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# The Labour Movement and Party Politics in Malaysia

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## Abstract

*This manuscript aims at examining the relationship between working class cleavage and party politics in Malaysia. My focus will be on the way in which conservative elites in Malaysia have suppressed the labour movement for the purpose of maintaining and consolidating their dominances. The labour movement of Malaysia has been impeded by lack of autonomy against external structure and by internal division. Externally, economic elites, employers have dwarfed labour in organizational capacity and finance, and ruling elites, governments have silenced the labour movement through police and suppressive laws. In the process, political and economic elites capitalized on ethnic cleavage and overshadowed class cleavage. Combined with this external restriction, trade unionism has been limited by internal division within and among trade unions. These already weakened unions have thus failed to exert power in politics, let alone to establish socialist parties in Malaysia.*

**Key words:** labour movement, Malaysia, trade union, political party

This manuscript examines the relationship between working class cleavage and the predominant political parties in Malaysia. My focus will be on the way in which conservative elites in Malaysia have suppressed the labour movement for the purpose of maintaining and consolidating their dominances. The control over labour has contributed to the maintenance and even the strengthening of dominant political parties led by conservative elites in two ways, economically and politically.

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Economically, the control over labour and restraining the bargaining power of trade unions were closely related to the nature of economies of Malaysia: the export-oriented economy heavily depending upon the low wages of labour and the lack of financial resources in the economic sector which was in need of attracting foreign investment. Conservative governments committed to a low wage policy and regulated trade unions in order to attract foreign investment and to promote industrialisation. By contrast, the first priority of labour was its welfare particularly, in improving working condition and wages for which trade unions concentrated on their bargaining power. Conservative elites in Malaysia justified their low wage policy for the fast growing export/economy, and their control over trade unions for appealing to foreign investment. Both foreign investment and the high-speed increase of export were regarded as indispensable elements for the rapid economic development and industrialisation. Conservative elites and parties claimed their credit for the rapid and stable economic development in the two countries, which in turn encouraged the public to support the dominant parties led by conservative elites. This political gain of conservative elites in Malaysia was further extended by their control over the cleavage structures based on ethnicity and ideology, respectively.

Politically, the Malay elites suppressed the labour movement which was led by the radical leaders largely, non-Malays, and trade unions under the influence of the MCP, (Malayan Communist Party) which was mainly composed of the ethnic Chinese. Gradually, the Malay elites replaced the radical leadership of Chinese with the moderate leadership of Malays and put trade unions under their influence. The moderate trade unions and leaders were mobilised for the support of the UMNO and the maintenance of its dominance. In summary, conservative elites in Malaysia consolidated their dominance by weakening the labour movement and banning the radical political groups pro-Chinese and pro-Communists. Conservative elites marginalised the labour movement and shattered the nexus between labour and the radical political group socialists and communists as well as the progressive politicians.

## I The Labour Movement and Socialist Party

Further, I will elaborate this relationship between dominance of conservative parties and the limit of labour movement and thus the lack of socialist parties in Malaysia. On the question of why there have been no significant socialist parties in Malaysia, unlike in Europe, even though the size of working class has increased rapidly, there are several answers. First, conservative governments colonial and post-colonial have dominated politics in Malaysia, and have banned socialist and communist parties by law. Moreover, repressive government labour policies and harsh managerial controls weakened workers such an extent that labour could not boost the power of socialists, unlike in Europe where socialist parties were supported by trade unions.

The number and proportion of manual industrial workers in the population increased in most European countries since the Industrial Revolution - first in Britain and then in the rest of Europe. Working class identity was strengthened not only through their increasing number but also through their upgrading status - from casual labourers to formal employment and semi-skills. This identity developed into extensive and political class organization- trade union movement.<sup>1)</sup>

More importantly, however, the strength of trade unions has translated into the electoral successes of socialist parties in Europe by the early twentieth century.<sup>2)</sup> Therefore, the question is not whether socialist parties in Western Europe are well established, but to what extent they have dominated the political arena - below or above 50 percentage of votes. Between 1917 and 1978, for instance, socialist parties have won more than 50 percent of votes in six countries: Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Finland, Austria and Luxembourg. It is only in Norway and Sweden that this majority has been maintained, however.<sup>3)</sup> So Socialist parties have firmly established themselves in the politics of Western Europe.

