

## BIBLIOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

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| <b>Title</b>                  | Still With the People? The Checkered Path of Student Activism in Malaysia                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
| <b>Source</b>                 | <a href="http://phuakl.tripod.com/pssm/conference/day129.doc">http://phuakl.tripod.com/pssm/conference/day129.doc</a>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
| <b>Author 1</b>               | Weiss, Meredith                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |
| <b>Author 2</b>               | NA                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
| <b>Author 3</b>               | NA                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
| <b>Publication/Conference</b> | 4th International Malaysian Studies Conference; 3-5 August 2004, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Bangi                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
| <b>Edition</b>                | NA                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
| <b>Document Type</b>          | Article                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
| <b>CPI Primary Subject</b>    | Education                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
| <b>CPI Secondary Subject</b>  | Philosophy, Politics, Culture; Democratization ; Social Movements;                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
| <b>Geographic Terms</b>       | Malaysia;                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
| <b>Abstract</b>               | <p>The commercialization and widespread provision of higher education in Malaysia probably does eat away at what special status students can rightly claim as political actors, but it is not clear how much it does so (or whether this same dynamic applies generically to contemporary developing or newly-industrialized states). In sum, then, while its course has been inconsistent, student engagement has remained a persistent part of the Malaysian political scene and offers a useful lens on the changes in and distinctiveness of the nation's politics..</p> |

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4<sup>th</sup> Malaysian Studies Conference  
3-5 August 2004  
Panel: Politics and Leadership

Very rough draft – **DO NOT CITE OR CIRCULATE**

***With the People? The Checkered Path of Student Activism in Malaysia***

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On June 8, 2001, around four hundred students from various Malaysian universities joined a peaceful demonstration in front of Mesjid Negara, the National Mosque, in downtown Kuala Lumpur. They were protesting the Internal Security Act (ISA), a holdover from anticommunist campaigns that allows indefinite detention without trial. The demonstration was illegal: the organizers had not obtained a permit. Armed with batons and rattan canes, riot police moved in to disperse the crowd. Several students were beaten and seven, all male, were arrested. The “ISA 7” could face not just expulsion from their universities – and indeed, all were promptly suspended – but fines and imprisonment of up to one year [2003 #604; Amnesty International, 2001 #553]. Later that month, students faced a heavy police presence to demonstrate in front of the offices of the National Human Rights Commission (Suruhanjaya Hak Asasi Manusia, SUHAKAM) regarding police brutality and restrictions on campus activism. The following month, two student activists were themselves arrested under the ISA for pro-reform activities. One was held incommunicado for ten days; the other, for twenty-three. A few months later, in October 2001, the Malaysian Education Minister cautioned university lecturers, too, by announcing the dismissal, transfer, or warning of sixty-one lecturers for alleged “anti-government” activities (Amnesty International 2001; ISREC 2001). This spate of arrests and penalties drew attention to the campus, calling into question the conventional wisdom of Malaysian students’ political apathy.

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Was this the start of a new wave of activism – or of repression – in Malaysia? Were these protests and arrests a continuation of a prior, if sometimes latent, tradition (perhaps more visible now than previously due to changes in civil society and the media), or did they represent something new? The answer is a bit of all of the above. Student protest has never been absent in Malaysia, but it experiences periodic surges. The scope and nature of student activism in Malaysia is intrinsically tied to political activism more broadly in the country. An understanding of the legacy of student protest in Malaysia and the place of the campus in the broader polity helps shed light on why these individuals got involved, why the government deemed what was clearly a minority of students and faculty enough of a threat actually to take action against them, and how students in Malaysia compare in terms of political engagement with their counterparts elsewhere.

### **Situating student activism in Malaysia**

In the late 1970s, Justus van der Kroef suggested that even though Malaysia had a comparatively meaningful formal political opposition, as elsewhere in Southeast Asia, opposition came primarily from extra-parliamentary interest groups: students and intellectuals, the military, religious and ethnic groups, and communists. He deemed students and intellectuals the most significant of these sectors (Van der Kroef 1978-79:622, 636). The roster of relevant interest groups and their relative significance may have shifted since then, but the point remains that students and intellectuals form a part – at times a critically important part – of the political opposition, regardless of the potency of opposition parties at any given moment.

In Malaysia even more than in many other postcolonial states, the university campus has represented a distinctive node within the polity. The government's concerted efforts to foster a Malay middle class through aggressive affirmative action policies since the 1970s have focused significantly on extending tertiary education to Malays, especially from rural areas, rendering the university a site for demographic transformation. While ideally, these policies are also intended to blur racial distinctions by reducing the coincidence of race with class, a side effect of affirmative action policies has arguably been to render campuses some of the most racially- and religiously-segregated spaces in Malaysia. Partly as a result of these government-encouraged demographic changes in the student body, the political timbre of both campus and country has shifted, as well. The most prominent example of this tendency is the rise of Islamist activism among the newly substantial mass of Malay students since the 1970s, which has both paralleled and stimulated a rise in Islamist politics more broadly.

More generally, the parallels between campus and state are most obviously visible in the general sequence of events and in the cleavages characterizing both. Placed on a timeline, the peaks and valleys of campus protest cycles clearly align with those of the broader political arena. The rise and decline of the university Socialist Club, for instance, echoed that of Malaysia's

Socialist Front, comprised of the Labour Party, Parti Sosialis Rakyat Malaysia (PSRM, Malaysian Socialist People's Party), and minor partners. The shift from student demonstrations to elections, and the rise of "money politics" within campus elections, likewise corresponds with the containment of public political participation post-1969 and trends especially over the Mahathir years.<sup>1</sup> Over time, the ideological and strategic bent of the most stridently, critically vocal student groups as well as of national-level opposition groups has been either socialistic and multiracial or Islamist and Malay, though the latter has gained preeminence over time and somewhat coopted the mainstream both on campus and off. Ethnic Chinese and Indian students and ordinary citizens alike have been engaged with socialist groups, but also with (non-Malay) church-related activism. Left-leaning Malays, whether students or not, have been considered comparatively radical in the community; anti-establishment Malays have tended instead toward the Islamist opposition. These involvements notwithstanding, the majority of students at any given time – even at the height of the ferment of the late 1960s – have remained disengaged or supportive of the "safe" status quo. Substitute "citizen" for "student" and that description pretty much holds for the polity more broadly, as well.

Student activism in Malaysia has been particularly intriguing on account of the variations in its manifestations over time; the depth and pervasiveness of racial, religious, and partisan political differences among students; and the semi-democratic state's use of both "carrots" and "sticks" to deter students from engaging in oppositional political activity. While observers today are quick to note the relative paucity of political activism among Malaysian students, apathy has not always been the norm and even now, is often overstated.<sup>2</sup> The stringency of the Universities and University Colleges Act (UUCA, or Akta Universiti dan Kolej Universiti, AUKU), the primary law governing student engagement, is testament to the vibrancy of campus activism over the years: by exerting its control, the government reveals its fear of the demonstrated potential of student activism.

Still, one should not overstate the exuberance of Malaysian students' engagement with things political. Even as student political activism reached new heights in the late 1960s, one commentator asserted, "It is an understatement to say that students are apathetic to student government and student welfare in the campus." He posited that only about 2 percent of the total student body at UM was involved with student societies or the student union – and less than half this small group were "actively" involved (Balakrishnan 1969:58-59). Moreover, even that surge of energy had been largely beaten down by an angry state within a decade. By the 1990s, campus dynamism seemed nearly gone. Despite a handful of oppositional outbursts through the 1980s and the steady advance of Islamization as pressed by campus *dakwah* organizations from the

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<sup>1</sup> See Pahrol 1999 for an overt effort at "containing" student activism, urging that students take the time to educate themselves and be prepared to offer intelligent advice rather than partaking in demonstrations.

<sup>2</sup> The charge of apathy, though, is not a new one, nor has it only been levied amidst the troughs of student activism – a column in the 1 Dec. 1972 issue of *Gemasiswa*, for instance, ponders seriously how to get students more socially engaged.

1970s on, most students seemed too focused on graduating and finding secure employment to take any undue risks. As a UKM journal piece laments in the mid-1990s, today's students are scoffed at as "passive, indolent, weak, clumsy, and not aggressive" (Aspirasi 1995/96:68). The deterrent effects of stiff penalties for student activism are one explanation, but an insufficient one if the experiences of neighboring countries, for instance New Order Indonesia, Marcos' Philippines, or Burma, are taken into account. Students elsewhere brave far graver repercussions to take a stand.

This paper takes an historical approach to probe the relation between repression and resistance in Malaysia – whether it is same for students as for other Malaysian citizens, or for students in Malaysia as elsewhere – as well as to gauge the actual impacts of student activism. I demonstrate that the radical fringe has dwindled over time; significant in the 1930s-50s, and especially forceful from the late 1960s to early 1970s, it hardly figures in the public consciousness today. The ideologies and issues galvanizing students, as well as the cleavages dividing them, mimic those of the larger polity, though students are sometimes in the vanguard and other times not. Overall, both the availability of institutionalized outlets for at least some student grievances and the relative status attached to tertiary education in Malaysia help to account for the differences in student activism in Malaysia compared with in comparable states.

### **A brief history of student activism in Malaysia**

A lack of historical memory commonly plagues student activism. When significant events in the student activist past become distant "cultural icons," comparable contemporary events "seem to lack historical context in the popular realm, when in fact they are heirs to a centuries-old global movement" (Boren 2001:3). In just this way in Malaysia, contemporary student activists speak admiringly of the heydays of campus unrest in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Knowledge of a broader array of student protest initiatives, however, is more lacking, not least since these are hardly highlighted in mainstream accounts of Malaysian history and markedly sidelined as a focus of academic research.<sup>3</sup> A lack of academic attention to Malaysian student activism gives short shrift to an arena that serves alternately as crucible for and microcosm of significant aspects of the Malaysian polity. This account thus begins with an overview of the history of student activism in Malaysia before analyzing the context of this activism in terms of domestic politics and the international setting.

In Malaysia as elsewhere, it is misleading to speak of a "student movement"; rather, there have been a range of student groups rallying around different issues and attracting different supporters. Student status *per se* has only sometimes been especially relevant to those campaigns. Importantly, most locally-educated Malaysians' initial forays into campus politics

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<sup>3</sup> Altbach gripes that this lack of academic attention is universal: researchers (and funding agencies) lost interest in student activism once it started to wane as a global phenomenon after the 1970s, before any coherent theoretical framework for its study had had a chance to solidify (Altbach 1982:160-63).

were not actually in Malaysia at all, as what became the University of Malaya (UM) was initially located in Singapore. The Kuala Lumpur campus started to take shape as of 1957, but did not achieve equal status to its Singapore counterpart until two years later (Silverstein 1970:11).<sup>4</sup>

Silverstein argues that for most Malaysians, “education was not seen as a vehicle for social advancement or change” (1970:11). The focus of higher education in Malaysia was initially professional and technical training, but the colleges “had no clearly defined educational goal” in terms, for instance, of providing recruits for government administration (Silverstein 1970:11-12). Especially since the British system of indirect rule in peninsular Malaya gave little incentive to Malays to pursue higher education, it was primarily Malayan Chinese who enrolled in Western-style schools and colleges. Contributing to the delayed onset of student activism in Malaysia compared with other states in the region was thus not just the remoteness of the campus from Malaya proper prior to independence in 1957, but also the racial composition of the student body (Silverstein 1970:9-10). Malays’ “political awakening” occurred in the immediate postwar years, when the British proposed with the Malayan Union plan to unite all the peninsular states and two of the Straits Settlements under a system of centralized, direct rule, reducing the authority of the traditional Malay rulers, and to grant non-Malays equal citizenship rights. As new, communally-organized political parties formed, each sought support among youths as well as other groups (Silverstein 1970:12-13). By that time, student organizations had already begun to take shape, some of them destined to play important political roles.

