an important role in validating *ketuanan Melayu* and Islamic populist frames among conservative Malays. They are particularly authoritative in deflecting allegations that the reactionary position was unjustifiably racist. Their messages are also appealing due to their mastery of the Malay language. This can be juxtaposed against "unpatriotic" non-Malays who are not fluent in the national language and prefer using English or vernacular languages in their daily

communication. Hence, these non-Malay preachers are able to deliver biased yet persuasive views on non-Malays and non-Muslims to a largely Malay-Malays audience. Interestingly, the three non-Malay preachers mentioned above are linked to Dr Zakir Naik, who clashed with DAP leaders calling for his deportation in 2019. In the following sub-sections, I will discuss how they amplified the same Islamic populist frame espoused by ISMA.

7.5.1 Dr Mohd Ridhuan Tee Abdullah

A professor in political science, Dr Ridhuan Tee is an ethnic Chinese who can be deemed as “more Malay than the Malays”. Seen as a “traitor” to the Chinese, Tee claimed that he had been spat at by other Chinese and even received death threats for speaking out against his own ethnic group and DAP leaders while defending Malay and Muslim rights (“Ridhuan Tee claims,” 2016). The former MCA member made his name as a newspaper columnist and came up with the term “*ultra kiasu*” to describe ethnic Chinese, and DAP in particular, during the run-up to the 2013 general election (“Rakyat perlu tolak,” 2013). Tee said the Hokkien term “*kiasu*”, which means “afraid to lose”, is most apt for DAP in rejecting the proposal for an Islamic state in Malaysia. He also authored several provocative books such as *Nasib Melayu di Bumi Melayu* (The Fate of the Malays on Malay Land) (2010), *Masih Adakah Ketuanan Melayu?* (Is There Still Ketuanan Melayu?) (2011) and *Melayu Menjadi Minoriti Dalam Majoriti* (Malays becoming a minority in the majority) (2013) to urge the Malays to unite in defence of their rights and not to allow others to take advantage of them (ibid).

From 2013 until 2016, Tee was a columnist for the Malay tabloid *Sinar Harian*. In his column, he would often apply the term *ultra kiasu* to condemn DAP and other Chinese-based political parties, including his former party

MCA. In March 2016, Tee claimed that the Singaporean government barred him from entering the country for his views on ultra kiasu, which was also a label applicable to Singaporeans (“Ridhuan Tee denied,” 2016). As an Islamic preacher, there are hundreds of videos featuring Tee’s talks and interviews on various YouTube channels. A common thread in his popular videos is the appeal for Malay unity to defend Islam (Calipha Channel, 2019). In August 2019, Tee even broke down in tears as he appealed Muslims to rally behind Dr Mahathir’s decision to allow Dr Zakir Naik to stay in Malaysia when DAP called for his deportation. According to him, the “enemies of Islam” would always look for “a single fault out of Naik’s thousands of good deeds” just to get him deported (“Ridhuan Tee sebak,” 2019).

7.5.2 Firdaus Wong Wai Hung

Unlike Ridhuan Tee, who is more politically-inclined in attacking DAP, Firdaus Wong, who is also ethnic Chinese, is more focused on dakwah activities. Out of the 50 students who were personally trained by Dr Zakir Naik, ten are Malaysians and Wong is one of them (Nusantara Studio, 2020). However, his application of Naik’s so-called comparative religion techniques to propagate Islam have made some non-Muslims uncomfortable. In comparing religions, Wong can be interpreted as playing up Islam’s superiority and putting down other religions and cultural practices. He is also aligned with the reactionaries by setting up his own online media company called *The Merdeka Times* (TMT), which mirrors TV Pertiwi in disseminating reactionary contents. In fact, Tee is one of TMT’s columnists (Tee Abdullah, 2024). More recently, Wong got into legal troubles for posting a TikTok video advising minors to hide their conversion to Islam from their parents (“Controversial Muslim preacher,” 2024). For several years, human rights activist Shashi Kumar had been trying to get

Wong and Zamri Vinoth, who was Wong's peer under Dr Zakir Naik's tutelage, to be prosecuted for allegedly insulting the faith and religious practices of non-Muslims (Anbalagan, 2024).

As echo chambers for reactionary views, Wong's videos are popular on YouTube. There are almost 43,000 subscribers on Bro. Firdaus Wong's Official YouTube Channel (2016) and its most popular video is *Bila Cina Ketawakan Ustaz Azhar Idrus* (When the Chinese laughed at Ustaz Azhar Idrus) with over 253,000 views (2023). In the video clip, he debunked a misperception among ethnic Chinese that Muslims were obsessed with sex after Azhar commented on the permissibility of certain sexual acts with one's spouse. He said Islam has injunctions on sexual matters whereas the Chinese culture does not and went on to criticise the Chinese for condoning practices such as cohabitation before marriage (ibid, 2023). Like Ridhuan Tee, Wong is a prolific writer. His notable yet controversially works are *Apa Lagi Cina Mahu?* (What Else the Chinese Want) (2019) and *Cina "Kiasu" atau "Kiasi"?* (The Chinese are Afraid of Losing or Afraid of Death) (2024). Ironically, both books claim to contribute to fostering better understanding of the ethnic Chinese among the Malays.

7.5.3 Muhammad Zamri Vinoth Kalimuthu

Another of Dr Zakir Naik's most prominent students in Malaysia is ethnic Indian preacher Zamri Vinoth. He has been described as Naik's most problematic student with about 1,200 police reports lodged against him for allegedly insulting other religions (Let the Truth Speak, 2024a). According to Zamri, these reports were made mostly in response to his efforts to defend Naik from being deported in 2019. In April 2019, Zamri was arrested for allegedly insulting Hinduism over his sermon which was uploaded online ("Cops nab,"

2019). Like Tee and Wong, many of Zamri's videos are available on YouTube and some carried provocative titles. There is a YouTube Shorts entitled *Rakyat Malaysia Tak Boleh Terima Islam Sebagai Agama Rasmi Negara?* (Malaysians cannot accept Islam as the country's official religion?), in which Zamri and his interlocutor mocked Malaysians whom they claimed are not willing to accept Islam as the country's official religion (Let the Truth Speak, 2024b). The fact that some Malaysians are concerned about how Islamisation will affect their rights instead of questioning Islam as the official religion is not contextualised.

Another of his popular YouTube Shorts is *Kenapa Saya Bagitahu Kafir Tak Boleh Sebut?* (Why I say kafir cannot be mentioned?) garnered over 1.2 million views and 52,000 likes (ibid, 2024c). In this video, Zamri defended Muslims' right to use the word "kafir" to describe non-Muslims because it is found in the scripture. However, non-Muslims abhor the term kafir because it can marginalise them further from being treated equally like how the labels of Bumiputera and non-Bumiputera created two classes of citizens in Malaysia. Besides the numerous police reports against him, Zamri also had a number of court cases due to his spat with liberal civil society activists. In August 2024, the Kuala Lumpur High Court delivered a landmark ruling when it ordered Zamri to pay a total of RM200,000 defamation compensation to activist Arun Dorasamy and lawyer-activist Siti Kasim while Arun was to pay RM100,000 to Zamri (Abdul Rashid, 2024). Following their Facebook feud between April 2019 to June 2020, Zamri sued Arun and Siti for alleging that he raped his wife before marriage. Arun and Siti then countersued Zamri for claiming the duo were "enemies of Islam" (ibid).

7.6 Conclusion

This chapter has shown how the concepts of injured Leviathan, frame bridging and frame amplification are still useful in helping us to think about changes in POS and the effects of populist framing on Malaysian politics. They also allow us to make sense of the seemingly inconsistent behaviours of ruling elites who backtracked on their promises to reform the country. Based on the framework of an injured Leviathan, we know that coercive power alone is insufficient in dealing with demands from society. In Malaysia, having symbolic power is particularly crucial for regime maintenance and using coercive power without sufficient legitimacy can be politically and financially costly. Whichever government which comes to power must first fix the state capacity to extract symbolic power. This explains why Dr Mahathir said that reforms are difficult without a two-thirds majority in Parliament (“Difficult to fulfil,” 2020), It is also a reason why Anwar Ibrahim is now pandering to reactionary demands (Jamaluddin, 2023). Another challenge for the government under an injured Leviathan is improving the state’s capacity to extract remunerative power.

Even though my earlier observations of Perkasa and ISMA were limited to the period between 2008 and 2017, this chapter has built upon earlier findings to show how frame bridging and frame amplification are still effective for the reactionaries to mobilise conservative Malays. Through a bridging strategy, the reactionaries represented by ISMA used *ketuanan Melayu* and Islamic populism to get Malay nationalists and Islamists together for the anti-ICERD protests in 2018. There was a precedent of populist bridging in Indonesia which inspired the reactionaries in Malaysia. Frame amplification also remains an important strategy beyond 2017 as social media allows the reactionaries to reach out to more people. Encouraged by their earlier success in utilising the Internet in campaigning against the TPPA in 2016, ISMA activists set up TV

Pertiwi as a part of their frame amplification strategy in 2018. However, the ensuing standoff between TV Pertiwi and MCMC shows that a government sometimes have to employ some degree of coercion in controlling reactionary societal forces from becoming more extreme. The challenge for Madani government is applying state repression without impeding its efforts to restore the state capacity to extract symbolic power from the Malays.

CHAPTER 8 Conclusion

8.1 Summary of Key Insights

This dissertation has offered new insights on how to understand the emergence and development of a reactionary SM in the context of changing state-society relations in the post-2008 era. Indeed, the major themes of this dissertation pertain to the limits of structural determinism and the power of agency within confines of structures. Guided by propositions laid out in Chapter 1, the subsequent chapters in this dissertation demonstrated how state transformation could be ignited by discourses of reformism within the regime, which in turn, stimulated the rise of reactionary social forces in society to prevent the state from liberalising itself and to continue reproducing the status quo. In doing this, I favour neither structure nor agency but take the position that both are equally important. Nonetheless, understanding the injured Leviathan is the starting point because we need to see the broad context in which state-society relations unfold. There are many statist elements that can be examined but we must investigate state capacity, instead of just focusing on regime type, as the most important structural factor hindering the development of SMs. Without sufficient state capacity, even the most authoritarian regime will succumb to societal pressures.