That is different from what happened in Malaysia where socialist groups have been weak and have been overshadowed by conservatives. In the 1940s, for

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<sup>1)</sup> Michael Mann, *The Sources of Social Power* vol. II *The Rise of Classes and Nation-States, 1760-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), chapters 15 and 17-18.

<sup>2)</sup> Adam Przeworski and John Sprague, *Paper Stones: A History of Electoral Socialism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), chapter 1.

<sup>3)</sup> Stefano Bartolini, "The European Left Since World War I: Size, Composition and Patterns of Electoral Development," in *Western European Party Systems: Continuity and Change* eds Hans Daalder and Peter Mair (London: Sage, 1983), 159.

example, the labour movement in Malaya increased its bargaining power and enjoyed its peak of power under the leadership of the MCP. Yet the strength of trade unions failed to translate into the political power in Malaya unlike in Europe. Offensive action from employers as well as from governments made the political left meaningless in the landscape of Malaysian politics and has overshadowed the power of organized workers since 1948. More importantly, however, the weakness of the labour movement and socialist parties in Malaysia can be explained by the predominance of Malays who outmaneuvered other ethnic minorities, especially the ethnic Chinese.

In this research, I will examine first the limitation of the labour movement in Malaysia and its failure to translate its support into political power. My focus will be on the way in which political elites and employers took advantage of ethnic cleavages in controlling the labour movement which has been dominated at first by radical non-Malays and then by moderate Malays. This external suppression has hampered the development of the labour movement by replacing class cleavage with an ethnic one. More important, however, were the internal weakness of trade unionism and the role of leadership. In the process, ethnic cleavage will be emphasised: to what extent ethnic division among labour and its leadership has influenced the feeble labour movement and thus the weak socialist party in Malaysia.

Thus I will analyse the labour movement to find out a possible explanation for weak/fragile socialists and for lack of socialist parties in Malaysia. For this, I will follow Panebianco's concept of institutionalisation.<sup>4)</sup> Panebianco measures institutionalisation on two scales, externally autonomy and internally systemness. Externally, he focuses on the organisation's degree of autonomy vis--vis its environment, and internally, on its degree of systemness - interdependence of its different internal sectors.<sup>5)</sup> He then highlights five means to evaluate these two scales of institutionalisation in parties.<sup>6)</sup> Of them I will concentrate on three elements: finance; relations with the external environment; and homogeneity of

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4) Angelo Panebianco, *Political Parties: Organization and Power*, trans. Marc Silver (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

5) Panebianco, *Political Parties*, 55-58.

6) Development of, or, lack of central bureaucracy, homogeneity of organizational structures, finance, relations with the external environment, and similarity between a party's "statutory norms" and its "actual power structure." Panebianco, *Political Parties*, 58-59.

organisational structures. Two factors will be employed to show to what extent governments and employers have dominated the labour movement. First, a highly institutionalised organization controls the uncertain environment i.e., the distribution of organisational incentives, while a lowly institutionalised one does not control the zone of uncertainty, and thus does not dominate incentive distribution. Second, and closely related to the first component, is financial resources: little and unstable financial resources contribute to the weakness of an institution, whereas big and reliable financial resources serve to strengthen the institution. Last, but most important, are organisational structures, since the structure of institution determines its power.<sup>7)</sup> The degree of a party's institutionalisation correlates with that of its leadership's solidarity, and reversibly with that of internal groups' independence. I will highlight to what extent government and employers have manipulated ethnic cleavage to control the labour movement in Malaysia.

With this concept of institutionalisation, I will analyse the labour movement in Malaysia. First, the growth of socialist parties in Europe and South America will be briefly examined by focusing on the relationship of trade unions and their political advancement/establishment of political parties. This brief examination of cases in Europe and South America will provide a general picture of the relationship between labour and socialist parties, which can be utilised for comparison with situations in Asian countries. Next, I will concentrate on the trade union movements and the weakness of socialist parties in Malaysia. Emphasis will be on the power balance between union leaders, on the one hand, and government and employers, on the other. I will examine to what extent government as well as employers dominated the labour movement with their superior resources organisational capacity and finance. I will focus on the political and economic elites and their role in capitalising on ethnic cleavages - to restrain radical trade unionists mainly non-Malays on the one hand, and to support moderate, conservative leaders Malays, on the other, showing how that has contributed to the predominance of conservative coalition the UMNO, in particular. Organisationally the division along size, sector, segment and ethnicity has weakened trade unions. Also, lack of a consolidated leadership has weakened trade unionism in Malaysia.