### *1930s – 1950s*

The first wave of student protest in colonial Malaya (partly technically in Singapore, since the UM campus was still located there) began in the 1930s. At the time, the prevailing debates in Malaya were over communism, Malay radicalism, and issues of national and/or ethnic identity. These issues took precedence among students, as well. Notably, the anti-colonial, Malay-nationalist Kesatuan Melayu Muda (Young Malay Union, KMM) was established by students from the Sultan Idris Training College (SITC) in the early 1930s. Many of Malaysia’s nationalist activists came from SITC; others emerged from Raffles College in the 1940s, some of whom joined the Malayan Democratic Union and at least a few, eventually the Malayan Communist Party.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> At the time, while in favor of establishing an autonomous Kuala Lumpur division of UM, students vehemently opposed splitting the student unions of the two campuses – the split was front page news in *The Malayan Undergrad*, the UM student journal, in for several months in 1958. As the editors declared (under the bold headline, “We Accuse .....”): the October 23, 1958 decision of the Federal Legislative Council to split UMSU “will go down in history as the most shortsighted and retrograde step in the development of a full fledged Malaysian nation” (*Malayan Undergrad*, Oct.-Nov. 1958: 1).

<sup>5</sup> Interview with Jomo K.S., 19 December 2003, Kuala Lumpur; Hassan 1984: 1. The full text of this volume edited by Hassan Karim and Siti Nor Hamid (1984) is reprinted verbatim in INSAN (1984). Hassan Karim’s initial essay – which provides an excellent overview of Malaysian student activism in its peak period – is reprinted also online on

In the early post-war years, as Malaysia approached and achieved independence, students agitated around those same and other issues of citizenship, nationalism, and language and education. In this second wave of activism, students at the University of Malaya engaged with nationalist journalists and trade unionists in the anticolonial movement (Hassan 1984:1). For instance, a number of students and recent graduates were arrested in connection with the Anti-British League (ABL) in the early 1950s.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, Singaporean and Malayan Chinese students agitated to “menacing proportions” in the mid-1950s, not just over perennial issues of language and education rights, but also over the requirement to register for national military service. Radical leftist students also played a leading role in a May 1955 transport workers’ strike in Singapore, “transforming what had been relatively peaceful picketing into a bloody riot” (Spector 1956:66). A contemporary observer deemed this activism – stirred up, it was presumed, by the Malayan and Chinese Communist parties – particularly noteworthy since students were so respected in the Chinese community and since Chinese students (who comprised a majority at all school levels) represented “tomorrow’s educated ‘Malayan’” (Spector 1956:65-66). Neither teachers nor community leaders could pacify the students – in fact, the students vociferously denounced the compliant Chinese Chamber of Commerce. While the national service issue, for instance, was more a Singaporean one than a Malayan one (though the shape of the soon-to-be-independent states was yet uncertain), the issue of the place of Chinese schools clearly applied to Malaya, as well (Spector 1956:67-68).<sup>7</sup>

Ethnic Indian students also agitated in support of non-Malays’ rights in a multicultural Malaya. As a student at Raffles College in the late 1940s, Malayan Indian James Puthucheariy argued that the Malays must not try to assimilate the non-Malays, but should accept them as integral to the nation. For condemning the differential salary scales and benefits given European and Asian civil servants, Puthucheariy and other student radicals were detained by the colonial government in January 1951. Released a year later, Puthucheariy went on to convince the university administration to allow students to set up political clubs to reduce the temptation to join the communists. With a multiracial group of fellow students, Puthucheariy formed the University Socialist Club and Pan-Malayan Students Federation in 1953. Puthucheariy was also involved in the establishment of the University of Malaya Society in July 1954 – which he later argued was meant to be the core of Singapore’s People’s Action Party (PAP) (Fernandez 2000). In early 1954, Puthucheariy and the seven other members of the editorial board of *Fajar*, the journal of the University Socialist Club, were arrested for sedition on account of an article titled “Aggression in Asia.” The article condemned the formation of the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) as an anti-China, anticommunist institution. The journal was banned and

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at least one website, plus forms the basis for his contribution (with Jomo K.S. and Ahmed Shabery Cheek) in Altbach (1989) – the main distinction is an appended section on post-1974 activism in the later iteration.

<sup>6</sup> Interview with Jomo K.S., 19 December 2003, Kuala Lumpur.

<sup>7</sup> One of the arguments made in favor of a Chinese university in Malaya was that otherwise, thousands of Malayan Chinese students might continue their studies in communist China – which was deemed likely to sway the community’s sympathies in favor of the latter as well as sap Malaya’s human resources (Buttwell 1953:346-48).

the students involved went to trial. They were eventually acquitted – and serving on the legal defense team gave Lee Kuan Yew the chance “to emerge as a hero.”<sup>8</sup> By the April 1955 Singapore elections, left-leaning students had thrown their support behind Lee Kuan Yew and the PAP (Spector 1956:68-69).

Back on the peninsula, in 1957, Malayan Chinese school students “in many states” carried out demonstrations. Joining them were Chinese Chambers of Commerce, educationists, and members of the general public (*Malayan Monitor* 31 Dec. 1957:6). A number of students went on hunger strike to force a response. By late November, sixty students had been arrested under the government’s Emergency Regulations and thirty-nine expelled; more were subsequently charged and a number of Chinese schools were “forcibly closed” (*Malayan Monitor* 31 Dec. 1957:6).

Not all student activism was so radical or transgressive, however. This same period saw the institutionalization of some of the most enduring – and at least sometimes more moderate – Malaysian student organizations. Among the most important of these were the Gabungan Pelajar-Pelajar Melayu Semenanjung (Peninsular Malays’ Students’ Union, GPMS); University of Malaya Student Union (UMSU); and Persatuan Kebangsaan Pelajar-Pelajar Malaysia (National Union of Malaysian Students, PKPM). The GPMS was established in 1948; it is Malaysia’s oldest national student organization. The goals of the GPMS upon its founding included uniting Malay students nation-wide, raising awareness of the backwardness of Malays, and taking responsibility for the educational uplift and broader progress of Malays. Early on, the GPMS became linked with the cause of Malay nationalism, primarily by fostering ethnic identity and national consciousness. Later, starting in the late 1950s, GPMS came to focus on the practical development of the Malay community, primarily through educational and social service outreach activities (Kee 1976:41-43).

The group that “became the centre of student life on campus” was UMSU (Silverstein 1970:13). UMSU was established in response to a 1949 Report on Higher Education, before many students became politically active. A branch was allowed when the UM campus in Kuala Lumpur opened. With the University Act of 1961 and implementation of the university constitution, each student became a member upon enrollment and had to pay a membership fee and annual subscription, which provided UMSU with a substantial budget (supplemented also through other means, including fines for offenses, since UMSU had the right to discipline students). The university also provided a union building. UMSU was self-governing, comprised of a Students’ Council elected by students and an Executive Committee selected from within that council. The union provided services (such as helping students find accommodation and employment or disbursing emergency loans), facilitated communication between students and the administration, and served as a political educator to the students (Silverstein 1970:13-14). UMSU came to play a central role in campus politics up through the mid-1970s.

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<sup>8</sup> Interview with Jomo K.S., 19 December 2003, Kuala Lumpur; Fernandez 2000.

Finally, PKPM, founded in 1958, united UMSU with its counterparts in other institutions of higher learning (teachers' training colleges, technical and agricultural colleges, etc.). PKPM developed a more political stance than most of its constituent organizations, not least through its affiliation with international student unions and attendance at their meetings. PKPM's headquarters was in the UMSU building, and UM students comprised the majority of PKPM members. Individuals could and did hold office simultaneously in UMSU and PKPM (Silverstein 1970:14).

Overall, though, as late as 1959, Singapore's Minister for Culture complained that UM students "gave the outsider the impression that they were interested in only trite things like ragging and rock and roll" (*Malayan Undergrad*, Oct. 1959:1); students' political engagement was limited at least until 1963. Silverstein offers several reasons: the expanding economy at the time and ready availability of good jobs upon graduation, the proportion of students attending on scholarship and thus bonded to the government after graduation, and the political climate: the combination of independence in 1957 and the anti-communist Emergency "meant that the people, students and other alike, were uninterested in radical politics," while the government appeared relatively representative of all racial communities and uncorrupt (Silverstein 1970:15). However, students did still engage on some matters, even if more often campus-related than broad sociopolitical concerns.

#### *1960s – mid-1970s*

When the new Universiti Malaya campus was established at Kuala Lumpur in the late 1950s, students focused their attention initially more on student welfare and other campus matters than national politics (Hassan 1984:1). That complacency was soon displaced by unprecedented levels of activism. In the third wave of the student movement in the late 1960s through the early 1970s, student activists joined forces with peasants and workers in presenting a socialist-inflected challenge to state-led development policies, as well as protesting around international concerns such as the Vietnam War and Middle East conflict and on issues of language, culture, and the status of Islam in the polity. The major student organizations of the time included UMSU (or Persatuan Mahasiswa Universiti Malaya, PMUM), which represented all students at UM and was thus multiracial; the University of Malaya Malay Language Society (Persatuan Bahasa Malaysia, PBMUM); the Chinese Language Society (CLS); the Tamil Language Society (TLS); and the University of Malaya Islamic Students' Society (Persatuan Mahasiswa Islam, PMI or PMIUM). Added to these as of 1967 was the Socialist Club of UM – the university's only political club.<sup>9</sup> The Socialist Club developed influence disproportionate to its relatively small size, not least

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<sup>9</sup> The Socialist Club went through a few iterations. The initial club of the 1950s did not endure in its original form. Taking its place was Pantai Forum (1964), then the Progressive Club (1965), then Forum Mahasiswa (1966), before the "Socialist Club" returned in 1967 (Junaidi 1993:21).

since members such as Syed Hamid Ali, Sanusi Osman, and Hishamuddin Rais also led organizations such as UMSU and the PBMUM for much of the late 1960s and early 1970s.<sup>10</sup>

Contributing to the lack of political engagement among students in the early 1960s were the Schools (Post-Secondary) Societies Regulations, 1960. These guidelines mandated that all student organizations provide information about themselves and gave the head of the school authority to dissolve any society used for “political propaganda detrimental to the interest of the Federation or of the public.” Opposition to this regulation spurred activism and angry (but fruitless) resolutions by UMSU and the PKPM (Silverstein 1970:15).