However, change is not always an inevitable outcome when the question of agency comes into the equation. Societal forces may challenge the existing structures but they can also reinforce them. We should not assume that a conservative state will not be challenged by reactionary social forces, especially when the regime is indicating a willingness to liberalise. Thomas Pepinsky (2012) noted how BN ruling elites “*tak nak mereform*” (refuses to reform), yet it is possible that the state “*tak boleh mereform*” (cannot reform) due to resistance

from society. The state may be caught between a rock and a hard place by opposing forces of liberalisation and conservatism. Reflecting on state capacity, I elaborated the distinction between a robust Leviathan (1969-2008) in Chapter 3 and the injured Leviathan (post-2008 era) in Chapter 4. While the Malaysian state's coercive power remained intact after the 2008 general election, other dimensions of state capacity were eroding. This explains the ruling elites' hesitation to apply hard repression on opponents.

While structural factors may create an opening for SM emergence, agency determines its subsequent development. Some movements could not last beyond a single event, but the reactionary Malay-Muslim SM discussed in this dissertation lasted for a decade despite the structural changes that were taking place. In Chapters 5, 6 and 7, I elucidated some of the reactionaries' populist discourses and identified their meaning-making processes using theories on framing, identity and populism. These findings indicated the SM's collective agency vis-à-vis UMNO, BN and the Malaysian state. The movement's growth necessitates a re-evaluation of some previous assumptions on Malaysian civil society such as the role of coalitional capital (Weiss, 2006). There is also a need to deepen our understanding of ketuanan Melayu as a source for populist uprisings. It is not just an ideology (Chin, 2021) but an emotive frame that spurs a broad segment of conservative Malays towards collective action.

Table 16: The Injured Leviathan & Framing Strategies of Reactionary SM

The Injured Leviathan (2008-2017)					
Perkasa emergence	NEM controversy	ISMA emergence	Allah row	COMANGO controversy	TPPA protests
Ketuanan Melayu CAF	Frame amplification	Islamic populism CAF	Frame bridging		Frame amplification
2008-2009	2010-2011		2013-2014		2016-2017

Table 15 sums up my understanding of the interplay between structure and agency that facilitated the emergence and development of a reactionary SM in the post-2008 era. It all began with the injured Leviathan providing a fertile ground for the formation of reactionary SMOs like Perkasa and ISMA between 2008 and 2017. While the Malaysian state did not directly sponsor these SMOs, it created the POS for their growth. Due to the state's impaired capacity to extract symbolic power from society, the ruling elites were reluctant to heighten repression in dealing with opponents and relied on patronage to stay in power. A competitive authoritarian regime cannot simply resort to coercion to stay in power at a time when its legitimacy has taken a beating. So, BN elites promised to reform and liberalise the Malaysian state. The state's reformist discourses, together with globalisation and liberal agitations, aggrieved conservative Malays who perceived their Islamic values and Bumiputera material interests were coming under threats. Towards the end of 2008, the reactionaries had all

the necessary ingredients – grievances, cognitive liberation and networks of allies – to energise a movement. With that, Perkasa was born with ketuanan Melayu as the collective action frame (CAF). ISMA, which is an Islamist dakwah organisation, came into the limelight a few years later after developing its own Islamic populist frame by latching Islamism onto ketuanan Melayu as the master frame (Snow & Benford, 1992; Benford, 2013).

Despite being fundamentally different – Perkasa is nationalist while ISMA is Islamist – both appropriated and re-interpreted ketuanan Melayu in their CAFs to oppose liberalisation and to defend the status quo. In their struggles which also involved confrontations with the state, both SMOs exercised agency in mobilising conservative Malays. Based on their discourses on the New Economic Model (NEM), the Allah row, the Coalition of Malaysian NGOs on the UPR Processes' (COMANGO) controversy and the Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement (TPPA) protests, I found that Perkasa and ISMA relied mostly on frame amplification and frame bridging. While frame amplification was a strategy to arouse the emotion of conservative Malays, frame bridging enhanced the solidarity between Malay nationalists and Islamists. Frame alignment was a useful tool to overcome the political divide among conservative Malays. The increased unity between the opposing camps of conservative Malays was noticeable during the Allah row and COMANGO controversy in 2013 and 2014 as Perkasa and ISMA tried to bring more conservative Malays together for a common cause. Their populist discourses heightened ethnic and religious tension in the Malaysian society. The situation became so alarming that a group of liberal-minded former civil servants were moved to speak out against the reactionaries ("Eminent Malays," 2014).

In fact, this dissertation was conceived in 2014 to make sense of Perkasa and ISMA. Some political observers such as John Funston (2016), James Chin (2016) and Clive Kessler (2016) insinuated that these two SMOs were either

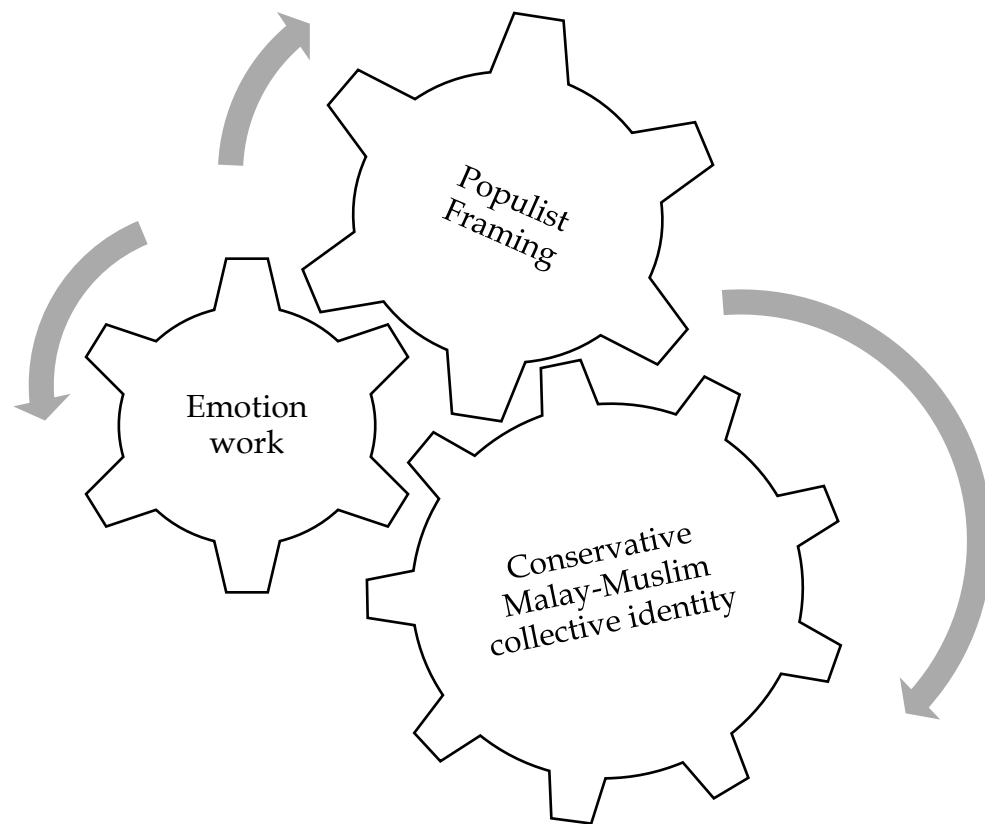
sponsored by UMNO or cultivated by Najib to shore up Malay support. However, this phenomenon was not straight-forward. Instead of bolstering UMNO, Perkasa and ISMA diverted away the support of conservative Malays from the party. In supporting the reactionary SM, disgruntled conservative Malays who were frustrated with UMNO and PAS could register their protest against both parties for neglecting their interests. The reactionary Malay-Muslim SM's emergence also highlighted the need to re-evaluate the role of social capital in civil society. Meredith Weiss (2006) observed how the Reformasi movement in 1998 fostered coalitional capital in the civil society by acting as a social glue which enabled Islamists and liberal non-Malay political activists to trust and work with each other. Defining coalitional capital as "the resources and experience with which groups may formulate broadly appealing alternative ideas about governance and policies and build cross-cutting coalitions with which to pursue those ideas," she (ibid, p.44) said the impetus for reform must come from society if the illiberal state prefers not to change. While this coalitional capital is still vested in the PH coalition, it needs to be reconceptualised in view of the reactionaries' emergence in civil society.

In the post-2008 era, it was the Malay nationalists' turn to build trust and norms of reciprocity with the Islamists. This variant of coalitional capital is not the progressive one envisioned by Weiss. Under the condition of an injured Leviathan, which is perceived as susceptible to liberalisation, the impetus to block reform also comes from society. Hence, the coalitional capital in Malaysia could work both ways for liberal and conservative movements alike. The formation of MN between UMNO and PAS in 2019, and PN, comprising of mainly Malay political parties, in 2020, can be attributed to this conservative form of coalitional capital. The enduring appeal of Malay-Muslim unity at the grassroots level also suggests that the fundamental schism between different ethnic groups remains a sticky problem for Malaysian civil society. Cognisant of the agency shown in Perkasa and ISMA's discourses, this dissertation

acknowledges the versatility of *ketuanan Melayu* as a conservative Malay ideology as well as a discursive tool that has transcended UMNO. Although the concept was first propagated by UMNO in the 1986 to justify the continuation of NEP and to bolster its image as the sole protector of Malays, *ketuanan Melayu* has evolved in post-2008 era. Today, it is no longer just a neo-feudal ideology (Muzaffar, 1979) that primarily serves the interests of Malay elites.