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<sup>7)</sup> Panebianco, *Political Parties*, 60.

In sum, the resources of the ruling elites, government and employers have restricted the labour movement in Malaysia, and the movement was further frustrated by internal division among, and within, unions.

## **II Industrial Transformation of labour and the Development of Socialist Parties in Europe and Latin America**

Before investigating the labour movement in Malaysia I will briefly examine various analyses of circumstances in Europe and South America where trade unions and socialist parties have been strong. By comparing the development of the labour movement and socialist parties in Europe and South America with that of Malaysia we can get a clear picture of the relationship between the labour movement and socialist parties in Malaysia.

Przeworski focuses on the dilemma of electoral/democratic socialism in Europe. He argues that the political behaviour of individuals is conditioned and developed by strategies of political groups. Thus the division of society into classes can be reshaped into the organization of politics in terms of class only through the mobilisation of political groups. In other words, the relative significance of class as a determinant of individual voting behaviour is a combined consequence of the strategies pursued by political parties. In the process, collective identity, group solidarity, and political commitment are transformed by political groups/institutions competing for their interests and views. Hence the particularistic interest of a class is translated into that of universalism through mobilisation strategies of political parties. The socialist parties' strategy to broaden their appeal transformed their ideology and class organisation. However, for two reasons, this contributed to the weakness of socialist parties in Europe until 1970s. First, by enlarging their support base, socialist parties watered down the general ideological importance of class and, consequently, weakened the driving force of class among workers an electoral trade-off. Since political parties do not mobilise individuals as workers but as people, masses, or simply citizens, they weaken the salience of class. Second, electoral mobilisation of the masses coincided with the disorganisation of workers as a class since parties of workers based on class conflict were transformed into those of the people.<sup>8)</sup> That is the dilemma of

democratic socialism, according to Przeworski: 1) the minority status of workers forced socialist parties to co-operate with classes other than workers to win elections yet only by diluting their ideology or 2) the workers can keep the purity of their class ideology through a party of workers alone which end up in electoral failure due to their minority. Democratic Socialists cannot carry on as a party of workers alone and at the same time expand their supports without compromising their own support among workers. In sum they are unable to win either way, according to Przeworski.<sup>9)</sup>

However, this electoral trade-off between support among the middle-class and recruitment of workers does not explain why socialist failed to win a majority vote in most European countries. Przeworski attributes this problem to the strategies of rival parties. Any strategy decisions are both symbolic and organisational. They concerned programs, platforms, and pronouncements, on the one hand, and organisation, on the other. Parties decide whom to organise and how to organise them - their organisational forms and their targets. Hence, the stagnation of socialist support is due both to their own electoral trade-off strategy and to the strategies of their opponents.<sup>10)</sup> The successes of electoral socialism in Norway and Sweden were dependent upon political mobilisation. Left-wing parties are able to increase their support because these parties did succeed in appealing to their potential supporters. Socialist parties based their supports on workers, and at the same time they was able to win supports from other groups through specific programs they offered and particular policies they pursued in office.<sup>11)</sup>

Similarly, Esping-Anderson maintains that social democratic power is associated with two historical forces: the arrangement of class coalitions and the party's control of class mobilisation through reformist procedures. But he emphasises the significance of the peasantry in the social democrats' break-through before World War II. The uniquely organised and democratic peasantry enabled social democrats to bring about the electoral successes in the Nordic countries.<sup>12)</sup> Unlike Przeworski, however, Esping-Anderson argues that

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8) Przeworski and Sprague, *Paper Stones*.

9) Przeworski and Sprague, *Paper Stones*, chapter 2.

10) Przeworski and Sprague, *Paper Stones*, chapter 3.