Part of the impetus for burgeoning student engagement came from community outreach activities among students. An early such initiative dates back to December 1957, when GPMS organized a Kursus Pelajar (Educational Course) offered by students to villagers in Negeri Sembilan; voluntary tuition classes continued through the 1960s (Kee 1976:41-43). Around 1960, PKPIM began a scheme for voluntary service by students in the community. In 1969, UMSU launched its own “Students Pioneer Corps” (Project Perkhidmatan Mahasiswa), supplemented by a Tenaga Pengajar (Teaching Force) focused on educational service provision as of 1971. PKPM developed a national-level counterpart for students of all institutions of higher learning in 1970, the Pasukan Perkhidmatan Pelajar-Pelajar Kebangsaan (National Student Service Corps).<sup>11</sup> GPMS formally launched its own Pasukan Operasi Pembangunan GPMS (Development Operation Corps of the GPMS) in 1972 (Kee 1976:29-31, 41-43; Gopikumar 1972:22). These community service initiatives reflected a growing concern among students for their place in society and of the sociopolitical environment outside campus. Such voluntary service was cast as having a political objective: students, as future elites, were to learn to identify with poor, oppressed peasant masses, plus pursue the goal of harmonious racial integration. The outreach projects took place in the context of rising political awareness and activism on campus – including the launch in 1969 of a Kempen Kesedaran (Awareness Campaign) targeted at rural masses and organized by PKPIM, PMIUM, PBMUM, and (for a time) GPMS (Kee 1976:43, *Mahasiswa Negara*, 7 June 1971:2).

In 1963, the Federation of Malaysia was formed of the union of Malaya with Singapore, Sabah, and Sarawak. Students responded to the merger and to the resultant *konfrontasi* with Indonesia. As of early 1963, PKPM supported a UN referendum for self-determination for Singapore, Sabah, Sarawak, and Brunei with regard to their proposed incorporation into the Federation of Malaysia (Silverstein 1970:15). Socialist students had come out against the merger even before then, labeling it an anticommunist “colonial conspiracy” designed to isolate and thus

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<sup>10</sup> Hassan 1984:2; interview with Hishamuddin Rais, 18 December 2003, Kuala Lumpur. Hishamuddin was staunchly coy when asked to quantify membership in the club. Economics professor Jomo K.S. suggests that membership was only about “probably just a few dozen, but their influence was ... very considerable” (interview, 19 December 2003, Kuala Lumpur).

<sup>11</sup> The PKPM’s scheme was inspired in part by the US Peace Corps (Gopikumar 1972:22).

counter the influence of Indonesia (*Fajar*, Dec. 1961, March-April 1962).<sup>12</sup> All the same, students in Malaysia appealed first to their Indonesian counterparts to reduce tensions, then when hostilities began, asked the Malaysian government to provide military training and establish Territorial Army Units on the UM campus. PKPM extended the latter call to other institutions of higher learning in 1965 (Silverstein 1970:16).

Worried about a possible upsurge of left-wing radicalism on campus, especially after Singapore (with its tradition of radical student politics) merged with Malaysia in 1963, the government required in 1964 that all applicants for admission to universities and colleges pass a loyalty test and obtain a “Suitability Certificate” from the Chief Educational Officer to be allowed to enroll. The Minister of Internal Security was empowered to handle any appeals to those decisions. The requirement mimicked the Singapore government’s strong steps to curtail political activism at the University of Singapore and Nanyang University.<sup>13</sup> Its objective was to weed out suspected communists and otherwise subversive or “undesirable” elements. As then-Acting Secretary-General of the DAP, Goh Hock Guan, explained at a UM forum, “The ostensible purpose of the certificate was to prevent undesirables from subverting innocent students in the university and institutions of higher learning,” premised upon Singapore’s experience with “professional agitators” in Nanyang University. Since Malaysia faced no such threat, he claimed, it should not have copied that particular policy (*Rocket*, August 1967:8).

Not surprisingly, the Internal Security Act Amendment (Bill) 1964 brought forth an angry reaction from UMSU, including demonstrations, public discussions, and debates on campus (Silverstein 1970:16). This contest tied in with a more general one over university autonomy,<sup>14</sup> since Malaysian students were worried that their government would mimic the tactics of Singapore’s in controlling the campus environment. UM students thus held annual Autonomy Days and kept maintenance of university autonomy and students’ freedoms major goals in UMSU and PKPM programs (Silverstein 1970:16). In response to student protests, the suitability certificate requirement was suspended in 1968.

Against the backdrop of merger, in 1963, PKPM affirmed both its support for Malay language and its conviction that the other languages and cultures of Malaysia enriched the nation and should be allowed to persist. The group resolved that student unions should work to advance Malay as the national language, particularly with the aim of interracial harmony (Silverstein

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<sup>12</sup> The Nanyang University Political Science Club and University of Singapore Socialist Club went so far as to conduct a poll of voters in the Tanjong Pagar constituency in Singapore in July 1962. 90 percent of those polled were against the merger proposals; only 6 percent were in favor (*Fajar*, July 1962: 1-4).

<sup>13</sup> See Lee Kuan Yew’s reply to a complaint from the president of the University of Singapore’s students’ union regarding steps to curb the threat of “the spread of communist influence amongst student in Malaysia.” Lee found some constraints on students’ freedom (in this case, restrictions on student travel in peninsular Malaysia) unavoidable (reprinted in *Malayan Undergrad*, Nov. 1962: 5; see also *Fajar*, Sept.-Oct. 1963:9).

<sup>14</sup> Demands for university autonomy and academic freedom were core concerns in a 1958 UMSU memorandum on plans for the bifurcation of the Kuala Lumpur and Singapore campuses of UM (*Malayan Undergrad*, June 1958).

1970:15). UMSU tended toward a similar stance, being multiracial and generally falling on the moderate left. Chinese students generally found an outlet in either UMSU or the CLS. The PBMUM, on the other hand – not an UMSU affiliate – became a critical political vehicle among Malay students, especially arts students from newer, more rural cohorts. Education policy and upholding the position of the Malay language remained core issues for the PBMUM. The organization organized demonstrations and dialogue sessions (for instance, see *Mahasiswa Negara*, 6 Sept. 1971); held a symposium on the National Education Policy in 1968; and successfully pressed for the mandatory use of Malay in the classroom and examinations.<sup>15</sup> Later, in 1974, Malay students successfully lobbied the UM administration to require that science students (who were mostly Chinese) pass a Malay language examination in their first year, too, rather than in a year of their choice as previously (Silverstein 1976:199-200; Hassan 1984:3).

Starting in the mid-1960s, the student movement became more vocal and politically significant. Prior to 1964, students were concerned with a more limited range of issues; by the period 1964-68, they were “still concerned with national unity, loyalty, and support for the king ... [but they were] concerned about Malaysia in the world, about domestic, social and economic problems and about the proper role students should play,” even if they remained nonviolent, moderate, and mainly focused on campus issues overall (Silverstein 1970:18). In May 1966, the Speaker’s Corner was established on the UM campus; it became an important venue for students. Denied the opportunity to form even nonpartisan political clubs on campus, students gathered at the Speaker’s Corner weekly to learn about, discuss, and debate “all the issues of the day – foreign and domestic, political, economic and social” (Silverstein 1970:16-17; ISREC 2003a).

1967 was a transition year, notable especially on account of the Teluk Gong struggle. Led by Hamid Tuah, a group of poor, landless peasants had cleared, tilled, and settled some forest land in the Teluk Gong region of Selangor. The government destroyed their crops and houses and arrested Hamid Tuah and his followers. UM students learned about the issue at the Speaker’s Corner. UMSU and the PBMUM, together with several lecturers and even some university administrators, denounced the government’s cruelty and voiced their support of the peasants (Hassan 1984:2-3; Silverstein 1970:17). Rural poverty was of particular interest to students at the time. For instance, also in 1967, the PBMUM sponsored a symposium on the problems facing rural communities (Hassan 1984:2).<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Comparable earlier initiatives included a National Language seminar organized by the University Socialist Club (and held, ironically, in English) in 1959 to discuss the position of Malay as the national language and ways to popularize its use (*Fajar* 2:3 [Sept. 1959]: 5); and a seminar on National Language and Culture organized by the Malay Society at the University of Singapore in late 1962 with the aim of expediting “the implementation of the Malay language as the national language of all the territories in the Malaysian region” (*Malayan Undergrad*, Nov. 1962: 1).

<sup>16</sup> Issues of rural poverty and landlessness also energized Malaysian students abroad in the same period. See, for instance, the journal of MASS MOVEMENT, the Malayan and Singaporean Student Movement in London in 1972: “The peasant masses are among the most exploited people in our country ... large tracts of land are concentrated in

Student involvement in national politics increased ahead of the May 1969 general elections, representing a new development for student activism in Malaysia. UMSU held over a dozen public rallies nationwide in April and May 1969, attracting over 100,000 people. The response to the students' progressive appeal was strong enough that the government forbade the students to hold rallies in towns, especially on the East Coast. UMSU also distributed over 100,000 copies of its *Manifesto Pelajar* (Students' Manifesto) for the election. The nonpartisan manifesto highlighted issues of democracy, freedom, justice, an improved popular standard of living, land reform, a "truly national education policy," the unconditional release of all political detainees, and the withdrawal of foreign military bases in Malaysia. Turnout for the students' rallies rivaled that for UMNO and the Alliance in certain large cities. Socialist students "formed the backbone" of the rallies, which denounced parties' recourse to racial appeals (Hassan 1984:4-5; Hishamuddin 2002; Muhammad 1973:80-82).

After the elections and ethnic unrest that followed the unprecedented success of the non-Malay opposition, students (especially Malays) joined the campaign to urge Tunku Abdul Rahman to step down as prime minister. UMSU, led by socialist student leader Syed Hamid Ali, and PBMUM, led by Muslim student leader Anwar Ibrahim, held a series of demonstrations on campus, albeit with differing rationales. Anwar felt that the Tunku had conceded too much to the Chinese and had not done enough to advance the status of Malays and their language, but he did not oppose the system of government overall. Syed Hamid and the Socialist Club took a more broadly oppositional stance, seeing the capitalist system as "the root cause of poverty," opposing the influx of foreign investment for allowing the people's domination and continued penury, and contesting the Tunku's leadership for having led to racial riots (Hassan 1984:5).<sup>17</sup> On August 29, 1969, police entered the campus for the first time to disrupt a demonstration – this one against the Tunku – and arrested several students, including Syed Hamid Ali. Students protested this violation of university autonomy. Ultimately, partly due to pressure from students, the Tunku was forced to resign (Hassan 1984:5-6).

In 1970, issues of Malay language and the National Educational Policy became central, causing a racial rift among students.<sup>18</sup> Most notably, on 5 October 1970, PBMUM members burned English-medium posters at the Speaker's Corner, then splashed paint over signs and notices in English on campus. UMSU condemned the incident. The clash between PBMUM and UMSU triggered a vote of no confidence for the 13<sup>th</sup> UMSU Council (*Mahasiswa Negara*, Oct.