From 2008 onwards, *ketuanan Melayu* has been re-interpreted and evolved in creative ways to appeal to different categories of conservative Malays. As a grassroots-oriented movement, Perkasa appropriated *ketuanan Melayu* for the Malay masses and turned it around to attack UMNO elites who harboured liberal intentions allegedly detrimental to conservative Malays. Under ISMA's framing of Islamic populism, there are no longer contradictions between *ketuanan Melayu* and Islam. Using *ketuanan Melayu* to defend Malay interests has become analogous to defending Islam. These gave rise to an interesting brand of identity politics in Malaysia. According to James Chin (2021), the political ideology of "*ketuanan Melayu Islam*" is the new racialised form of political Islam in Malaysia. However, *ketuanan Melayu* is more than an ideology. It is better conceived as a frame that guides collective actions. Unlike an ideology, a frame is not a comprehensive worldview but a discursive device to influence people's interpretation and understanding of an issue (Snow & Benford, 1988, p.198). So, a frame does not just operate at the intellectual level but can be tweaked to appeal to emotions. I have shown how Perkasa and ISMA manipulated the populist sentiment on race and religion to provoke disgust, fear and anger as well as to enhance solidarity among conservative Malays with different political persuasions.

Figure 3: Interactions between Framing, Emotion Work & Collective Identity



Finally, framing and emotionality help to forge solidarity among conservative Malays to merge under a single movement. I have highlighted the populist elements in Perkasa and ISMA's framing strategies and the emotional dimension of their discourses. As illustrated by Figure 4, populist framing, emotion work and the construction of a new collective identity are inter-related parts of a social process that are mutually reinforcing. The reactionism, which encompasses both Malay nationalists and Islamists, became more salient when Perkasa and ISMA's stepped up their populist framing on racial and religious issues to stir up Malay sentiment. Tarrow (2011, p.153) has pointed out that nationalism is a ready source of emotional energy which becomes stronger when linked to religious or ethnic appeals. The combination of ketuanan Melayu and Islamism will continue to fuel populist discourses in Malaysia going forward. Besides embracing ketuanan Melayu as a component of their

CAFs, their movement's success can be attributed to UMNO's perceived failure in defending Malay interests. With UMNO losing its monopoly on *ketuanan Melayu*, there is now a new path for populism. Citing various structural factors, Meredith Weiss (2020) believed that Malaysian politics is unlikely to turn populist but agreed it has the "raw materials for a populist surge". Hence, it is worth contemplating who has the incentives to embrace populism.

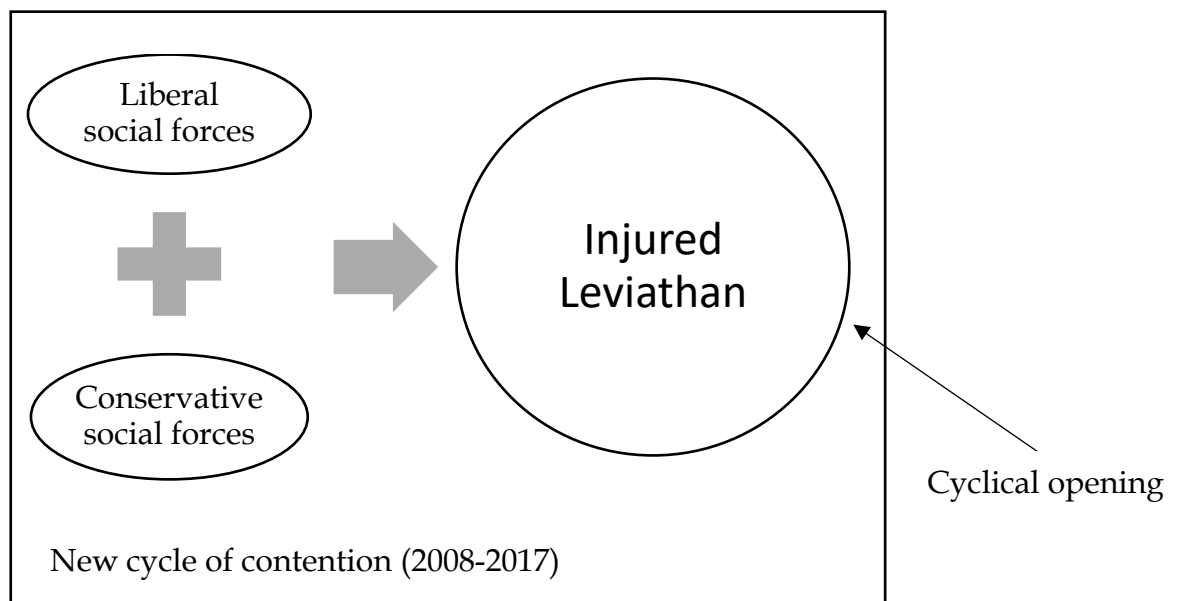
8.2 Recommendations for Future Research

One of the things that I observed during my research for this dissertation is the intensity and frequency of political dissent against the injured Leviathan in the post-2008 era. The emergence of a wider range of SMs, encompassing both liberal and conservative social forces, and their protests suggest that a new cycle of contention has arisen around the 2008 period (See Figure 5). Sidney Tarrow (2011, p.199) has defined a cycle of contention as the following:

a phase of heightened conflict across the social system, with rapid diffusion of collective action from more mobilised to less mobilised sectors, a rapid pace of innovation in the forms of contention employed, the creation of new or transformed collective action frames, a combination of organised and unorganised participation, and sequences of intensified information flow and interaction between challengers and authorities (ibid).

Figure 4 shows how the Malaysian state's transformation into an injured Leviathan following the 2008 general election from its previous form as a robust Leviathan is indicative of a new cyclical opening for collective action.

Figure 4: Major Societal Forces in a Cycle of Contention Against the Injured Leviathan



According to Tarrow (*ibid*), widespread contention gives societal challengers a temporary advantage over the state, which is forced to decide on whether to repress or facilitate the challenger's movement. The state can opt for a combination of repressive and facilitative strategies. Short of sponsoring the reactionaries, this dissertation has shown how the injured Leviathan sometimes took a facilitative approach to pacify and preserve UMNO's conservative Malay base. Meanwhile, it oscillated between repressive and facilitative measure in dealing with liberal social forces even though it initially tried to repress them. Nevertheless, further research is required into looking at the relationship between both conservative and liberal groups with the injured Leviathan as a whole. The outcome of a state-movement encounter in a cycle of contention is generally more than the sum of the results of an aggregate of unconnected events (*ibid*). Ruud Koopmans (2004, p.21) hit the nail on the head by suggesting that we need to move beyond the research on single movements. Besides that, he said we also must:

consider dynamic interactions among a multitude of contenders, including not only challenging protestors, but also their allies and adversaries – elite and nonelite, as well as the whole range of forms of claim-making from the most conventional and institutionalised, to the most provocative and disruptive (ibid).

Since my research focused primarily on the relationship between the Malaysian state and the reactionaries, it does not look at the cycles of contention in a comprehensive way. Therefore, future research should consider a deeper investigation into these. Despite statist constraints on society, there were at least two other cycles prior to 2008. As explained in Chapter 3, SMs that emerged under the watchful eye of a robust Leviathan were easily curtailed and their chances of success were not good as those under an injured Leviathan. The first cycle was characterised by university students' protests in the early 1970s before the rise of the Islamic dakwah movement in mid-1970s. The second cycle was the Reformasi movement from the late 1990s to early 2000s. However, the third cycle, which started with the Bersih protest in 2007 followed by Perkasa's emergence in 2008 represented a break from earlier cycles in the 1970s and 1990s due to the injured Leviathan. Hence, their relative success in the post-2008 era. Perkasa was initially a countermovement to Bersih but also ended up challenging the Malaysian state. Nevertheless, one is liberal and the other is reactionary. The civil society also contained other SMs such as Hindraf which exclusively championed ethnic Indians religious rights and the anti-Lynas environmental movement that fought to shut down a rare earth processing facility in Malaysia. These were neither strictly liberal nor conservative. So, we need to take into account the contradictions in civil society.

This research is going to be challenging as we need to consider not just the relationship between a single SM and the state (like this dissertation) but to probe the complicated links in a number of SMs with different political persuasions. However, it will be intellectually satisfying to see the bigger picture and learn about the interactions between liberal and conservative social forces at a phase when foes become friends. Above all, understanding the post-2008 cycle of contention can help us to unravel the larger political processes which took place between 2008 and 2017. Like how Bersih, Perkasa and ISMA eventually saw eye-to-eye with each other on the need to oppose Najib administration on issues such as 1MDB and TPPA, they also triggered a new political alignment among the disparate conservative and liberal parties in Malaysia. For a while, some reactionaries, particularly Perkasa activists who later joined PPBM, appeared to be willing to work with representatives of the liberal and multicultural social forces. The height of this unusual liberal-conservative cooperation came when PPBM helmed by Malaysia's arch-conservative Dr Mahathir officially joined the PH opposition coalition in March 2017. Together, they went on to defeat the BN and ousted Najib from power in the 2018 general election.

Tarrow (2011, p.201) put it succinctly by suggesting that the dynamic of a cycle is the outcome of the interactions between all relevant groups, including the authorities, political parties and SMs, in a particular social system. So, the tasks are to identify the generalised structure of contention and how elites, opponents and potential allies respond to each other in a cycle of contention (ibid). While I detected some patterns in the framing processes of the conservative Malay-Muslim SM from 2008 to 2017, it was beyond the scope of my research to investigate a larger meaning-making process incorporating the framing of liberal SMs and what happened in specific phases of the cycle to get even more insights into Malaysia's changing state-society relations. By focusing on the "why" and "how" to explain the emergence and development of a

reactionary SM in the post-2008 era, this dissertation has not provided a more comprehensive account on the “who” and “what” aspects. Therefore, another fertile area for research is to learn more about the reactionaries.