11) Przeworski and Sprague, *Paper Stones*, chapter 5.



socialist parties have been able to win votes of other classes without compromising ideology or principles through the fabrication of political constituencies and augmentation of public-sector, which in turn help expand employees. In any case, the social democrats need to forge political coalitions with other classes peasants or middle class though. The degree of reform is thus dependent upon the scale of dominance of the social democrats within the coalition. In sum the survival of social democrat parties relies on the capability for such a coalition - whether or not reforms have been able to generate a "broader, stronger, and even politically homogenic unity and solidarity" continuously.<sup>13)</sup>

Kitschelt's position is similar to those of Przeworski and Esping-Anderson in that he correlates the social democrats' electoral fortunes and controlling government power with their shifting program and their appeals. According to Kitschelt, social democracy has moved from the arena of resource distribution in 1970s to the physical and social organization of production and the cultural conditions of consumption in 1980s and 1990s in European societies. Hence the future of social democracy depends upon party leaders/activists and the parties' strategic appeals. Unlike Przeworski and Esping-Anderson, however, Kitschelt emphasises the internal structure of party strategies and cleavage structure based on factors other than class. First, Kitschelt elaborates the political dynamic of intra-party organization and the intellectual legacies of social democrats' debates. He analyses the internal arrangement for potential strategies conditioned by shifting competition within party systems and the dynamic of political choice inside political organisation. Second, Kitschelt holds that in advanced capitalism, class divisions are not the most feasible sources of collective political mobilisation. Rather divisions of education, occupation, gender, and employment sector are more likely to structure citizens' political consciousness and to appeal to them more powerfully than class.<sup>14)</sup>

He examines how internal party organization and intra-party coalition building mediate between the political system and the party's strategic appeals. Party strategies cannot succeed without the appropriate match of organisational forms

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<sup>12)</sup> Gosta Esping-Anderson, *Politics Against Markets: The social democratic road to power* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1985).

<sup>13)</sup> Esping-Anderson, *Politics Against Markets*, chapters 1 and 10.

<sup>14)</sup> Herbert Kitschelt, *The Transformation of European Social Democracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

and systemic conditions: the autonomy of the party leadership, the nature of membership recruitment and the level of organisational effectiveness.<sup>15)</sup> Hence social democracy's strategies and electoral fortunes are explained primarily by the patterns of parties' response to political competition in the electoral and legislative arena, and by their strategies in building intra-organisational coalition. Parties formulate organisational opportunities through membership recruitment, and party leaders transform opportunities through organisational autonomy. For their benefits, party activists and leaders change their parties' internal decision-making processes and manipulate their political structures. They can choose their constituencies and alter their appeals, by converting activists, rearranging coalitions, and changing organisational statutes inside parties.<sup>16)</sup>

Collier and Collier are different from the above scholars in two ways: first in their research area South America and second their approach focus on incorporation. They follow the historical development of the labour movement in Latin America by focusing on the concept of 'incorporation' and its legacy. They argue that state control of the working class transformed from repression exclusion to legalisation and institutionalisation incorporation. In parallel with the legitimisation of unions, political leaders sought to mobilise workers as a base of political support. This new state-labour relationship was possible due to the new political circumstances: a decline of older oligarchic groups and the rise of newer elites based on middle sectors. Collier and Collier divide two types of incorporation state and party according to primary goal, main agency and legacy. In the state incorporation period the de-politicisation of the labour movement was the principal goal, which was initiated by the legal and bureaucratic apparatus under an authoritarian regime. The initial regime then broke down and engendered a process of democratisation. In the party incorporation stage, on the other hand, a political party or political movement principally aimed at mobilising the working class in addition to controlling it. More progressive policies under more democratic and competitive regime, however, precipitated a strong conservative reaction - a coup and a period of authoritarian rule. Later, more competitive institutions and civilian electoral regime were restored.<sup>17)</sup>

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<sup>15)</sup> Kitschelt, *The Transformation*, chapters 4 and 5.

<sup>16)</sup> Kitschelt, *The Transformation*, chapter 7.