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the hands of foreign monopoly-capitalists and a tiny handful of Malay feudal landlords and non-Malay comprador-capitalists ...." (*New Malayan Youth* 1:3 [March 1972]: 3).

<sup>17</sup> A concrete manifestation of this stance was the participation of around forty students (organized by UMSU) in demonstrations in support of workers retrenched from Raleigh Cycle Co. in Petaling Jaya, a suburb of Kuala Lumpur (*Mahasiswa Negara*, Nov. 1970:16).

<sup>18</sup> A few years previously, the government had charged that students opposed to the National Language Bill had been inspired by Indonesian students from KAMI who visited Malaysia in late 1966 and extended their influence (*Rocket*, April 1967). It was around 1970-71 that the Malay name "Universiti Malaya" came more frequently to supplant the English "University of Malaya," for instance on the masthead of *Mahasiswa Negara*.

and Nov. 1970). The establishment of University Kebangsaan Malaysia (National University of Malaysia, UKM) in 1970 “was viewed as the culmination of efforts to ensure the sovereignty of the Malay language and the implementation of the National Education Policy” (Hassan 1984:6). A second new university was also established in 1970: Universiti Sains Malaysia (Science University of Malaysia, USM). Two others – Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM) and Universiti Pertanian Malaysia (Agriculture University of Malaysia, UPM) – followed shortly after, together with an increase in the number of other institutions of higher learning, especially in and around Kuala Lumpur.<sup>19</sup>

Fearing a repeat of the 1969 campaign, the government was worried by the increasing total numbers of students in higher education in Malaysia, including from poor and rural backgrounds, and took steps to curb campus protest. The post-1969 National Operations Council formed the Campus Investigative Committee in 1970. Its findings became the basis of the University and University Colleges Act (UUCA), passed by Parliament on 18 March 1971 (Hassan, 1984:6-7; *Mahasiswa Negara*, 24 May, 7 June, and [especially] 3 Dec. 1971, and 29 May 1972). The provisions of the UUCA initially related mostly to the establishment of new universities. Campus organizations and publications continued largely as usual from 1971 through 1974, though anti-UUCA demonstrations were held on campus in 1971, 1972, and 1973 and members of the Special Branch openly monitored and questioned student leaders on campus (Hassan 1984:7; *New Malayan Youth*, July-Aug. 1973:12; *Mahasiswa Negara*, 6 Sept. 1971; Hishamuddin 2002). Moreover, by 1973, student organizations from UM, UKM, USM, UTM, UPM, and Institut Teknologi Mara (ITM)<sup>20</sup> had started to cooperate to oppose the government on issues such as corruption<sup>21</sup> and the UUCA (Hassan 1984:8-9). Aside from the campus-specific UUCA, constitutional amendments in 1971 removed “sensitive” issues from public debate and the government embarked on a program of economic restructuring, the New Economic Policy (NEP), to combat poverty and reduce the identification of race with occupation. These changes clearly impacted upon the campus environment, especially since a core component of the NEP was a system of quotas to increase Malays’ access to higher education.

International events also inspired mobilization in this period. In 1966, the US bombing of North Vietnam prompted a series of demonstrations in front of the American Embassy in Kuala Lumpur, a “fashionable” cause linked with the protests of activists in other countries. Students called for the Malaysian government not to provide recreational facilities for American soldiers in Vietnam and called for the parties to pursue a peaceful settlement (Muhammad 1973:48; Silverstein 1970:16-17). Then, the Soviet Union’s invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968 provoked

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<sup>19</sup> Even once other universities were established, UM remained the flagship: it “set the tone and [gave] leadership to the students both on its campus at beyond” (Silverstein 1976:200).

<sup>20</sup> Students demonstrated in 1973 in favor of granting the overwhelmingly Malay ITM degree-granting (instead of just vocational-technical) status (Silverstein 1976:200).

<sup>21</sup> For example, students protested in 1973 against Selangor chief minister Harun Idris for having stripped timber from the UKM site, calling for his investigation (Silverstein 1976:200).

students at UM to join international protests by staging a demonstration outside the Soviet Embassy in Kuala Lumpur. This demonstration was the first by students outside the campus – and the first time students faced “police brutality and tear gas” (Hassan 1984:4, 7-8). That same year, students staged a demonstration against the Philippines, which was asserting territorial claims to Sabah, in East Malaysia. Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman initially lauded the students’ spirit, “though he toned down his enthusiasm somewhat when later he learned that the same students had forced their way into the Philippine Embassy compound and had torn down its flag prior to their demonstration” (Silverstein 1970:3). The revolt of French students against DeGaulle also inspired Malaysian students.

More broadly, a growing sense of “Asian” identity and of the need for transnational coordination among students sparked the foundation of the Asian Students Association (ASA) in April 1969. Launched in Kuala Lumpur, the ASA aimed to promote cooperation and mutual understanding among Asian students, advance a shared Asian identity, promote human rights and academic freedom, and help member organizations implement programs effectively (Pandey 2000:14, 16). However, the ASA was denied registration in 1971 under Malaysia’s Societies Act and was forced to close its local office (*Mahasiswa Negara*, 23 Aug. 1971:1, 20).

In 1971, the oppression of Muslims in Pattani (in southern Thailand) sparked a massive demonstration among Malaysian students (spearheaded by PKPIM) (Nagata 1980:410), as did the Palestinian cause in 1973 (*Truth* 1:7 [Oct. 1973]:4,7). The 1971 demonstration, which attracted as many as two thousand students from UM and UKM, was especially significant since it challenged the newly-promulgated UUCA, was the first off-campus demonstration since the UUCA’s passage, and drew students from two universities. Held June 14, the demonstration was organized by the PMIUM, and thus attracted few non-Malays. The demonstration was to protest a visit by Thai prime minister Thanom Kittikachorn on account of the Thai government’s alleged ill-treatment of the Muslim minority in southern Thailand. The police confronted the students, who lined the main roads outside their campuses. Over twelve students were injured – the first Malaysian students injured in the course of demonstrating – and nineteen arrested at UM. The demonstration continued the following day, as students protested police brutality and demanded the release of their classmates (*New Malayan Youth*, June 1972:3-4, 32; *Mahasiswa Negara*, 21 June and 6 Sept. 1971; Hassan 1984:7-8).<sup>22</sup> Malaysian students protested seemingly less weighty issues, as well, such as with demonstrations in 1970 over Singapore’s forced cutting of visiting Malaysians’ hair (Junaidi 1993:114).

After all this excitement, by 1972, UMSU and the PKPN were beset by infighting. On June 19, the 14<sup>th</sup> UMSU Council, headed by Sim Kim Chiew and including many members of

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<sup>22</sup> *Mahasiswa Negara* devoted substantial coverage to “The June 14 Incident,” but part of it was belated. The issue immediately following the incident carried only a black-bordered box in lieu of an editorial, with a notice that the editorial had been withheld on legal advice so as not to jeopardize the outcome for the students still awaiting trial (*Mahasiswa Negara*, 21 June and 6 Sept. 1971).

the Socialist Club, was toppled by other members of the Council who garnered support through racial appeals. The fall of the Council “was tantamount to a defeat for the student left”; by the end of 1972, the Socialist Club was especially weak, particularly since several key members had graduated (Hassan 1984:8-9 and *Gemasiswa*, June 20, 1972). That same year, the left also lost control of the PKPM when student leader Hishamuddin Rais was replaced as Secretary-General (*Mahasiswa Negara*, 19 Oct. 1972:4, 13). In early 1973, the Socialist Club launched a concerted effort to revitalize itself at UM. In that year’s UMSU elections, Hishamuddin Rais was elected Secretary-General of UMSU, where he was joined by several other Council members from the Socialist Club (Hassan 1984:8-9). In a new blow for the left, however, the Tun Razak government announced in November 1973 that it was banning the monthly “progressive” (a.k.a. “socialist”) journal *Truth* after only seven months of publication, declaring it a “danger to public peace and national security” (*New Malaysian Youth*, Sept.-Nov. 1973:1-3).

International issues then came to the fore again with a huge October 13, 1973 protest outside the United States Embassy in Kuala Lumpur, staged by UMSU but joined by students from various universities, in opposition to the US role in the Arab-Israeli war.<sup>23</sup> Police broke up the demonstration with tear gas. Three days later, four thousand students joined in a second demonstration at the US Embassy. The PLO representative in Malaysia addressed the crowd, then the students marched to the Lincoln Cultural Center, which they charged was a CIA front and threatened to burn. The police did not intervene this time (*Gemasiswa* and *Mahasiswa Negara*, 24 Oct. 1973; Hassan 1984:9-10).

1974 proved a key year. With a slogan of “Students and People Unite,” and with significant public support, students grew increasingly more politically engaged. They “filled [a] vacuum that had been created by the withering of the parliamentary opposition” as most former opposition parties were coopted into the ruling Barisan Nasional (BN, National Front) coalition before the 1974 elections (Hassan 1984:10). The pivotal episodes in this phase of the student movement were the Tasik Utara incident of September 1974 and the Baling events two months later. Punctuating the period, too, were the eruption of deep rivalries among students.

The crux of the first of these incidents was the effort of predominantly Malay squatters to forestall eviction from the settlement they had created in Tasik Utara, an area about three miles from the center of Johor Bahru (the southernmost city in peninsular Malaysia). In the course of the 1974 electoral campaign, BN leaders had assured the squatters – 134 families of poor laborers – that their homes would be protected. Shortly after the elections, the Land Office – which had previously investigated the site and voiced no objection – sent the squatters eviction notices, saying their homes were slated for demolition. Over half the structures in the settlement were torn down by a demolition squad on 8 September 1974, just two weeks after the election.

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<sup>23</sup> This student protest was not the only one at the US Embassy in regard to the Middle East conflict. Students returned in 1982, for instance, after the Sabra and Shatila massacres, and again in 1986 after the US attacked Libya (Jomo, Hassan, and Ahmad Shabery 1989:153).

The residents appealed to the government for an alternative site; when that appeal failed, the squatters sent a telegram to UMSU requesting aid, drawing an immediate response. Over the course of the next two weeks, both squatter and student leaders were arrested, having failed to prevent further demolitions. The gamut of student organizations in all campuses in Malaysia as well as Singapore<sup>24</sup> came out in support of the squatters, issuing press statements, demonstrating, appealing to the authorities, and collecting donations. On 20 September, the day after the arrest of Hishamuddin Rais and others, more than 2,500 students from UM and other institutions, together with progressive intellectuals and lecturers, demonstrated outside the PM's Department in Kuala Lumpur for a just resolution and for the release of those detained. They demonstrated again the following day and were met with tear gas and batons from the Federal Reserve Unit (FRU, riot police). Around ten students were briefly detained and officials threatened the withdrawal of participants' scholarships. The squatters continued to picket until on September 22, the FRU surrounded the site and arrested forty-one squatters and seven students. When the remainder demonstrated in front of the state courthouse to protest the arrests, three more students were detained<sup>25</sup> (Hassan and Siti Nor 1984:27-34; Hassan 1984:11-14).