Yet, identities are multifaceted, complex and fluid. The reactionaries do not represent all conservative Malays and not everyone is open to the idea of reconciliation with their political rivals. This is why the reactionaries have to continue framing and reframing their positions to appeal to supporters and sustain their activism. New people join and existing members may also drop out. Many people are likely to be free-riders who morally support the SM but do nothing more (Olson, 1965). There is also an assumption that conservative Malays are rural people but SMs are mostly based in the cities. Rural folks may be sympathetic but nothing stops them from free-riding on the urbanites’ struggles. Since this dissertation is exploratory, qualitative and interpretative, future research can be quantitative and follow a more rigorous research method. Surveys can be done to get a more comprehensive snapshot of how much the reactionaries influence the Malays. While Perkasa’s grassroots comprised of those from a lower socioeconomic status, ISMA seems to attract more educated Malays. There are also various other reactionary groups and it is interesting to assess their proliferation in the Malay society.

As my research only covered two SMOs, future scholarships can examine the roles of other organisations. Prominent groups that can be studied are *Gabungan NGO Gerakan Merah Malaysia*, better known as the Red Shirts, led by Jamal Yunos; *Persatuan Veteran Angkatan Tentera Malaysia* (Malaysian Armed Forces Veterans Association) led by Ali Tinju, who is notorious for leading the “butt-dance” in front of Bersih 2.0 leader Ambiga Sreenevasan’s house; and *Pertubuhan Martabat Jalinan Muhibbah Malaysia* (Goodwill Network Dignity Foundation) led by the flamboyant Abdul Rani Kulup Abdullah, who is famous for lodging thousands of police reports. These are personality-driven groups

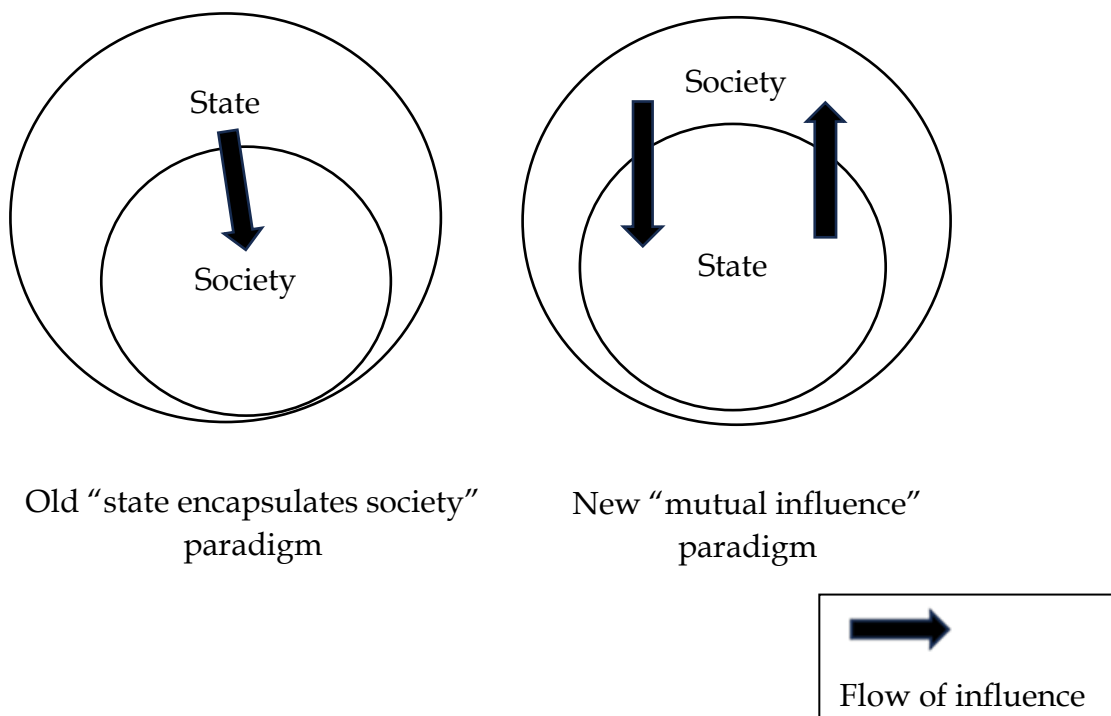
which received media attention for their leaders' outrageous and comical antics. There are also issue-driven ones such as PPIM and occupational groups like *Persatuan Ulama Malaysia* (Ulema Association of Malaysia), *Persatuan Peguam-Peguam Muslim Malaysia* (Muslim Lawyers' Association of Malaysia) and *Pertubuhan Doktor-Doktor Islam Malaysia* (Organisation of Malaysian Muslim Doctors). We also should not overlook older Malay-based students' organisations such as GPMS, PKPIM or *Gabungan Mahasiswa Islam Se-Malaysia* (Pan-Malaysian Coalition of Muslim Undergraduates). There are many Malay-Malay SMOs which can lead a reactionary movement. It takes just another racial or religious issue to spark a new round of protests.

8.3 Concluding Statements

Despite its limitations, this dissertation has established significant insights to assist future research on state-society relations. On statist side, I hope it will initiate a paradigm shift in the study of Malaysia's political system towards state capacity. Previously, scholars of Malaysian politics mostly focused on regime type and regime change in their analysis to an extent of overlooking the subtle changes in state capacity and the elites' inclination for repression, especially after Dr Mahathir left office in 2003. The current political reality indicates that the Malaysian state could no longer encapsulate and dominate society like before. What has emerged in the post-2008 era is a situation of power parity where the state and society influence each other without one side capturing the other (See Figure 6). Unlike previously, the state can no longer force its way on society without facing a significant backlash from societal forces. In fact, the balance of power has tilted more towards society.

The Malaysian state, in spite of being reduced to an injured Leviathan, however, is still a strong state. Its capacity for repression may have been reduced but it is still the most powerful organisation with a monopoly over the use of violence in society. So, it is important to look at how reactionism influences the state and society. Recent events showed that the reactionaries do not always side with a conservative state. In the age of globalisation, even a minor indication of liberalisation can provoke a strong reaction from the conservative segment of society if the right populist discourse is used. This dissertation has shown how populist framing contributed to the reactionary SM's mobilisation efforts in the post-2008 era. Hence, more work should be done to understand the link between populism and conservatism in Malaysia. While an injured Leviathan is favourable for democracy, Malaysia is still far away from liberalisation due to reactionary interventions which prevented the state from implementing reforms deemed as detrimental to conservative interests.

Figure 6: Old vs New Paradigm in State-Society Relations for Malaysia



APPENDIX 1 (FASS Research Ethics Committee's Approval)

Mr Tan Chong Yew
School of Politics, History and International Relations
Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences



The University of
Nottingham

UNITED KINGDOM · CHINA · MALAYSIA

23 March 2016

Dear Mr Tan,

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FASS Research Ethics Committee Review

Thank you for submitting your proposal on "**Democracy and Its Discontents: Identity Politics and the New Public Sphere in Malaysia**". This proposal has now been reviewed by the FASS Research Ethics Committee to the extent that it is described in your submission.

I am happy to tell you that the Committee has found no problems with your proposal and able to give approval.

If there are any significant changes or developments in the methods, treatment of data or debriefing of participants, then you are obliged to seek further ethical approval for these changes.

We would remind all researchers of their ethical responsibilities to research participants. If you have any concerns whatsoever during the conduct of your research then you should consult those Codes of Practice relevant to your discipline and contact the FASS Research Ethics Committee.

Independently of the Committee procedures, there are also responsibilities for staff and student safety during projects. Some information can be found in the Safety Office pages of the University web site. Particularly relevant may be:

Section 6 of the *Safety Handbook*, which deal with working away from the University,
<http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/safety/handbook/general-precautions.aspx>

Specific safety guidance on:

Fieldwork <http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/safety/documents/fieldwork-policy.pdf>

Lone working <http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/safety/documents/lone-working.pdf>

Overseas travel/work <http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/safety/documents/overseas-travel.pdf>

Risk management <http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/safety/policies-and-guidance/guides-and-support.aspx>

Responsibility for compliance with the University/National Data Protection Policy and Guidance also lies with the principal investigator or project supervisor.

The FASS Research Ethics Committee approval does not alter, replace or remove those responsibilities, nor does it certify that they have been met.

Sincerely

Dr Yeoh Ken Kyid

On behalf of the FASS Research Ethics Committee

The University of Nottingham
in Malaysia Sdn Bhd (473520-K)



APPENDIX 2 (Perkasa's Supreme Council, 2013-2016)

President	: Dato' Ibrahim Ali
Deputy President	: Dato' Abd. Rahman Abu Bakar
Vice-Presidents	: Tan Sri Abd. Rashid Abd. Rahman Boni Yusop Abdullah Tuan Syed Osman Syed Mansor Dr Zubir Harun
Secretary-General	: Syed Hassan Syed Ali
Treasurer-General	: Norlizaizul Ismail
Information Chief	: Ustaz Hassan Basri
Executive Secretary	: Zulkarnain Mat Junoh
Wiranita Chief	: Datin Paduka Norkhaila Jamaluddin
Wira Chief	: Irwan Fahmi Ideris
Wirawati Chief	: Marini Nasution Harun

Supreme Council Members

- | | |
|---|--|
| • Yusof Merah | • Hajah Foziah Dato' Haji Nawawi |
| • Laksamana Madya (B) Datuk Mat Rabi Abu Samah | • Lt. Jen (B) Datuk Mohd Salleh Ismail |
| • Lt. Jen (B) Dato' Wira Haji Masood Haji Zainal Abidin | • Datuk Ruhanie Ahmad |
| • Datuk Mustapa Yacob | • Dato' Sirajuddin Haji Salleh |
| • Tuan Haji Amier Haji Hasan | • Mej. Jen (B) Malik Sahar Harun |
| • Prof. Dr Mohd. Amir Sharifuddin Hashim | • Nasaruddin Rais |
| • Ahmad Zaini Ismail | • Muhammad Zahid Md Arip |
| • Fadzil Shuib | • Prof. Dr Mohd Amir Sharifuddin |
| • Jeffrus Maimin Rijan | • Muhammad Azrul Akmal Saharudin |
| • Kamaruddin Endut | • Abd. Hamid Harun |
| • Zoofikar Ali Isa | • Pizijihat |
| • Dr Khairulmazmi Ahmad | |

Source: Perkasa (2015)

APPENDIX 3 (Selected Photographs from Perkasa AGM)



Perkasa AGM in Stadium Titiwangsa, Kuala Lumpur on 20 November 2016.