In short, Przeworski and Esping-Anderson are limited in explaining the labour movement and party politics of Malaysia since they focus on the significance of class - the dilemma of socialist parties, electoral trade-off Przeworski and the importance of peasantry Esping-Anderson. But class has not been an essential cleavage in the party politics of Malaysia. The approaches of Kitschelt, and of Collier and Collier have also limited value in analysing politics in Malaysia, in that Collier and Collier emphasise external structure the role of the state while Kitschelt internal party organisation. To get a whole picture of the relationship between the labour movement and socialist parties it is necessary to explore and analyse both internal and external factors.

### III Trade Unionism in Malaysia

This section will focus on the way in which the labour movement of Malaysia has been dominated by government and employers, and has declined because of insufficient organisational consolidation and finance. This control over the labour movement led to the dominance of the UMNO led by conservative elites.

From the mid-1960s, radical trade unions and labour activists those associated with the leftist Labour Party were subject to growing restrictions. More pragmatic trade union leaders, anxious to distance themselves from the leftists and thus escape the repression, affiliated themselves with the new social democratic and multi-ethnic Gerakan Rakyat Malaysia. The Gerakan was initiated by former labour Party moderates, the United Democratic Party - a breakaway faction of the MCA, led by former KMT leader and MCA president Dr. Lim Chong Eu - and a few other liberal dissidents committed to multi-racialism. On the surface, the Gerakan seemed to represent labor's interests, since it shared many leaders with the MTUC representing relatively conservative trade unions during the 1950s and 1960s. However, the politics of Malaysia was dominated by ethnic mobilisation, racial cleavage since the government persecuted and consequently dismantled the multi-ethnic Socialist Front.<sup>18)</sup> This led to race riots after the May 1969 general

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<sup>17)</sup> Ruth Berins Collier and David Collier, *Shaping The Political Arena: Critical junctures, the labor movement, and regime dynamics in Latin America* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1991).

<sup>18)</sup> It included the Labour Party, led by former UMNO Cabinet Minister Aziz Ishak. Jomo and Todd, *Trade Unions and the State*, 169.

elections which ultimately created a broader ruling coalition, the Barisan Nasional, National Front dominated by UMNO (United Malay Nationalist Organisation).<sup>19)</sup>

In the 1970s, the government inaugurated tripartism as part of an enlarged new social contract. However, new regulations were introduced to control organised labour in the 1980s. After 1980, the bargaining power of labour was further weakened by the new amendments to labour laws, increasing labour flexibility, government encouragement of more easily controlled in-house unions, and the increasing flow of immigrant labour - especially in plantation agriculture, land development schemes, construction, domestic service, and even manufacturing.<sup>20)</sup> First, the government officially sanctioned previously illegal labour immigration, primarily from Indonesia, southern Thailand especially to the northern states of Peninsular Malaysia, and the southern Philippines to Sabah. Estimated from 1 to 2 million by the early 1990s illegal labour immigrants had a significant impact on the labour market in Malaysia given a national population of between 17.5 and 19.0 million according to various estimates, and an official labour force of some 7 million.<sup>21)</sup> The increasing number of immigrant and contract labour further depressed real wages, especially for the predominantly Malay and Indian unskilled and semi-skilled workers.

Second, the government officially encouraged the growth of in-house unions as part of its Look East policy since 1983. Interestingly enough, however, government support for in-house unions failed to register new in-house unions where no unions existed before, except for several in the electronics industry. Instead, in-house unions were favoured to replace radical national industry-side union already in existence. The government encouraged in-house unions in the private sector in order to erode further the already weak trade union movement in the country.<sup>22)</sup>

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<sup>19)</sup> A third state of Emergency was thus declared soon after race riots in May 1969. The first Emergency Regulations (1948) were lifted in 1960. Yet a second state of Emergency was declared in September 1964 during the Indonesian Confrontation of Malaysia (1963-1966) and new restrictive labour laws were introduced. Jomo and Todd, *Trade Unions and the State*, 107-108.

<sup>20)</sup> Jomo K. S. and Patricia Todd, *Trade Unions and the State in Peninsular Malaysia* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1994), chapter 8.

<sup>21)</sup> *New Straits Times*, 12 June 1992; quoted in Jomo and Todd, *Trade Unions and the State*, 150; Human Resources Minister Datuk Dr Fong Chan Onn Said that the government had already allowed 700 000 foreign workers into the country and the factories still wanted more. *The Star*, 19 July 2000; Archived news at Ministry of Human Resources Home Page (<http://www.jaring.may/ksm/issuebi.htm#a47>), 26 November 2000.