After the September 19 arrests, UMSU called an emergency meeting and decided both to hold demonstrations only within the campus and to take over the administration of UM. Students formed a *Majlis Tertinggi Sementara* (Temporary Executive Council, MTS) and took over the UM administration on September 21. An opposing group of students – who had previously won only one seat in the 1974 UMSU elections – simultaneously formed the *Majlis Tertinggi Nasionalis* (Nationalist Executive Council, MTN) and challenged UMSU and the MTS.<sup>26</sup> That evening, MTN members used iron rods, bicycle chains, and the like to attack and trap MTS members in the UMSU secretariat. The head of UMSU and several other MTS members were kidnapped and taken to the *Dewan Tunku Chancellor* (DTC), a hall on campus. The MTN, supported by the university vice chancellor (VC), imposed a curfew, issued passes to control movement on campus, and played up racialism and Islam.<sup>27</sup> An array of student groups issued a joint statement condemning the MTN as illegal and overly aggressive, and most students complied with an UMSU-declared boycott of lectures. Student unions in the other universities and overseas declared their support for UMSU rather than the MTN, while UM's Academic Staff Association issued a press statement on 22 September expressing their support of the squatters' and students' struggle. The government had been looking for an excuse to quash the troublesome UMSU. Education Minister Mahathir Mohamad closed the university on 23 September,

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<sup>24</sup> Students from the University of Singapore and Singapore Polytechnic demonstrated outside the Malaysian High Commission in Singapore on 18 September (Hassan and Siti Nor 1984:31).

<sup>25</sup> This set of detainees included Hassan Karim, who went on to write about student protest of the period (Hassan and Siti Nor 1984:34).

<sup>26</sup> The PBMUM was behind the MTN (Silverstein 1976:200-01).

<sup>27</sup> Lending grist to claims that the authorities backed the MTN was the fact that the FRU cracked down anew on the squatters and students in Johor Bahru just nine hours after the MTN overpowered UMSU on September 21 – presumably knowing that the students would thus be unable to protest so avidly as before (Hassan and Siti Nor 1984:39).

announcing that violence had broken out on campus (it had not), but then reversed his decision a few hours later – only to repeat on 26 September that UM would be closed in the event of violence. The government suspended UMSU a few days after the MTS/MTN standoff (Hassan and Siti Nor 1984:33-42; Hassan 1984:13-14).<sup>28</sup>

Just two months later, student support for the peasants of Baling, Kedah proved the climax of the post-1969 student movement. With inflation in 1973, the prices of food and other necessities had soared, even as the price of rubber had fallen. Most of the residents of Baling were rubber smallholders. They wanted the government to intervene to raise the price of rubber and lower the price of food and other staples. On 19-21 November 1974, over one thousand peasants demonstrated, then more than 13,000 people from Baling and surrounding areas staged mass demonstrations, converging on Baling on 21 November. With the government still non-responsive, 30,000 people demonstrated in Baling on 1 December 1974. The Baling protests were especially significant since the site of protest was located in Kedah, in the Malay heartland, and since the essence of the struggle was a critique of the government's strategy of economic development. That very development – and especially the extension of higher education to students from rural areas like Baling – served to highlight the gaps between the poverty of some areas and the prosperity of others (Peiris 1984).

Two days later, five thousand students demonstrated in Kuala Lumpur in support of the rubber smallholders.<sup>29</sup> The students demanded a solution to the problem of inflation, an increase in the price of rubber, and the exposure and punishment of corrupt government officials. The police used tear gas to disperse the students, who retreated to Mesjid Negara. The FRU fired tear gas into the mosque and entered. 1,128 students were arrested. The government blamed the demonstrations on foreign professors and PSRM agitation, as well as communists. With students continuing to demonstrate after the mass arrests the police entered the campuses early the morning of December 9 (and again subsequently) and invoked the ISA to detain both student leaders and lecturers supportive of the students' and peasants' struggles (Hassan 1984:14-15; Peiris 1984; Munro-Kua 1996:82-83; Silverstein 1976:201; Makmor 2001:45). Hishamuddin Rais fled the country to avoid arrest under "Operasi Mayang"; he remained in exile for the next twenty years.<sup>30</sup> Demonstrations continued after the arrests, but this last crackdown marked the end of the most politically significant era of student protest in Malaysia (Hassan 1984:16).

A December 1974 government White Paper on the UM protest, entitled *Communist Party of Malaya Activities with the University of Malaya Chinese Language Society*, cited communist manipulation via the Chinese Language Society: the government claimed that communists had

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<sup>28</sup> Also, interview with Hishamuddin Rais and Kamarazaman Yacob, 18 December 2003, Kuala Lumpur.

<sup>29</sup> The plight of Baling had been reviewed several years earlier in a *Mahasiswa Negara* exposé of the failure of development plans there (4 Oct. 1971: 2).

<sup>30</sup> Interview, 18 December 2003, Kuala Lumpur.

infiltrated the CLS and through it, UMSU.<sup>31</sup> However, that explanation is unconvincing, especially given the fact that the issues involved were clearly of concern to the Malay community, plus the substantial participation by students at the almost entirely Malay UKM, at least 70 percent of the students of which were from peasant families. While the dregs of the outlawed Malayan Communist Party may have done what they could to foment protest, the main instigators were the recently-formed Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia (Malaysian Islamic Youth Front, ABIM, particularly strong amongst rural Malays); PKPIM (which dominated the government-sponsored Malaysian Youth Council, MBM, at the time); and PSRM (which linked Chinese and Malay radicals and involved a number of university lecturers and students) (Peiris 1984:53-56; Silverstein 1976:201-02).

In 1975, a set of harsh amendments to the 1971 UUCA were steamrolled through Parliament. The amendments imposed tight restrictions on students' freedoms of expression and association. All student organizations were dissolved, and the feisty student unions were replaced by relatively powerless and dependent Student Representative Councils (SRCs, or *Majlis Perwakilan Pelajar*, MPP<sup>32</sup>), while the VC and Student Affairs Department of the university were given added authority (DEMA 2003:7, 13). Section 15 of the act states that no student "shall be a member of, or shall in any manner associate with, any society, political party, trade union or any other organization ... whether it is in the University or outside the University ... in Malaysia or outside Malaysia ... except as may be approved ... by the Vice-Chancellor [of the university]" (DEMA 2003:8).<sup>33</sup> The same constraints on association apply also to student organizations. Students and their organizations are likewise prohibited to "express or do anything which may be construed as expressing support, sympathy or opposition to any political party or trade union or as expressing support or sympathy with any unlawful organization, body or group of persons" (DEMA 2003:8). Moreover, the Deputy VC (Student Affairs Department) has authority to register, refuse to register, or deregister any student society, and students have no recourse to challenge or expedite these decisions (DEMA 2003:12-13).<sup>34</sup> Students from all institutions decried the UUCA for undermining principles of democracy and freedom of speech.

#### *Late 1970s – mid-1990s*

The implementation of the UUCA in 1971 clearly failed to stifle student protest; the 1975 amendments had a more dramatic impact. After the crackdowns and new restrictive legislation of

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<sup>31</sup> See AFHR (n.d.) for specifics of the charges; the volume compiles detention orders for and statements by or in support of detainees from the 1974 sweeps in Malaysia and Singapore (for instance, Anwar Ibrahim and Lee Ban Chen). Among other complaints, the CLS also presented statements (included here) condemning the suppression of the Chinese community's "progressive" arts and culture through its attacks on the CLS and detention of so many affiliated students.

<sup>32</sup> SRCs were supposed to have replaced student unions as of 1971; UMSU had applied for and received an exemption, so retained its name and council structure (*Mahasiswa Negara*, 3 Dec. 1971:1).

<sup>33</sup> The Prime Minister is the Chancellor.

<sup>34</sup> See also Junaidi 1993 for more on the UUCA's features and effects.

the mid-1970s, student protest became far more muted. In particular, “student activity in national politics declined precipitously” (DEMA 2003:10) and the student left was decimated. Campus political activism was allowed only within the SRCs that replaced the more feisty Student Unions or other student welfare bodies. The chief exception to this diminution of activity was the rise of increasingly more visible and vocal Islamist activism. In addition, a significant degree of critically-engaged community activism continued, especially among Catholic and Muslim students. Two main camps remained among students: a pro-government faction and more anti-establishment Islamist activists. However, neither camp rivaled the vibrancy of the pre-1975 movement, and both focused primarily on campus issues. While initially stronger, the pro-government camp lost support in the late 1970s and early 1980s, especially as Islamic revivalism gained steam (Jomo, Hassan, and Ahmad Shabery 1989:154).

In this period, too, the government extended the scope of its crackdown on campuses with the 1979 promulgation of the Discipline of Staff Rules. Previously, university staff had been permitted to write for or edit non-academic publications, to join opposition parties in speaking out on controversial issues, and to engage in electoral campaigns.<sup>35</sup> Under the new rules, while academic faculty and staff could be ordinary members of political parties, they could not hold positions in them or stand for election. Also forbidden for faculty and staff were making public statements in support of any parties or publishing material relating to any parties (except in the course of academic research or academic seminars approved by the VC). Government-appointed VCs and government appointee-dominated councils were given most authority in hiring and firing staff, as well.<sup>36</sup> The Academic Staff Association of UM proclaimed it would resort to industrial action if necessary to protest these restrictions on freedom of expression, but the rules were passed (DEMA 2003:9, 11; AFHR n.d.:188).

Constraints on lecturers persisted well beyond the 1970s. Frustrated with constraints on academic freedom especially since the new rules of 1979, but related also to more general restrictions like the Official Secrets Act, Printing Presses and Publications Act, and staff general orders, a group of academics formed the Malaysian Academic Movement (MOVE), chaired by Wan Abdul Manan. The group cites an increasing number of violations of academic freedom since 1979, from lecturers’ being questioned and even detained under the ISA for involvement with the Islamist Darul Arqam movement in the early 1990s to drawing flak for reporting (correctly) about a new viral strain that beset Malaysia in 1998, as well as self-censorship generated by fear of surveillance and punishment (Netto 1999).

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<sup>35</sup> As of 1968, teachers were liable to lose their jobs “if found dabbling in politics” by the Ministry of Education (*Rocket*, Dec. 1967: 6).

<sup>36</sup> Students and lecturers did successfully topple an unpopular VC in January 1974. Tun Razak’s appointment of Abdullah Ayub as VC stimulated ten days of protests, boycotts of lectures, and so forth; students and faculty deemed the appointment calculated to undermine university autonomy and academic freedom. The PM was forced to withdraw his appointee (*New Malayan Youth* Dec. 1973-Feb. 1974: 4).