Perkasa president Ibrahim Ali



Wira Perkasa chief Irwan Fahmi Ideris (right) with AGM chairperson.



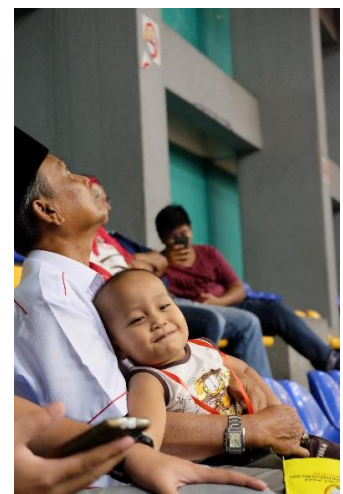
Holding up the keris ceremony



Parade of participants in Malay warrior costume



A youngster with Ibrahim Ali T-shirt



Delegates with families and young children

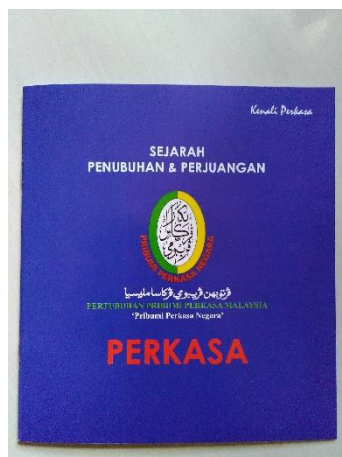
APPENDIX 4 (Samples of Perkasa's Internal Documents)



Perkasa's constitution booklet



Perkasa's struggle strategic plan



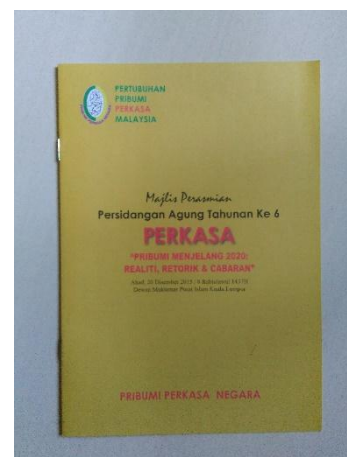
Perkasa's history of establishment & struggle



Perkasa's brochures



National Unity Memorandum



Perkasa's AGM booklet

APPENDIX 5 (Tujuh Wasiat Raja-Raja Melayu)

1. Kami namakan dan kami panggil dia, bumi yang kamu pijak dan langit yang kamu junjung PERSEKUTUAN TANAH MELAYU (sekarang dikenali dengan nama MALAYSIA);
2. Kami isytiharkan dan kami simpan untuk kamu dan kami benarkan kamu isytihar dan simpan untuk anak cucu kamu, selain gunung-ganang, tasik dan hutan simpan, TANAH SIMPANAN MELAYU sehingga nisbah 50 peratus, selebihnya kamu rebutlah bersama-sama kaum lain;
3. Bagi menjaga kamu dan melindungi anak cucu kamu serta harta hak milik kamu, kami tubuhkan REJIMEN ASKAR MELAYU selain untuk membanteras kekacauan dalam negara dan ancaman dari luar negara;
4. Kami kekalkan dan kami jamin Kerajaan dan Kedaulatan RAJA-RAJA MELAYU memerintah negara ini;
5. Kami isytiharkan ISLAM adalah Agama Persekutuan;
6. Kami tetapkan bahasa kebangsaan ialah BAHASA MELAYU;
7. Kami amanahkan dan kami pertanggungjawabkan kepada Raja-Raja Melayu untuk melindungi KEDUDUKAN ISTIMEWA ORANG MELAYU dan KEPENTINGAN SAH KAUM-KAUM LAIN (Kemudian ditambah kedudukan istimewa anak negeri Sabah dan Sarawak).

Source: Perkasa (n.d.-b, p.2)

APPENDIX 6 (Speech by Dr Mahathir on 22 March 2009)

**UCAPAN OLEH
YABHG TUN DR MAHATHIR BIN MOHAMAD
DI PERHIMPUNAN DAN SIDANG KEMUNCAK PRIBUMI PERKASA
NEGARA
DI KOMPLEKS SUKAN TNB, JALAN BANGSAR, KUALA LUMPUR
PADA HARI AHAD, 22 MAC 2009
JAM 10.00 PAGI**

Terlebih dahulu saya ucap terima kasih kepada penganjur perhimpunan ini kerana menjemput saya dan memberi peluang kepada saya untuk berucap kepada hadirin. Saya yakin ramai daripada kita yang hadir, terutamanya orang Melayu dan bumiputra lain, hadir kerana kita berasa kita berada dalam keadaan cemas, keadaan yang merbahaya, keadaan terancam. Kenapa tidak? Kita kini diserang berkali-kali oleh berbagai pihak. Ramai daripada orang lain berkata Melayu adalah kaum pendatang.

Melayu mengamalkan apartheid ala kulit putih Afrika Selatan. Melayu tidak adil, suka menidakkan hak kaum-kaum lain. Melayu sudah cukup kaya dan tidak perlu dasar Ekonomi Baru lagi. Semua peluang perniagaan dan pelajaran diberi hanya kepada orang Melayu. Kuasa politik dibolot oleh orang Melayu dan lain-lain. Berhadapan dengan tuduhan dan tohmahan ini Melayu sekarang tidak boleh mempertahankan diri, bahkan tidak boleh bercakap berkenaan dengan bangsa mereka tanpa dituduh sebagai racist.

Mereka harus terima sahaja semua tuduhan/tohmahan ini dan berdiam diri atau bersetuju sahaja. Mereka juga boleh tambah tokok kepada kecaman ini dan mereka ini akan dianggap liberal dan disanjung tinggi oleh orang lain. Sebenarnya orang Melayu sekarang berada dalam ketakutan, tidak mempunyai pemimpin yang sanggup pertahankan mereka. Sebaliknya pemimpin mereka mengerohkan lagi keadaan dengan memohon maaf walaupun kesalahan dilaku oleh orang lain.

Demikianlah situasi yang mereka hadapi sehingga mereka berasa mereka bersalah, tergamam dan tak dapat berkata apa-apa. Keadaan hari ini lebih merbahaya daripada keadaan semasa British merancang untuk menakluk negeri-negeri Melayu dengan perancangan Malayan Union. Pada masa itu kita boleh cakap berkenaan Melayu dan tidak ada sesiapa yang akan tuduh kita sebagai racist. British pun tidak panggil kita racist. Mereka akui memang pun

hak orang Melayu menuntut negeri-negeri Melayu sebagai hak orang Melayu. Semua perjanjian berkenaan dengan negeri-negeri di semenanjung mesti dibuat dengan Raja-Raja Melayu.

Tidak ada siapa dari kaum lain yang berhak membuat apa-apa perjanjian. Sekarang orang Melayu tidak pun boleh berkata negeri ini negeri Melayu, tidak boleh sebut negeri ini dikenali sebagai Tanah Melayu. Negeri Jepun boleh dikatakan negeri orang Jepun, negeri Korea – negeri orang Korea, negeri China – negeri orang Cina, negeri India – negeri orang India. Tetapi negeri Melayu – bukan negeri orang Melayu. Dahulu mungkin. Tetapi tidak sekarang.

Sekarang Malaysia, hak orang Malaysia dan bukan hak orang Melayu. Kesanggupan dan kerelaan orang Melayu berkongsi milik negara ini tidak sedikit pun dihargai. Pemberian satu juta kerakyatan oleh Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra kepada kaum lain tidak dihargai bahkan tidak diingati, dilupakan dengan begitu sahaja. Orang Melayu dikatakan kaum pendatang di negaranya sendiri. Dan kaum pendatang lain tidak boleh dipanggil kaum pendatang. Jika sesiapa berbuat demikian, mereka mesti minta maaf. Tidak perlu sesiapa minta maaf jika berkata Melayu kaum pendatang.

Namun saya memberanikan diri untuk bercakap sedikit berkenaan orang Melayu di Malaysia walaupun akan dituduh sebagai racist. Saya beranikan diri kerana sesungguhnya orang Melayu berada dalam keadaan cemas, dilanda oleh bermacam-macam masalah dan ancaman. Jika orang Melayu tidak dibenar bercakap berkenaan masalah mereka, maka mereka mungkin jadi kaum yang terlucut hak (dispossessed) di negara mereka sendiri. Bahaya ini benar kerana kita sudah lihat tekanan dan kehinaan terhadap bangsa kita apabila mereka dijadikan bangsa minoriti di wilayah yang dahulu adalah sebahagian daripada negeri-negeri Melayu.