<sup>22)</sup> Jomo and Todd, *Trade Unions and the State*, 151.

Third, in 1980, the government introduced amendments to tighten the already restrictive labour laws, further restraining the activities of trade unions, by eroding the right to take industrial action. The labour laws have been effectively used to reduce the number of strikes and to suppress any attempts to take 'illegal' industrial action. Unions considered to be behind illegal industrial actions lost their union membership, and were de-registered, their leaders were arrested or imprisoned.<sup>23)</sup> Thus only picketing remained as a means of protest, but the impact of picketing was limited because pickets had to be staged peacefully under a police presence and outside working hours so as not to interfere with the operations of the company.

In sum, the labour movement of Malaysia has suffered by its lack of autonomy from its external environment - governments and employers, in particular. However, the weakness of trade unionism cannot be explained entirely without examining its internal limitation - division of the labour movement.

#### **IV Union leadership, ethnicity and national confederations**

Trade unionism in Malaysia has not been institutionalised due to the low rate of unionisation, since the 1980s in particular. In 1980 about 25 percent of wage-earning workers were unionised, but by 1990 this figure had fallen to about 17 percent.<sup>24)</sup> Over the last decade, the rate of unionisation in Malaysia has been about 10 percent.<sup>25)</sup> Institutionalisation of trade unions was also obstructed by lack of its financial resources and of managerial expertise for which unions were reliant upon the government or trade organisations abroad.<sup>26)</sup>

More importantly, however, trade unions were frustrated by their internal struggles. Worker solidarity was obstructed owing to conflicts among unions according to size big versus small, sector private versus public, segment white

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<sup>23)</sup> For taking illegal actions, more than 600 unionists lost the right to join a trade union in 1972 and 11 National Electricity Board workers were arrested under the Industrial Relations Act in 1975. The AEU was de-registered for taking illegal industrial action against MAS and 23 MAS employees were detained under the ISA in 1979. Jomo and Todd, *Trade Unions and the State*, chapter 8.

<sup>24)</sup> Harold Crouch, *Government and Society in Malaysia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), 90.

<sup>25)</sup> To-date there are 555 trade unions of workmen with 778 919 members and 14 trade unions of employers with 488 members in Malaysia. E-mail from Izhar bin Haji Harun, Director General of Trade Unions, Ministry of Human Resources in Malaysia (Jabatan Hal Ehwal Kesatuan Sekerja, jheks@po.jaring.my), 22 November 2000.

<sup>26)</sup> Jomo and Todd, *Trade Unions and the State*, 131 and 134.

colour versus blue colour and ethnicity Malays versus non-Malays.<sup>27)</sup> I will analyse division of trade unions focusing on ethnicity, sector, and union leadership.

First, ethnicity has limited the development of the labour movement. The trade union movement lacked political cohesion because its members were drawn from different racial communities and organized along communal lines.<sup>28)</sup> Indians mostly in plantation workers, who made up 62 per cent of members in 1960, traditionally dominated trade unionism. Many notable trade union leaders were also Indian. But Indians in unions began to be overshadowed by Malays due to the New Economic Policy (NEP) which started in 1971 to improve the economic position of ethnic Malays. Since 1971, Malays have increased their employment in the much-expanded public sector more rapidly than non-Malays.<sup>29)</sup> Malaysia's rapid growth of manufacturing and other industries also contributed to the employment of an increasing number of Malays since 1970s.<sup>30)</sup> The number of both Chinese and Indian union movement declined sharply since their peak year of 1978.<sup>31)</sup> Trade unionism in Malaysia has thus correlated with ethnicity rather than with class-consciousness.

Ethnicity has symbolised trade unionism of Malaysia externally as well as internally. Internally union leaders are constrained by grass-roots workers. The union leaders put the interests of trade unionism before political affiliations and ethnic issues. Yet the rank-and-file members and rival factions within the union supported various ethnic welfare and youth associations at the factory associated with ethnically based political parties. Accordingly ethnic organization and the union compete for the loyalties of the workers. The union leaders criticised grass-roots members who, they argued, have impractical ideas about the role of a

27) Jomo and Todd, *Trade Unions and the State*, 99, 120-121 and 131.