With post-1969 constitutional amendments taking “sensitive” issues completely off the public agenda and the UUCA allowing surveillance and control of student activity, religion became one of the chief channels for expression and debate on campus. In this new phase, “issues such as social reform, national unity and interethnic harmony, [were] all discussed in terms of Islamic principles and justice” (Nagata 1980:410). Malaysia’s Islamic resurgence first took root in the early 1970s among young, western-educated Muslims as well as Malays who flooded local universities, thanks in part to quotas and scholarships introduced under the NEP, only to find themselves out of their element and eager to find a community with which they could relate (Jomo and Ahmad Shabery 1992:79). While efforts were made to recruit Malays to science streams, many gravitated toward arts instead, especially Islamic Studies (Nagata 1980:411). In addition, the government started more aggressively in the 1970s to send *bumiputera* (Malays and indigenous peoples) students abroad for further study. While there, they interacted with students from other Muslim countries, especially Pakistan, Libya, and Saudi Arabia, and came back more committed to Islam and less secular in orientation than when they left Malaysia (Nagata 1980:411).

The dakwah movement was not uniform; rival groups – some more spiritually-oriented, and others more focused on the links between Islam and critical social issues – coexisted, though the latter generally dominated campus politics (Jomo, Hassan, and Ahmad Shabery 1989:154). The two primary factions in the movement were an Arabic- and religious-educated group that pressed Malays to become more devout, and youths newly educated in Malaysia or abroad. By the late 1970s, this latter group comprised about 15 percent of undergraduates and graduates of local universities. While their knowledge of Islam was less complete than that of the first faction, their commitment was comparable and they concentrated on developing organizations to promote Islamization in society (Mohamad 1981:1040-41). Brokered by organizations like ABIM and leaders like Anwar Ibrahim, the Islamic resurgence permeated between campus and the broader polity, inflecting the government’s Islamization drive of the 1980s-90s. The goals of the dakwah movement overall – if such a simplification is possible – were Islamization of society, both through closer observance of the tenets of Islam among Muslims and through conversion of non-Muslims, and (more controversially, since many Malays as well as non-Malays preferred a secular state) Islamization of the state (Mohamad 1981:1045). The movement initially assumed a moderate stance: ABIM, for instance, never called for immediate establishment of an Islamic state or implementation of *syariah* law under Anwar’s leadership, but urged students to be sociopolitically aware and pursue incremental, progressive Islamization. By the end of the 1970s, however, especially as the first post-NEP cohort of more “fundamentalist”-inspired students returned from their government-sponsored studies abroad, the movement became more radicalized (Zainah 1990:33).

The flagship dakwah organization of the early 1970s was ABIM, founded in 1971. ABIM formed to enable Muslims who had been active in PKPIM and comparable groups while in school to continue their dakwah activities after graduation (Mohamad 1981:1041-42). ABIM prospered under the charismatic leadership of Anwar Ibrahim from its early days until he joined UMNO in 1982. The social issues-oriented dakwah organizations that dominated on campus were closely linked with ABIM, at least until Anwar’s departure – and ABIM, in turn, relied heavily on student support (Jomo, Hassan, and Ahmad Shabery 1989:154; Zainah 1987:11). PKPIM is rooted in the more radical campus of the 1960s and drew members primarily from UM

and teacher training colleges as the revival gained steam. Among other causes, both spiritual and social, PKPIM supported Thai Muslim separatists and was the first to call for the creation of an Islamic university in Malaysia in 1970 (Anwar Ibrahim, as head of PKPIM, appealed by letter to PM Tun Razak) – a demand ultimately granted in 1983 (Nagata 1980:409-10; letter from Anwar Ibrahim to Tun Razak, 23 Sept. 1970).

Other dakwah organizations, particularly the Islamic Republic (IR), were more radical and political in approach from the outset. IR eventually nudged PKPIM and ABIM from their preeminent position on university campuses (Zainah 1987), though PMI subsequently assumed dominance. Two other main groups in the dakwah movement were Darul Arqam, which promoted an austere, self-sufficient communal lifestyle, guided by Islam and with total gender segregation; and the less influential Jamaat Tabligh, a mission-oriented, all-male organization (Zainah 1987). All these groups had in common a tendency to focus on Islam and campus issues. Non-Malays became increasingly more marginalized from campus-level student leadership through the 1980s (Jomo, Hassan, and Ahmad Shabery 1989:154).

Campus Islamist groups have echoed PAS in coming out on social issues, decrying “morally decadent” behavior such as women’s wearing immodest clothing, public displays of affection, or the staging of activities on campus purely for entertainment purposes. These appeals may be placidly presented, as through an August 1989 memorandum from PMI to UM authorities asking for the imposition of a moral code, to be enforced by university guards (Zainah 1990:34). Other times, these appeals may be more strident. For instance, in September 1989, around three hundred UM students demonstrated against a campus concert by pop singer Sheila Majid. Twenty-two students were arrested and the secretary and treasurer of PMIUM were detained for a week under the ISA for questioning (DEMA 2003:10).

October 1987 saw a major crackdown on opposition parties and social activists, dubbed Operasi Lalang, that reverberated on campuses. Around one hundred politicians, lawyers, social activists, artists, and academics were detained under the ISA and the publishing permits of three newspapers were revoked. PM Mahathir cited increasing racial and religious tensions – purportedly fomented by the DAP and PAS – that threatened to lead to riots, especially given the exacerbation of economic recession and high unemployment (*Malaysian Digest*, Nov. 1987:4). All gatherings and rallies nationwide were also banned. Indeed, cultural activities had been and continue to be subjects of racialized controversy on campus. The Student Affairs Department at the various universities has actively curtailed certain student activities, such as Chinese New Year events, moon cake festivals, lion dances, and Chinese language classes (DEMA 2003:14; ISREC 2003a).

Overall, then, compared with the decade preceding the amendments to the UUCA in 1975, the next twenty years were notably placid, at least measured in terms of student protest activity. Students staged virtually no demonstrations for five years after the amendments, then only sporadic ones in the years after that (see Junaidi 1993:106, 113-17 for a stark accounting of this trend through 1986). All the same, students were not inactive entirely, even if their foci and ideological orientations shifted more toward campus issues and Islam than previously.

*Late 1990s – present*

Student activism began to perk up again in the late 1990s. An anti-Israel demonstration in 1997 marked the start of this new wave (ISREC 2003b). While some of the issues motivating students were unique to the campus environment – most notably continuing demands for the abolishment of the UUCA – others reflected the national political scene. For instance, the Gerakan Mahasiswa Mansuhkan ISA (Abolish ISA Student Movement, GMMI) has energetically carried on the enduring cause of opposing the ISA. Moreover, coalitions such as the Federation of Islamic Students of Malaysia (GAMIS), Barisan Bertindak Mahasiswa Negara (National Student Action Front, BBMN), and GMMI all articulated concern for the poor, underprivileged, and marginalized in society rather than just for students (ISREC 2003b). The *Reformasi* movement that began with the dismissal in September 1999 of deputy prime minister Anwar Ibrahim motivated more students to get involved. They joined off-campus non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and opposition parties in demanding social justice, civil liberties, and good governance. Sporadic protests and responses continued even after most Reformasi activity had tapered off, centering on government's Vision School Plan, the ISA, and other issues (ISREC 2003b). The American attacks on Afghanistan and Iraq prompted further engagement. For example, nine student and youth organizations allied in Gabungan Pelajar Malaysia Anti Perang (Malaysian Students' Anti-War Coalition, GEMPAR) to press for a withdrawal of troops from Iraq and for US President George Bush to be brought before a war crimes tribunal (GEMPAR leaflets).

Perturbed by students' critical engagement in things political, the government stressed that students should be grateful for their scholarships and places in the universities (especially Malay beneficiaries of affirmative action policies), and should focus on their studies rather than on politics. Student activists, warned the government, were likely to be manipulated by outside agents and to give Malaysia a bad name internationally (DEMA 2003:11). The government launched a harsh crackdown against the resurgence of student activism with arrests (for instance, those described at the start of this paper), as well as a spate of expulsions, closing or freezing the assets of student societies (PMI at USM and UiTM, as well as others), and labeling groups – especially Islamist ones, in the post-9/11 environment – as militant or extremist (for instance, GAMIS) (ISREC 2003b; 2001). The authorities also worked to intimidate students by such means as calling their families to report the students' political activities (ISREC 2003b; interviews). Faculty were not immune. Professor Chandra Muzaffar, a staunch supporter of Reformasi who came to play a leading role in the newly-formed Parti Keadilan Nasional (PKN), was denied renewal of his contract in February 1999 (DEMA 2003:11-12, 15) and Mahathir “personally attacked” economist Jomo K.S. when he filed a lawsuit challenging the electoral rolls for the 1999 general elections (ISREC 2003a). University officials who hesitated to take harsh action were criticized in the media and in parliament (ISREC 2003b), and the Education Ministry convened a disciplinary panel in late 1999 to consider reports of teachers who had “incited” their students against the government. That September, the ministry reportedly “acted against” several teachers for having engaged in “anti-government” activities (DEMA 2003:16).

Aside from protests, campus elections have also become a key site for political engagement, though not necessarily with the same sort of import. UUCA guidelines against students' involvement with political parties notwithstanding, campus elections have long been

marked by purported meddling by both government and opposition parties; the polls are sometimes deemed a proxy for national-level contests. Students align with particular blocs to contest SRC elections, although only some campuses (UM, UKM, and USM, for instance) allow them officially to contest in groups (i.e., parties). Students are known (even if they deny partisanship) to be either pro-government (*pro-aspirasi kerajaan*) or pro-PAS (primarily PMI), though ABIM and IR also have their own factions, and some students run as “independents” (Kariena 2003; Mohd. Izani 2002; DEMA 2003:10; interviews). In the 1980s, the pro-PAS student groups joined with other Islamist groups to form an Islamic bloc, while Chinese and Indian students joined with Malays parties to form a campus version of the BN. Campaigns, too, mimic those off-campus, complete with poster wars and charges of vote-buying and “dirty tactics” (Mohd. Shuhaimi 1995:20-22, 48-50).

Whether due to closer monitoring and more media attention or to an actual increase in incidence, evidence of these irregularities seems to be escalating. The 2001 elections brought charges of university officials’ having supported certain “preferred student groups” and mistreated others, especially Islamic groups (ISREC 2003b). Then in 2002, six UTM students incurred fines for having complained to SUHAKAM about irregularities in that year’s campus elections (*Malaysiakini*, 28 August 2003). In 2003, “pro-opposition” students complained that they were contesting not just against other students, but against the administration, as well (ISREC report cited in Kariena 2003). That year’s polls were especially contentious. PAS and “anti-establishment” groups charged that UMNO Youth gave pro-government candidates money and cellular phones; they demanded that SUHAKAM investigate. Other claims were perhaps less colorful: that administrators were improperly involved in UPM elections, had hindered anti-establishment students from contesting in UiTM, had conducted midnight raids on “anti-establishment” students’ rooms at UPM and UKM and confiscated documents, had made harassing phone calls to “anti-establishment” candidates’ families, had monitored students’ movements and prevented distribution of leaflets or other campaign materials, had failed to keep students’ votes secret, had threatened students with expulsion if they voted against the pro-government faction, or had timed elections improperly, rendering them illegal. A coalition of students’, youth, and civil rights organizations compiled a list of purported abuses and charged the authorities at six universities with having violated the rules of fair, democratic elections by intimidating voters and preventing some candidates from running. UMNO denied the charges. Education Minister Musa Mohamed declared the polls “clean enough,” while his deputy waffled, asserting that if the government was involved, PAS probably was, too (*Malaysiakini*, 22, 25, and 28 August; 4 and 18 September; 20 October 2003).<sup>37</sup>

Students have also offered support to off-campus electoral campaigns, especially for PAS and other opposition parties (for instance, PKN in 1999). Their doing so not only assists the parties in a material sense, but also provides a stream of likely future leaders (Kariena 2003).