Keadaan ini boleh berlaku kepada orang Melayu bukan sahaja kerana orang lain tetapi kerana orang Melayu sendiri. Mereka suka membinasakan diri mereka. Mereka tidak mahu merebut peluang yang disediakan bagi mereka. Tempat di universiti tidak diambil. Peluang perniagaan diselewengkan. Belia Melayu tidak ingin belajar, lebih berminat dengan melepak atau jadi Mat Rempit. Majoriti daripada rakyat Malaysia yang terlibat dengan dadah terdiri daripada orang Melayu, yang mendapat penyakit HIV Aids kebanyakan adalah Melayu, kes rogol dan jenayah lain juga ramai orang Melayu.

Yang gagal dalam perniagaan juga Melayu, tidak bayar hutang Melayu, tak selesaikan kontrak juga Melayu. Gejala jualan AP pun melibatkan Melayu. Kita tak suka dengar semua ini. Kita malu. Tetapi jika tidak disuarakan masalah tidak akan hilang dengan sendirinya. Orang lain tahu juga. Lebih baik malu jika kita dapat sedarkan beberapa kerat daripada kita dan mereka mengubah tabiat supaya tidak melakukan yang salah lagi. Yang lain tak malu tak mengapa. Tak mungkin kita dapat sedarkan semua. Yang kena akan terus kena. Dasar Ekonomi Baru dibentuk supaya dalam jangkamasa 20 tahun kita akan dapat bahagian kita sebanyak 30%.

Tetapi sekarang sudah hampir 40 tahun. 20% yang dikatakan kita dapat pun dapat kerana badan-badan yang mewakili Melayu, bukan orang Melayu sendiri. Kita hendak supaya DEB diteruskan. Apa gunanya jika kita tidak mahu guna peluang yang diwujudkan? Apakah kita mahu DEB kerana nak jual AP, kontrak, lesen dan sebagainya? Lebih baik DEB tidak diteruskan dan kita tidak dapat selewengkannya. Sekurang-kurangnya kita tak akan malu kerana pelbagai ejekan yang akan dibuat kepada kita. Kita bernasib baik kerana dalam bidang politik kita cekap, kita kuat, kita dapat menguasai Kerajaan selama 50 tahun.

Walaupun Melayu berpecah kepada beberapa parti, bermusuhan sesama sendiri, tetapi majoriti Melayu masih dapat kekalkan kuasa mereka. Mereka dihormati dan disegani. Tetapi itu pun sudah terlepas daripada genggamannya. Sekarang kita tidak kuat lagi. Parti Melayu yang terkenal sudah kalah dalam Pilihanraya Umum ke-12. Parti Melayu yang menangpun berada dalam ketakutan jika parti rakan mereka menolak mereka. Sekarang orang tidak lagi hormat kita. Apa sahaja yang dituntut orang lain, baik yang menang, baik yang kalah akan kita layan. Kita yang perlu hormati orang lain. Tersilap sikit kita minta maaf bagi pihak semua bangsa Melayu.

Sesungguhnya pemimpin kita yang memperjuangkan kemerdekaan, yang menebus maruah kita sudah kita khianati. Mereka berjuang bermati-matian supaya kita hidup bahagia. Mereka korbakan apa sahaja yang ada pada mereka. Pemimpin Melayu hari ini, pengikut -pengikut mereka tidak tahu mengenang budi. Mereka khianati pejuang-pejuang dahulu dengan melupakan perjuangan asal kerana utamakan kepentingan diri sendiri. Biar bangsa hancur asalkan dapat kemenangan bagi diri sendiri, dapat jadi Menteri, Perdana Menteri, dapat kontrak, dapat duit. Kononnya nak jadi Perdana Menteri termuda.

Bukan nak majukan bangsa dan negara, hanya jawatan tertinggi untuk diri sendiri seawal mungkin. Dengan apa cara sekalipun, halal atau haram, tak mengapa asalkan boleh jadi Perdana Menteri termuda. Jika kita sudah sanggup jual bangsa kita, kita jual untuk dapat duit sedikit, untuk jawatan kecil dan besar, untuk isi temolok kita, alamatnya apa? Yang dikejar tidak akan dapat, yang dikilik akan berciciran. Lepas itu kita tidak ada apa-apa yang boleh diraih lagi. Semuanya akan dikuasai orang.

Pada masa itu kita jadi hamba sahaja, kita akan meminta-minta sepanjang masa. Ada pula yang dibawah bertanya, orang yang mereka sokong dapat jadi Perdana Menteri, Menteri, Menteri Besar – dapat kereta, dipanggil Yang Berhormat, elaun besar, terbang sana, terbang sini. Kita dapat apa? Duduk di takuk tu juga. Lebih baik kita ambil sedikit bagi diri kita, sementara ada peluang. Salahkah kalau kita terima duit sedikit? Mungkin kita tidak undi orang yang menyogok. Dia bukan tahu. Tetapi Tuhan tahu. Kamu membuat sesuatu yang haram. Kamu bukan sahaja jual bangsa. Kamu menolak agama kamu yang melarang, yang mengharamkan perbuatan kamu. Kamu berdosa. Tapi tak mengapa. Masih muda, tak akan mati lagi.

Bila dekat nak mati pakai kopiah putih dan sembahyang kuat-kuat. Tetapi yang haram, haram juga. Kalau makan daging bibi haram, makan duit rasuah lebih haram, kerana ia akan binasakan bukan kita sahaja, tetapi kaum bangsa kita yang semuanya beragama Islam. Pengundi salah, samada undi penyogok atau tidak. Salah kerana sudah terima jenayah rasuah sebagai budaya kamu. Apabila rasuah dibudayakan, percayalah bangsa dan negara mungkin dijajah oleh penyogok secara langsung atau tidak langsung. Bangsa akan dihina oleh dunia, akan dipandang rendah, akan dipermainkan orang.

Akhirnya yang makan suap, mereka sendiri akan jadi mangsa, mereka sendiri akan terpaksa hulu untuk mendapat apa yang sebenarnya hak mereka. Inilah nasib bangsa yang menjadikan rasuah sebagai budaya biasa. Sesungguhnya Melayu mudah lupa. Kita lupa betapa kita dijajah dahulu, kita terpaksa panggil tuan orang yang menjajah kita, orang yang menghina kita. Tak boleh cakap berkenaan ketuanan Melayu. Kamu jadi hamba dahulu, bukan Tuan, layak hanya untuk tanam padi, tangkap ikan, jadi kuli orang, bawa kereta orang, tukang masak orang. Selama 450 tahun kita dijajah, hidup sebagai hamba, dianggap tidak layak mentadbir negara sendiri, tidak layak merdeka.

Kita terpaksa letak diri kita dibawah naungan negara-negara jiran yang lebih kuat. Tiap tahun kita usung bunga emas dan perak untuk dipersembahkan kepada negara penaung-penaung kita. Kadang-kadang Raja kita pun pergi bersama, untuk membuktikan kesetiaan diri dan negeri kepada negara penanung. Kata orang Kedah “Terkerempun-kerempun” apabila berhadapan dengan orang asing. Mungkin ramai yang tidak faham. Tanyalah orang Kedah. Itulah “body language” kita dahulu walaupun hari ini ada juga, tetapi pada Raja yang tak bertakhta. Saya biasa lihat seorang orang tua Melayu berbasikal di tendang jatuh oleh askar Siam semasa Kedah diberi kepada Siam oleh Jepun. Kesalahan orang tua ini ialah kerana tidak berhenti dan menghormati lagu kebangsaan Siam.

Saya biasa lihat orang Melayu ditempeleng dan disuruh panjat pohon kelapa seperti kera oleh Jepun. Inilah nasib orang yang tidak merdeka, tidak memerintah negara sendiri. Boleh ditendang, boleh ditempeleng. Dan yang lihat diam sahaja, tak dapat buat apa-apa, termasuk saya. Dalam kehinaan ini muncul kesedaran dan semangat untuk menebus balik maruah bangsa. Dan bergabunglah orang Melayu untuk menangkis rancangan Malayan Union British, untuk mengekalkan perhambaan orang Melayu. Tidak siapa yang bertanya “apa yang saya akan dapat bagi diri saya” pada ketika itu.

Yang kita tumpukan ialah untuk membebaskan bangsa dan negara daripada dijajah dan dihina. Kalau dalam proses ini kita terkorban, atau kita berada seperti biasa, itu tidak mengapa. Yang kita utamakan ialah maruah bangsa kita, tidak lagi akan ditendang, tidak lagi akan ditempeleng – tetapi akan dihormati oleh kawan dan lawan. Sekarang kita merdeka. Perjuangan pengasas negara telah berjaya. Kita tidak akan ditendang dan ditempeleng lagi. Kita bebas daripada kehinaan. Memang pun keadaan terhormat ini sudah menjadi perkara biasa bagi kita. Bagi ramai dari kita ia datang bergolek.

Ia datang melayang. Ia tidak akan dipisah dari kita. Perjuangan orang dahulu adalah perkara lama, tidak perlu diingati. Yang jelas kita sudah merdeka, dapat pelajaran dan kaya sedikit. Soal tendang, tempeleng, itu cerita lama. Pepatah Melayu berkata sekali merdeka, selama-lamanya merdeka. Apa pun kita buat merdeka tetap merdeka. Sekarang ialah masa untuk kita “enjoy”. Kita kecap sepenuhnya nikmat yang ada pada kita. Apa dianya semangat ke-Melayuan? Apa relevannya? Bukankah kita sudah berjaya? Hendak semangat buat apa lagi? Masuk parti untuk apa? Perjuangan sudah selesai dengan jayanya.

Tidak bermakna masuk parti jika tidak dapat sesuatu bagi diri sendiri. Kita sokong orang dapat jadi Yang Berhormat, jadi Menteri, dapat peluang raih duit kerajaan dan lain-lain. Kita tak bolehkah dapat sikit bagi diri kita. Tetapi benarkah kita akan merdeka selama-lamanya? Memang benar. Walaupun kita tidak buat apa-apa untuk mengekalkan kemerdekaan, bukankah sudah 50 tahun kita merdeka? Apa yang hendak dikhuatirkan? Lima puluh tahun, 100 tahun lagi pun kita akan merdeka walau apa pun kita lakukan.