28) For example the FTU in Penang had a separate Indian section, while the Rubber Workers General Labour Union in Kedah changed its membership rules to exclude Indians in March 1948. Jomo and Todd, *Trade Unions and the State*, 80-81.

29) Malays' increase is notable in the plantation sector as well. For instance, there are about 180 000 estate workers in Peninsular Malaysia alone. Of these, 39 percent are Indians, 38 percent Bumiputera and the rest contract workers. *New Straits Times*, March 2 2000; Archived news at Ministry of Human Resources Home Page (<http://www.jaring.may/ksm/issuebi.htm#a47>), November 26 2000.

30) By 1980 Malays made up 50.6 percent of union membership while Indians and Chinese constituted 26.9 percent, and 21.6 percent, respectively. By 1985 61.9 percent to principal officers (president, secretary, treasurer) in trade unions were Malays, 20.7 percent Chinese, and 15.5 percent Indians. Crouch, *Government and Society in Malaysia*, 90.

31) The percentage of Malay union members rose from 13 percent in 1949 to 31 percent in 1964, 47 percent in 1975, and 59 percent in 1988, while the proportion of Chinese dropped from 24 percent in 1949 to 18 percent in 1988, and the percentage of Indian declined from 58 to 22 percent over the same period. Jomo and Todd, *Trade Unions and the State*, 25.

trade union, while the members regard their unions as being contingent upon the national political arena where mobilising ethnic support is essential in competing for resources. Consequently workers consider the union leaders to be spending their money without bringing about benefits for them, and multi-ethnic trade unions are highly vulnerable to demands from the rank-and-file members mobilised in ethnic terms.

Political forces - governments, also repress union leaders. Both government and management prefer to deal with union leaders who are English-educated and are moderate in their approach to labour issues. In order to obstruct militant trade unionism, colonial and post-colonial governments suppressed the trade unions through legislation and police mobilisation. Against this background, union leaders could not dismiss ethnic considerations.<sup>32)</sup> With support from government and management, English-educated trade unionists formed a labour elite. The labour elite was predominantly comprised of Chinese and Indians because Malays with a secondary level English education preferred government service to the industrial labour force.<sup>33)</sup> Malaysian industrial workers were suspicious of the non-Malay union leaders' administrative expertise and external resources. The Malay workers preferred to support leaders from their own ethnic group and to pressure these leaders to pursue ethnic interests. In other words, the Malay workers' emphasis on ethnic stakes contradicted the class ideology avowed by trade union leaders.<sup>34)</sup>

Second, a division between national federations based on different sectors private versus public has also weakened trade unionism. The government suppressed the MTUC as a national/umbrella union from the outset. For example, it was not allowed to register under the TUO since the council had members from more than one trade, occupation, or industry. In September 1951, therefore, the MTUC was registered, not as a trade union, but as a society.<sup>35)</sup> This limit of registration has kept the MTUC from leading the labour movement in Malaysia. The MTUC's incapacity to direct and co-ordinate the labour movement is best demonstrated by its failure to amend the repressive legislation.<sup>36)</sup> In mid-1976, for

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<sup>32)</sup> Ackerman, "Ethnicity and Trade Unionism in Malaysia", 159-165.

<sup>33)</sup> Jomo and Todd, *Trade Unions and the State*, 99-100.

<sup>34)</sup> Ackerman, "Ethnicity and Trade Unionism in Malaysia", 165-166.

<sup>35)</sup> Jomo and Todd, *Trade Unions and the State*, 98 and 120.



instance, the MTUC drafted a programme of industrial action to pressure the government to revise the labour laws. On 20 September a mass rally was held as the first step of this plan. The revisions to the labour laws in February 1980, however, did not embrace any of the 183 amendments proposed by the MTUC. But, the congress had to abandon plans for a nation-wide picket due to the lack of consensus among its leaders.