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<sup>37</sup> As a few of these articles note, in accordance with the UUCA, sources had to remain anonymous, since students are forbidden to make statements to the media without the written approval of the VC.

Recognizing these ties, UMNO has been particularly keen to “recapture” the campuses from the PAS-linked PMI, which has dominated since the 1970s. As of the 2002 campus elections, “anti-establishment” factions dominated at UM, UKM, UPM, USM, and Universiti Islam Antarabangsa (UIA, International Islamic University or IIU). In 2003, pro-government factions won control of UPM and UKM, but the anti-establishment faction regained control of UTM (*Malaysiakini*, 18 September 2003).

Shifts in the campus environment are reflected in the progress of campus elections. For instance, UM’s multiracial Students United Front wrested control from the competing Islamist group (centered around PMIUM) in heated December 1989 elections – per observer Zainah Anwar, “a clear sign of moderation in student activism on the campuses” since early 1988 (Zainah 1990:32). She explains that while since the mid-1970s, student unions had been almost continuously dominated by Islamist groups (generally linked with PAS), “liberal, multi-racial, nationalist” groups had started to challenge that dominance by the late 1980s (Zainah 1990:32-33). However, this change reflected not merely a change in orientation among students, but also administration attempts to curb more radical Islamist groups – like requiring a minimum of a “B” average for students to stand for election, changing the rules for residential college committee elections to prevent hegemonic control, and developing alternative campus activities to divert students from Islamic programs (Zainah 1990:32-33).

Aside from these primarily campus-focused political activities, a small but energetic proportion of students, taking inspiration from the radical activists of the 1960s-70s (and actively mentored by Hishamuddin Rais himself), has worked especially since the late 1990s to rekindle student engagement with issues of corruption, civil liberties, democracy, and so forth. Among the groups involved in these activities are the multiracial (but mostly Chinese) Malaysian Youth and Student Democratic Movement (DEMA), which focuses on a range of social justice issues (DEMA leaflet; interviews); Universiti Bangsar Utama (UBU – with the *double entendre* fully intended, per its founder<sup>38</sup>), which engages with issues such as the ISA, but also provides social services to the area surrounding the UM campus; Independent Student Resource and Legal Training Centre (ISREC), which focuses on research and legal aid related to students’ rights and human rights more broadly (ISREC leaflet; interviews); and an array of coalitions such as the aforementioned GMMI, many of them working in concert with advocacy-oriented non-governmental organizations. Several of the issues pressed by this branch of the contemporary student movement rest at the intersection of campus and national politics. As enumerated by DEMA, these foci include students’ right to education (and hence opposition to the commercialization of higher education), to freedom of expression (and hence opposition to the UUCA), and to freedom of association (and hence opposition to the VC’s power over student organizations) (DEMA 2003:17-18). Other issues that have sparked engagement in recent years include protests over the interest rate on loans from the National Higher Education Providence Fund, international issues, and more (ISREC 2003b).

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<sup>38</sup> Interview with Hishamuddin Rais, 18 December 2003, Kuala Lumpur.

By the late 1990s, “Generation M” or “Gen M” – students born after 1981, and thus having lived under only the prime ministership of Mahathir Mohamad (1981-2003) – had overtaken the campuses (UPP-IKD 2003:24).<sup>39</sup> This cohort can be defined in either of two ways. Gen M is presumed preoccupied “with their own pursuit of wealth and economic well being” (UPP-IKD 2003:31). On the other hand, thanks to Malaysian modernization under Mahathir, Gen M has been “more exposed to ideas concerning governance, democracy and rule of law,” as well as learning about other cultures, systems, and people (UPP-IKD 2003:31). While most members of Gen M see “politics as a dirty word” and decline to get involved, their level of awareness may thus be high. Preempting their involvement are factors such as deference to elders, peer pressure, insulation from society, lack of awareness of their rights, cynicism, lack of spare time, and restrictive laws (UPP-IKD 2003:33, 36-39). Clearly, though, at least some Gen M students have translated their exposure to democracy and related concepts into an activist agenda. Hence, while much of student activism may have become “contained”<sup>40</sup> as elections have supplanted demonstrations as the key moments for student engagement, the legacy of the past has not been entirely neglected.

### **Putting the campus in context**

The direction of influence between campus and state is neither clear nor consistent. Students may have either led or followed national political trends. Observing dynamics of organization and mobilization on campus helps to complicate our understanding of Malaysian politics more broadly, however. For instance, the post-election riots of 13 May 1969 are most commonly characterized as “ethnic”: Malays attacked Chinese in frustrated response to the increasing political as well as economic dominance of the latter. The fact that the major points of ferment in the preceding few years on campus – and the extent of ferment was significant – were captured far better through an economic lens (i.e., multiracial students’ struggling to end rural poverty) than a racial one suggests the significance of other factors.

Part of what makes the campus environment distinctive in Malaysia is the way in which developing demographic changes play themselves out there. Education is generally presumed to erode prejudice and foster tolerance. The NEP, too, was purportedly meant to speed the decline of communal mistrust and animosity in Malaysia, in large part by bringing Malays into higher education. Prior to 1969, Chinese students comprised around 70 percent of the total Malaysian student population; by the mid-1970s, that proportion had declined to around 30 percent, while the new UKM was almost completely Malay. Moreover, an increasing majority of Malay

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<sup>39</sup> As of the 2000 Census, two-thirds of Malaysians were under the age of 35, and thus part of “Generation M” (UPP-IKD 2003:25).

<sup>40</sup> I refer here to McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly’s definition of “contained” and “transgressive” contention. In the former, “all parties [involved in “episodic, public collective” claim-making], are previously established actors employing well established means of claim making.” In the latter, “at least some parties to the conflict are newly self-identified political actors and/or ... at least some parties employ innovative collective action” (McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001:7-8).

students were from rural areas, bringing with them “a strong Islamic tradition and genuine social concern about the poverty amongst rural Malays and the growing affluence of a small class of professional urbanized Malays and a larger community of Chinese businessmen and professionals” (Silverstein 1976:199). As Peiris explains of 1974’s Baling protest, among students newly arrived on campus from rural areas, their support of the peasants was “not an intellectual exercise. It was a gut reaction from the students’ own experience of rural misery” (Peiris 1984:54-55).

However, particularly since implementation of the UUCA and the repression of the non-communal campus left, the student movement in Malaysia has been deeply divided along racial lines. Indeed, the campus has never been a site of true racial integration, though some left-wing organizations, at least, were relatively mixed. As the DAP newsletter proclaimed after the 1968 UMSU elections, “Racialism stalks in the University of Malaya, as it stalks in the Malaysian society” (*Rocket*, Aug./Sept. 1968:1). The *Majid Report* of 1971 on race relations at UM found “a mutual lack of comprehension and understanding” across racial groups that might lead to “polarization on serious political issues and even to hostility in times of student crisis” (cited in Marimuthu 1984:49-50). A decade after the implementation of the NEP, Thangavelu Marimuthu found that students at the five universities then in operation still tended toward communalism. Most studies since then have found that students continue to identify and interact on the basis of ethnicity (for instance, Chandra 1984; Marimuthu 1984; Abraham 1999). In contrast, Heng Peck Koon found a strong sense of a shared Malaysian identity among the members of “Generation M” she surveyed in 1999-2000: about 70 percent of respondents ranked this identity as at least equally important to their own ethnic identity, and more than 80 percent (of both Malays and non-Malays) said Malaysia’s multiracial harmony, social and political stability, and economic success made them proud to be Malaysian. Even so, Heng still noted pronounced racial divisions between Malay and Chinese conceptions of nationhood – Islam and the Malay language were cited by most Malays as defining traits of Malaysian identity, as opposed to cultural and religious diversity among most Chinese students, for instance (Heng 2004:373-75).

Prior to 1969, student initiatives generally reflected a non-ethnic perspective and class analysis (the major alternative) could be made to seem more resonant than later on, not least since socialist parties and organizations were still relatively overt and thriving in Malaysia. Like workplace-based movements, student movements were significantly affected by the influx of Malay students into universities with the start of the NEP, especially given religious revivalism. By 1975, Malays were in the majority among tertiary students; just three years later, that proportion had jumped to two-thirds (Nagata 1980:411). The most significant societies in terms of their influence on students’ values and attitudes were (clearly communal) religious ones. As moments of mobilization were met with harsh repression and the reinforcement of legal constraints, the space for student organization narrowed. However, former student activist Hishamuddin Rais argues, the constriction of democratic space in the mid-1970s affected not just students, but all Malaysians. The government’s increasingly pro-business, pro-capitalist approach was incompatible with too much dissent on campus or off, especially from the left (Hishamuddin 2002).

Over time, the Malaysian government has become “increasingly reliant upon suppression and repression to maintain power” in the face of mass unrest (Hassan and Siti Nor 1984:41). In

the 1960s, the government was first suspicious of, then felt threatened by, increasing student radicalism. The government worried that students would be manipulated by political parties, but also thought students should accept certain restraints in exchange for the liberties they enjoyed as part of their education (for instance, the ability to read Marx on campus, whereas the general public could not). In 1966, the Tunku complained in a convocation speech that some students were acting like an opposition political party and trying to pressure the government, which he deemed inappropriate. UMSU and the PKPM replied in turn that as citizens, students should be able to think and act politically, including criticizing their leaders (Silverstein 1970:17). The government continued to disagree and ultimately passed the UUCA to discourage students more firmly from engaging with off-campus issues or organizations. However, “overkill in controlling student activism is grudgingly recognized by some educational authorities ... [as having] adverse implications in terms of student alienation, inexperience, and lack of leadership abilities” (Jomo, Hassan, and Ahmad Shabery 1989:154).

Having surveyed both the history of Malaysian student activism and contemporary attitudes, Junaidi Abu Bakar concludes that the UUCA has whittled away at the intellectual characteristics of the university and furthered instead its bureaucratizing function (Junaidi 1993:105). Students, she finds, have become complacent: most are no longer even critical of the UUCA, let alone prepared to rise up against it. The majority of students (especially in the science stream and Malays) have only limited knowledge about or awareness of the implications of the UUCA, even though it provides the basic policy framework governing their lives on campus. She attributes this apparent apathy to a Weberian process of routinization of authority: students today see the limitations they encounter on their freedoms as students as natural. Indeed, they appreciate the peace and harmony engendered by the UUCA and the services provided by the Student Affairs Department on campus. The majority of students today have never attended a political seminar; almost half have never even attended a political forum or *ceramah* (public talk, as during an election campaign). Junaidi worries about what these trends mean for Malaysians’ understanding of the role of the university as well as of students and academics in society, and for the new generation’s preparation for later political participation (Junaidi 1993:108-110). If students are not allowed to exercise citizenship skills on campus, they may not be able to develop these later – so an ineffective campus-based opposition may translate into an increasingly less effective formal opposition over time.