Takkanlah kerana kita ambil 100 Ringgit duit sogokan maka akan hilanglah kemerdekaan kita? Kita boleh sembahyang hajat dan terima 100 Ringgit lagi. Orang lain terima lebih daripada kita., katanya satu juta. Masih kita merdeka. Tidak benar kerana sedikit rasuah kemerdekaan akan hilang. Tetapi ingatlah penjajahan tidak selalu berbentuk penaklukan secara langsung. Penjajahan boleh berlaku walaupun kita miliki pemerintahan sendiri. Ia boleh berlaku apabila pemerintah kita yang dipilih dan diberi kuasa oleh kita sudah menjual diri mereka kepada orang lain, samada dari dalam negeri atau dari luar.

Atau takut jiran marah. Pemerintah yang mengikut telunjuk orang lain bukan bebas lagi. Pemerintah yang menjadi pemerintah melalui rasuah akan benar diri mereka disogok kerana perlu mendapat kewangan yang cukup untuk membeli sokongan lagi supaya kedudukan mereka sebagai pemerintah akan kekal. Untuk mendapat sogokan yang cukup mereka akan sanggup ikut arahan penyogok. Dengan perkataan lain mereka akan jadi alat pada penyogok. Kepentingan penyogok tidak sama dengan kepentingan kita, atau kepentingan bangsa dan negara. Kita sudah lihat hanya kerana hendak kekal sebagai pemerintah, ada yang sanggup layan apa sahaja arahan, tuntutan, desakan oleh pihak yang menentukan jawatan bagi kita.

Kalau pun apa yang dituntut merugikan orang Melayu, itu tidak mengapa asalkan kita dapat jawatan, walaupun sebagai "figurehead", patung sahaja, tidak berkuasa pun. Jika kita terjemah keadaan ini kepada jawatan yang didapati kerana disogok apakah yang tidak sanggup kita buat? Jual bangsa, jual negara pun kita sanggup. Apabila kita sudah jual bangsa dan negara apakah kita merdeka lagi? Sudah tentu tidak. Justeru itu tidak benar kepercayaan kita bahawa sekali merdeka selama-lamanya merdeka. Pada permukaannya kita merdeka tetapi pada hakikatnya kita sudah kembali dijajah. Apabila kita kembali dijajah maka kita sudah khianati pejuang-pejuang kemerdekaan kita dahulu.

Itulah kenyataan yang sebenar. Melayu mudah lupa. Kata seorang ahli falsafah; “Mereka yang lupa akan sejarah mereka akan didera dengan mengulangi kesalahan mereka berkali-kali”. Inilah hasil daripada mudah lupa. Kita lupa bahkan kita tidak suka diperingati akan sejarah kita. Apa kena-mengena peristiwa 50 tahun dahulu? Apa kena-mengena dengan kita akan kemiskinan Melayu, dengan kedaifan mereka dalam bidang ilmu dan profesyen di masa dahulu? Itu dahulu, ini sekarang. Sudah tentu sejarah penjajahan kita dahulu tidak ada kena mengena dengan keadaan kita sekarang.

Tidak ada pelajaran yang akan kita dapati daripada sejarah 100, 500 tahun dahulu. Itu semua cerita dongeng. Apa yang kita lakukan sekarang, kita lakukan kerana kita sudah merdeka dan selamat. Buatlah apa pun kita tetap selamat, tetap merdeka. Jadi penagih dadah, jadi pelepak, jadi “Mat Rempit”, jadi penjenayah pun tak mengapa. Bukankah kita yang memilih dan membentuk Kerajaan? Kerajaan perlu bertanggungjawab terhadap kita. Jika kerana amalan buruk kita, sesuatu yang tidak baik menimpa kita, bukankah menjadi tanggungjawab Kerajaan pilihan kita untuk menyelamatkan kita? Jika kita diserang orang bukankah menjadi tanggungjawab Kerajaan yang kita pilih untuk menangkis serangan ini?

Jika kerana Kerajaan yang kita pilih terdiri daripada orang yang sogok duit pada kita dan mereka pula disogok oleh orang lain dan mereka berasa lebih terikat kepada yang menyogok mereka dan kurang bertanggungjawab kepada kita kerana sokongan kita mereka dapati kerana kita terima sogokan, apakah yang dapat kita buat? Tak banyak. Hanya menerima sahaja. Akan menjadi lebih buruklah nasib kita sepanjang masa. Hakikat yang sebenar ialah sokongan kita, undi kita yang kita jual tidak lagi mengikat mereka yang kita pilih untuk jadi Kerajaan. Mereka akan anggap balasan kepada sokongan kita sudah pun dibuat melalui wang sogokan daripada mereka. Sesungguhnya nasib kita ada di tangan kita.

Jika nasib ini tidak baik kitalah yang harus berusaha untuk memperbaikinya. Ingatlah, Tuhan telah berfirman yang Dia tidak akan mengubah nasib sesuatu kaum melainkan kaum itu sendiri berusaha mengubah nasibnya. Apakah kita sedang berusaha untuk memperbaiki nasib kita? Tidak ternampak satu pun usaha ke arah ini. Yang kita lihat ialah perbuatan merosakkan lagi keadaan nasib yang sudah buruk ini. Kita tahu yang kita lakukan bukan untuk memperbaiki keadaan. Tetapi kita lakukan juga untuk kepentingan semasa kita. Masa depan soal lain. Pejuang-pejuang kemerdekaan telah pilih demokrasi sebagai cara kita memerintah. Kenapa? Sebabnya ialah kerana mereka percaya

majoriti daripada rakyat tentulah bijak dalam amalan mereka, tentulah tahu antara yang baik dengan yang buruk, tentulah bijak semasa membuat pilihan.

Pengasas kemerdekaan percaya majortiti akan tahu pilih apa yang baik bagi mereka. Sudah tentu mereka akan menolak orang yang hanya bergantung kepada sogokan untuk dipilih. Tetapi mereka tidak sangka pewaris mereka, sebilangan yang tidak kecil akan tolak kebaikan dan mengutamakan sogokan untuk menentukan siapa akan memerintah mereka. Pejuang kemerdekaan yang sedar betapa sukarnya bagi orang Melayu mendapat peluang dan bantuan dahulu dan dengan kerana itu Melayu tidak berjaya. Dengan kesedaran ini mereka merangka untuk mengadakan lebih banyak peluang dan sokongan kepada bangsa mereka supaya bangsa mereka boleh berdiri sama tinggi dan duduk sama rendah dengan kaum-kaum lain, bahkan dengan bangsa-bangsa lain di dunia. Mereka percaya semua peluang dan sokongan akan direbut oleh pewaris daripada bangsa mereka.

Ya, mereka ini kebanyakan sudah tidak ada, sudah tinggal kita. Tetapi jika mereka ada apakah perasaan mereka? Tentulah mereka akan kecewa dan hampa amat sangat kerana segala-gala yang mereka ilhamkan sudah dipermainkan oleh pewaris mereka, tidak dihargai oleh pewaris mereka. Mereka melihat bagaimana peluang dan bantuan disalahgunakan atau ditolak dengan begitu sahaja. Sepatutnya dengan peluang belajar di semua peringkat bangsa mereka sudah jadi bangsa yang berilmu. Dengan peluang berniaga mereka sudah jadi kaya, atau sekurang-kurangnya tidak miskin.

Tetapi tidak. Peluang bukan sahaja tidak direbut tetapi peluang digunakan secara yang boleh merosakkan bangsa. Mereka lepak, mereka jadi Mat Rempit, yang lakukan jenayah yang kadang-kadang menyebabkan kematian mangsa mereka. Diberi peluang berniaga, diberi modal, diberi latihan tetapi kerana ingin kaya cepat mereka memperdagangkan peluang, kontrak, lesen, permit dan sebagainya. Modal mereka guna untuk belanja bagi memenuhi nafsu, hutang mereka tidak dibayar. Kerana kelakuan beberapa daripada mereka, bangsa mereka dicap sebagai bangsa yang tidak beramanah, dan tidak boleh dilayan, tidak boleh diharap dengan duit ringgit. Dan banyaklah lagi perbuatan mereka yang tetap mengecewakan pejuang bangsa dahulu. Kata mereka, jangan buka pekong di dada. Malu kata mereka.

Tetapi tidakkah lebih malu apabila mereka lakukan apa yang telah saya sebutkan. Tak buka pekong pun busuk juga. Biarlah pekong di dada dibuka

supaya kerana bau terlalu busuk kita akan cuba melepaskan diri daripadanya. Jika tidak ia akan menjadi lebih busuk di dalam dan akan bunuh kita. Semua yang disebut ini menjadi pengkhianatan kepada pejuang bangsa dahulu. Kerosakan kerana ini lambat laun akan merosakkan masa depan kita. Tetapi yang terdahsyat diantara amalan buruk kita ialah rasuah, terutama rasuah politik.

Politiklah yang dapat memberi kuasa walaupun pada yang lemah dan miskin. Politik kita sewaktu perjuangan untuk kemerdekaan berjaya memberi kekuatan kepada Melayu sehingga mereka yang daif ini dapat mengalahkan kuasa besar dunia. Hanya dengan bersatu dan bertindak bersama, hanya dengan pendirian yang tegas kelemahan dapat diatasi dan kejayaan dicapai. Sesungguhnya kuasa politik kuasa ajaib. Selagi ada kuasa ini kepada kita, percayalah kita akan dapat pulih segala-galanya, kita akan dapat mengatasi kelemahan kita, kita akan dapat tentukan masa depan kita.