### **Are Malaysian students different?**

Malaysia has much in common with other plural, postcolonial states, many of which have also used education policy as a critical arena for nation-building. In other developing states, as well, the imperatives of the “rice bowl” may seem to dampen youthful ire so long as the government is delivering on its economic policies – though on the converse, the apparent lack of correlation between growth of the middle class and pro-democratic, secular priorities among so many

educated youths in Malaysia would appear to counter conventional wisdom regarding postindustrial societies.<sup>41</sup> Two factors that go some way toward explaining why student activism looks different in Malaysia than elsewhere in the region are the availability of more “tame” channels for participation and the relative lack of elitism attached to student status.<sup>42</sup>

Fischer argued in 1963 that students throughout Southeast Asia were becoming increasingly more involved with politics as a result of malaise: the universities were expanding too quickly to adapt appropriately, modernization of traditional societies caused inevitable strains, and future prospects for the increasing number of graduates were uncertain. Moreover, the separation of youths from traditional structures of authority, sudden focus on examination-based advancement and exposure to foreign languages and influences, and generation gap that thus grew increased alienation, and hence students’ propensity for activism (Fischer 1963). This explanation seems to hold reasonably well for Malaysia, except for the fact that aggressive student activism tapered off so soon after the first influx of rural, “traditional” students under the NEP. Should not the features Fischer lists still have sparked activism for at least a bit longer?

It is true that Malaysian students face constraints on their activism. However, it is not a given that the UUCA would quell political involvement. At the time of its passage, opposition MP Tan Chee Khoo vented, “these repressive measures far from curbing students’ political activities, will harden their attitude and if they cannot conduct their activities openly they will just go underground” (quoted in Silverstein 1976:202). Similarly, *Mahasiswa Negara* opined, “In attempting to prohibit a healthy interest and participation in politics, the government is paving the way for unhealthy, undercover activities” (7 June 1971:14). That process happened elsewhere – Burma or Indonesia, for instance – but not in Malaysia, or at least not to any significant extent.

Perhaps the shift to contained contention – religious organizations that look reasonably tame to the state, elections that can be monitored and perhaps controlled, and so forth – represents a shift in tactics more than just a diminution of activism compared with student movements elsewhere. Students were able to engage openly, as Tan argued they should, but the scope of that engagement was limited. The power dynamics behind student involvement are particularly clear when governments respond with force to student protests, but “those overt displays shed light on student actions occurring in more subtle forms” (Boren 2001). Both on campus and off, overt displays are less common than the contained contention of backstage negotiations, but both are significant. Malaysian students *have* taken comparatively radical action in the past. While the UUCA was not yet in effect at the peak of that activity, other regulations were in place. Silverstein argues that these protests “must be viewed as more than youthful exuberance or irresponsibility. The students were well aware that their future careers as

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<sup>41</sup> Silverstein (1970 and 1976) cogently compares student political activism first just in Burma and Malaysia, then adds Singapore and Thailand to the mix. However, given how much has changed since then both on campus and off in all these countries, it is plausible to assume that his conclusions may no longer hold.

<sup>42</sup> These conclusions are tentative and not very clearly articulated as yet.

students and government employees were put in danger by taking such actions” (Silverstein 1970:17). He suggests that students struck out both because the government was trying “to keep politics off the campus and the students out of political involvement” and because they had so few channels through which to express dissent. The Speaker’s Corner was one such student-created venue, and filled the void left by the government’s refusal to register a political club for students (Silverstein 1970:17). The fact that students do have at least some channels now may explain why they have felt less need to be so transgressive in their activism as in more authoritarian contexts – much as the lack of much radical protest activity in Malaysia compared with elsewhere may be attributed to the presence of opposition parties with at least some scope for efficacy.

Unlike, for instance, in Burma, Malaysian student leaders reached out to counterparts at other institutes for higher education, but not to students at other levels. While limiting the scope of the movement, this trait did mean participants were mature enough (and had the necessary financial resources on their own) to make decisions and at least initially, to resist cooptation by professional politicians – and the movement in Malaysia has retained throughout its primary focus on university student needs (Silverstein 1970:21-22). In the 1960s, also unlike in other countries (again, Burma is a good example), Malaysian students were not captured by any political party. Many students felt themselves intellectually superior to and better informed than the politicians, and as elsewhere, students considered themselves part of an intellectual elite rather than of a kind with the rest of their age cohort – while (to the resentment of university students) political parties recruited most youth and other leaders from among the less well-educated non-elite (Silverstein 1970:18).<sup>43</sup>

Indeed, part of the reason for student activism in Malaysia in the past seemed to be students’ irritation with corruption in government – suggesting an internalized sense among students of being moral arbiters for the nation – as well as resentment against the government’s “talking down” to them (Peiris 1984:54). Moreover, student demands inspired so much popular support – for instance, at the time of the 1969 elections – because students were seen as sincere and not driven by private objectives (Hishamuddin 2002). Given the more recent intervention of political parties in campus politics, it is not clear whether contemporary students could still claim the same moral standing. For instance, one commentator argues that “the quality of students today cannot be compared to that of students in the past,” with implications for students’ suitability to serve as “spokespeople and agents of social change” (Md. Ibrahim 1984-85:113).

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<sup>43</sup> As the first issue of the USM Student Union journal *Insaf* proclaimed in 1974, “Social action and social justice is a legitimate and necessary part of education. ... INSAF realises students’ obligations to society and believes in student power as a catalyst for change” (*Insaf*, Nov./Dec. 1974). Alas, the journal was launched just before the 1975 amendments to the UUCA, and was thus short-lived. Contra Silverstein, though, the roster of prominent student activists of decades past reads like a “who’s who” of political leaders from both government and opposition parties (and in many cases, political detainees).

The change from a focus on transgressive to contained contention on campus implies that students are no longer seen – and do not see themselves – as substantially different sorts of political actors from anyone else, even if the language of “purity” still crops up when activists explain their motivations. It would appear that changes in the selection criteria for universities, particularly with the NEP (and subsequently by loosening restrictions on foreign universities and private colleges, in order to expand the number of places for students), have worked to diminish the assumption that university students comprise an elite with special intellectual and moral standing. The comparatively technocratic bent of Malaysian higher education supports this conclusion: higher education has been seen since colonial days more as a tool for forging the necessary human resources for economic development than for cultivation of intellectual elites,<sup>44</sup> and the sector has become increasingly commercialized in approach and intended applications over time. If university is just one more step in training for economic productivity, students should have no special status as the “conscience” of the nation, as they may claim elsewhere.

All the same, those students who *are* activists tend to see themselves as occupying the same sort of special moral space as students as their counterparts elsewhere. In addition, present and former activists are familiar with the nature and impact of student movements in other countries and cite those supranational interventions as inspirational. (It is surprising how comparatively scant the concrete links across student movements in the region have been, though, especially during the height of left-wing militancy and shared anti-Americanism in a number of states in the 1960s-70s.<sup>45</sup>) Thus, the commercialization and widespread provision of higher education in Malaysia probably does eat away at what special status students can rightly claim as political actors, but it is not clear how much it does so (or whether this same dynamic applies generically to contemporary developing or newly-industrialized states). In sum, then, while its course has been inconsistent, student engagement has remained a persistent part of the Malaysian political scene and offers a useful lens on the changes in and distinctiveness of the nation’s politics.

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<sup>44</sup> See, for instance, Goh Hock Guan’s critique of the Higher Education Planning Committee Report. He complains that the Report “concentrates largely on the need to produce so many more doctors, engineers, dentists, architects, arts men, agriculturalists, etc.,” but not “nation builders” (*Rocket*, July/Aug. 1968: 4-5).

<sup>45</sup> The various student journals – especially UM’s *Mahasiswa Negara* and UKM’s *Gemasiswa* – did provide regular coverage of student activism elsewhere, and student unions from across Asia/ASEAN did pursue cooperation and coordination (for instance: *Mahasiswa Negara*, Sept. 1961 and Jan. 18, 1971; *Gemasiswa*, June 20, 1972).

## **Acronyms**

|         |                                                                                                          |
|---------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| ABIM    | Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia (Malaysian Islamic Youth Movement)                                         |
| ASA     | Asian Students Association                                                                               |
| BN      | Barisan Nasional (National Front)                                                                        |
| CLS     | Chinese Language Society                                                                                 |
| DAP     | Democratic Action Party                                                                                  |
| DEMA    | Malaysian Youth and Students Democratic Front                                                            |
| FRU     | Federal Reserve Unit (riot police)                                                                       |
| GAMIS   | Federation of Islamic Students of Malaysia                                                               |
| GMMI    | Gerakan Mahasiswa Mansuhkan ISA (Abolish ISA Student Movement)                                           |
| GPMS    | Gabungan Pelajar <sup>2</sup> Melayu Semenanjung (Peninsular Malays' Students' Union)                    |
| IR      | Islamic Republic                                                                                         |
| ISA     | Internal Security Act                                                                                    |
| MTN     | Majlis Tertinggi Nasionalis (Nationalist Executive Council)                                              |
| MTS     | Majlis Tertinggi Sementara (Temporary Executive Council)                                                 |
| NEP     | New Economic Policy                                                                                      |
| PAP     | People's Action Party                                                                                    |
| PAS     | Parti Islam seMalaysia (Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party)                                                     |
| PBMUM   | Persatuan Bahasa Malaysia Universiti Malaysia (UM Malay Language Society)                                |
| PKPIM   | Persatuan Kebangsaan Pelajar <sup>2</sup> Islam Malaysia (National Union of Muslim Students of Malaysia) |
| PKPM    | Persatuan Kebangsaan Pelajar <sup>2</sup> Malaysia (National Union of Malaysian Students)\               |
| PMI(UM) | Persatuan Mahasiswa Islam (Muslim Students' Society [of UM])                                             |
| P(S)RM  | Parti (Sosialis) Rakyat Malaysia (Malaysian [Socialist] People's Party)                                  |
| SUHAKAM | Suruhanjaya Hak Asasi Malaysia (National Human Rights Commission)                                        |
| UiTM    | Universiti Teknologi Mara (Mara University of Technology)                                                |
| UKM     | Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (National University of Malaysia)                                         |
| UM      | Universiti Malaya                                                                                        |
| UMNO    | United Malays' National Organisation                                                                     |
| UMSU    | Universiti Malaya Student Union (PMUM)                                                                   |
| UPM     | Universiti Pertanian Malaysia (Agricultural University of Malaysia)                                      |
| USM     | Universiti Sains Malaysia (Science University of Malaysia)                                               |
| UTM     | Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (Technology University of Malaysia)                                        |
| UBU     | Universiti Bangsar Utama                                                                                 |
| UUCA    | Universities and University Colleges Act (AUKU)                                                          |
| UUM     | Universiti Utara Malaysia (Northern University)                                                          |

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