Tidakkah kita lihat bagaimana daripada bangsa yang dijajah dan dihina, kuasa politik sudah mengubah nasib kita demikian sehingga kita dianggap sebagai contoh kepada bangsa-bangsa lain di dunia. Bandingkan negara kita 50 tahun dahulu di waktu kita mencapai kemerdekaan dan negara kita sekarang. Negara dagang yang ke-17 terbesar di dunia. Kemiskinan dikurangkan daripada 70 peratus kepada lima peratus. Bandar sebesar bandar di negara maju, penuh dengan pencakar langit. Bekalan air, api dan kenderaan yang terkini. Pendapatan per kapita yang 20 kali lebih tinggi dari 50 tahun dahulu dan lain-lain.

Semua ini adalah hasil kuasa politik semata-mata. Kerana kuasa politik, negara berbilang kaum, ugama, budaya dan bahasa dapat distabilkan. Dan sesungguhnya kita sudah dapat berdiri hampir sama tinggi dengan kaum-kaum lain dan bangsa-bangsa lain. Tetapi sekarang kita lakukan perbuatan untuk menghakis dan menghapus kuasa politik kita. Kerana wang yang sedikit, kerana 100-200 Ringgit kita jual kuasa politik, kita serah nasib kita kepada perasuah, perasuah yang akan jual bangsa dan negara. Apakah akan jadi kepada kita apabila kuasa politik terlucut daripada kita? Apakah kita akan terus merdeka?

Saya fikir tidak. Tuan-Tuan dan Puan-Puan Perhimpunan Melayu hari ini memang menjadi hak bagi kita kerana kita menghadapi masalah-masalah yang besar-besar, bukan satu tetapi banyak masalah. Kita semua berasa cemas. Di

mana-mana sahaja orang Melayu sedang berhimpun untuk membincang masalah mereka, kecemasan yang mereka rasai. Jika pada hari ini kita dapat menyedarkan akan musibah yang sedang dan akan timpa keatas kita, jika kesedaran ini akan menyebabkan kita bertindak keras terhadap mereka diantara kita yang mencetuskan masalah ini, jika kita dapat bandingkan gejala rasuah yang menjadi ancaman terhadap kita yang terbesar sekali, maka ralatlah perhimpunan ini, berjayalah perhimpunan ini.

Saya tak salahkan orang lain. Saya salahkan kita sendiri. Tak mungkin orang lain menguasai kita jika kita tegas dan tidak membenarkan mereka. Maju mundurnya bangsa kita terpulanglah kepada kita. Ingatlah Tuhan tidak akan ubah nasib kita melainkan kita berusaha mengubah nasib kita sendiri. Oleh itu berusahalah mengubah nasib diri sendiri setelah kita berhimpun di sini untuk membincang masalah yang kita hadapi. Saya percaya perbincangan kita akan membuahkan pemikiran dan tindakan yang boleh menyelamatkan kita. Wassalamu'alaikum warahmatullahi wabarakatuh. Terima kasih.

Source: Omar (2009)

APPENDIX 7 (ISMA's Anti-TPPA Flyer in 2013)



IKATAN MUSLIMIN MALAYSIA (ISMA)

Ikatan Muslimin Malaysia adalah sebuah pertubuhan Islam yang ditubuhkan pada tahun 1997 bermatlamat mendidik masyarakat dengan ajaran dan keperibadian Islam, meningkatkan kesatuan, kasih sayang dan kekuatan umat Islam kearah menjadikan mereka umat beragenda jauh yang mampu memimpin negara dan mengamalkan Islam sebagai cara hidup yang unggul dan sempurna dalam segenap aspek kehidupan mereka.

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PERJANJIAN PERKONGSIAN TRANS-PASIFIK (TPPA): PENJAJAHAN EKONOMI OLEH AMERIKA

Perjanjian Perkongsian Trans-Pacific (TPPA) ini adalah merupakan salah satu strategi licik Amerika Syarikat untuk menguasai ekonomi negara lain bagi memastikan negara-negara ini akan sentiasa tunduk kepada kehendak mereka.

TPPA yang dicadangkan untuk ditandatangani oleh kerajaan pada Oktober 2013 antara lainnya mengandungi:

- Penghapusan cukai import terhadap barangan yang masuk dari Amerika
- Memberi kebebasan rakyat negara lain untuk bekerja dan membuka perniagaan dinegara ini tanpa ada sebarang sekatan
- Pengeluaran modal ke luar negara secara bebas
- Pemilikan Bumiputera kepada syarikat asing yang ingin beroperasi di negara ini tidak lagi menjadi syarat
- Malaysia boleh disaman oleh syarikat asing ataupun kerajaan asing jika merubah undang-undang atau peraturan perniagaan yang dilihat merugikan mereka
- Kontrak-kontrak kerajaan mesti dibuka kepada syarikat asing tanpa mengambil kira kepentingan Bumiputera

Jika negara bersetuju untuk menandatangani perjanjian ini, ia bermakna Malaysia akan kehilangan ratusan juta ringgit setahun, pengusaha tempatan sukar untuk bersaing dan mungkin akan kehilangan terus peluang berniaga, kehilangan pekerjaan dikalangan rakyat yang mengakibatkan pengangguran dan kemusnahan sistem sosial negara.

Dua kalimah syahadah merupakan perisytiharan pembebasan diri setiap individu muslim daripada sebarang kuasa melainkan kekuasaan Yang Maha Esa. Kemerdekaan diri muslim itu tidak memberi sebarang makna jika ia merelakan tanahairnya dijajah dalam apa saja bentuk sekalipun.

Oleh kerana itu, perjuangan untuk membebaskan watan daripada sebarang bentuk penjajahan kuasa asing merupakan satu kefardhuan ke atas setiap individu muslim. Ia bukan hanya sekadar tanggungjawab yang diwakilkan kepada kerajaan. Bahkan setiap individu muslim yang melafazkan dua kalimah syahadah bertanggungjawab secara langsung terhadap isu ini dan mesti bangkit melakukan sesuatu.

Berdasarkan itu maka IKATAN MUSLIMIN MALAYSIA (ISMA) mendesak kerajaan supaya tidak menandatangani perjanjian TPPA dan menyeru semua rakyat Malaysia untuk bersatu menentang penjajahan ekonomi yang zalim ini oleh Amerika Syarikat.

USTAZ HJ. ABDULLAH ZAIK ABD RAHMAN, SMT
Presiden Ikatan Muslimin Malaysia



Sebarang pertanyaan, sila hubungi kami melalui:

- Telefon : 03 8926 5424 | 03 8926 5954
- Email : petugas_isma@yahoo.com

APPENDIX 8 (ISMA's Anti-TPPA Flyer in 2015)



RAKYAT BERSATU TOLAK TPPA

Diterbitkan oleh
Biro Penerangan
Ikatan Muslimin Malaysia



Mengancam Kedaulatan Negara: 10 Sebab Mengapa TPPA mesti ditolak

Perjanjian Kerjasama Trans-Pasifik (TPPA) merupakan perjanjian perdagangan bebas multilateral yang sedang dirundingkan bersama 11 negara anggota iaitu Australia, Brunei, Canada, Chile, Japan, Malaysia, Mexico, New Zealand, Peru, Singapore, Amerika Syarikat dan Vietnam.



Penindasan terhadap Usahawan Tempatan

Perolehan kerajaan boleh dibida oleh syarikat gergasi multinasional dari Amerika dan negara-negara lain. Tiada lagi keistimewaan untuk kontraktor Melayu dan bumiputera.



Keselamatan Makanan Negara Terancam

Keselamatan makanan negara terancam apabila kita bergantung kepada beras Amerika yang lebih murah kerana subsidi tinggi, selepas cukai import terhadap makanan asasi itu dihapuskan.



Penghapusan Sijil HALAL

Piawaian HALAL negara terpaksa "ditundukkan" kepada piawaian Amalan Terbaik acuan Amerika yang dijadikan rujukan utama dalam rundingan perjanjian TPPA.



Kedaulatan Undang-Undang Negara Dicabar

Negara kita boleh disaman berbillion dollar AS, jika mengadakan peraturan baru -selepas termeterai TPPA- yang boleh menjejaskan jangkaan keuntungan syarikat gergasi Amerika.



Tanah Rizab akan Tergadai

Tanah rizab Melayu kemungkinan besar bakal tergadai kepada pelabur dari Amerika pula, berdasarkan rekod penyusutannya sebelum ini melalui aktiviti "ali baba" dan rasuah.



Filem-Filem Lucah Tidak Boleh Dihalang

Kemasukan filem lucah dan ganas akibat tiada lagi tapisan filem, kerana ia dikira sebagai halangan perdagangan bebas "bukan cukai".



Peningkatan Harga Ubat sehingga 80%

Peningkatan antara 60% - 80% daripada harga sekarang ini adalah akibat syarat ketat ke atas pembuatan ubat-ubatan generik yang murah, yang merupakan 80% daripada bekalan ubat kini.



Penindasan Terhadap Pekerja Tempatan

Pekerja tempatan akan kehilangan pekerjaan akibat persaingan sengit dengan pekerja mahir dari negara maju dan buruh murah dari negara miskin yang dibawa masuk oleh syarikat gergasi Amerika.



Agenda Syarikat Gergasi Amerika-Yahudi

TPPA adalah projek gabungan syarikat gergasi multinasional Amerika-Yahudi yang menguasai Amerika demi mengaut keuntungan berkali ganda, tanpa menghiraukan nasib rakyatnya sendiri.



Mengapa Dirahsiakan?

Rundingan TPPA dijalankan secara rahsia, hampir semua Ahli Parlimen, kerajaan mahupun pembangkang, tidak mengetahui apa-apa mengenainya, menunjukkan ia sesuatu yang amat buruk untuk negara.

Ikuti kami di: www.facebook.com/bantahtppa

Sertai petisyen di: www.janganjualnegara.com

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