This already weak trade union movement has been further weakened by bitter a split between the MTUC and the CUEPACS Congress of Unions of Employees in the Public and Civil Services <sup>37)</sup> since 1980. Basically this split was due to competing union leaders - personal interests, ambitions, and conflicts. Public sector and private sector unions had different interests and tactics to industrial relations. Public service unionists in Malaysia tend to be more conservative than their private sector counterparts. CUEPACS was moderate and generally less willing to take industrial action than private sector unions. Their differences surfaced publicly over the government's amendments to the labour laws in 1980. Private sector unions condemned the civil service union, which was reluctant to take industrial action against the restrictive amendments. On their part, the civil service union denounced the private sector union for not considering the legal restraint imposed on them by the TUA.<sup>38)</sup> At the MTUC General Council meeting on 13 May 1980, both sides bitterly accused each other and then exchanged insults in the press. This only served to deepen personal hatred and made it more difficult to resolve serious issues - the desired structure of the trade union movement, and the form of the national trade union centre(s). Attempts to reunite the MTUC and CUEPACS into a single national have since been sabotaged, largely by the personal interests and ambitions of union leaders who put the interests of their own power bases and privileges before furthering labour solidarity. For example, CUEPACS supported a labour Ministry proposal that public sector unions be legally prevented from joining the MTUC (New Straits Times, November 5 1984), which undoubtedly would have had a negative impact on labour in general, and

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<sup>36)</sup> Jomo and Todd, *Trade Unions and the State*, 137-138.

<sup>37)</sup> CUEPACS was registered in 1957.

<sup>38)</sup> Section 27 of the Trade Unions Act, severely limits the right of public servants and employees of statutory authorities to join trade union. With only the King's permission, they can join unions. And some categories are totally forbidden from trade union membership what so ever.



damage and alienated the MTUC, in particular. The confrontation has reemerged publicly each year, especially over the government's choice of labour representatives to attend the annual ILO conference.<sup>39)</sup>

Such divisions within the MTUC in 1980 eventually led many public sector unions to disaffiliate and to back CEUPACS' claim to be the sole representative of civil service unions. The government fostered the conflict between the MTUC and CUEPACS by officially recognizing CUEPACS as a national confederation, and by preferring it to the MTUC. It even suggested that public sector unions be once again legally prevented from joining the MTUC. In short, persistent conflict between public and private sector unions has made the labour movement in general, weak, and has discredited the MTUC in particular. For its part the government took advantage of this division to manipulate the labour movement and even stimulated such conflicts.<sup>40)</sup>

Third, the lack of consensus among its leaders and frequent clashes in public have seriously weakened the credibility of the congress in the eyes not only of trade unionists, but also of the general public. The MTUC leadership, for instance, was divided over the question of taking industrial action against the revisions to the labour laws in February 1980). Its 'moderate' president, P. P. Narayanan did not want to agitate the government through a picket, while the radical wing led by the general secretary, V. David, supported industrial action. Eventually the congress had to abandon plans for a nation-wide picket. The disagreements had arisen partly because of genuine differences of opinion, usually between public sector and private sector unionists, and also because of personal power struggles, which plagued many individual unions.<sup>41)</sup>

Another discrepancy of the MTUC was noticeable among its leaders. One recent example was the difference in opinion between the president of MTUC, Zainal Rampak and its secretary general, G. Rajasekaran regarding the Employees Provident Fund<sup>42)</sup> Annuity Scheme or Epfas.<sup>43)</sup> The former accepted the scheme

<sup>39)</sup> Jomo and Todd, *Trade Unions and the State*, 162-164.

<sup>40)</sup> (*New Straits Times*, 5 November 1984); quoted in Jomo and Todd, *Trade Unions and the State*, 137-139.

<sup>41)</sup> Jomo and Todd, *Trade Unions and the State*, 137-138.

<sup>42)</sup> The EPF fund was established to provide retirement funds to its members. The number of EPF members is around 9 million (almost half of Malaysians are). Basically it is a savings account. As part of a benefit package to give Malaysians financial security, an insurance policy was attached to each account which provided for the payment of RM30 000 in case of death or disability. Probably most members were unaware this policy was in force. "EPF and your money," *Malaysiakini* [Malaysia Today], Web site, ([http://www.malaysiakini.com/archives\\_news/2000/oct/oct16/news3.htm](http://www.malaysiakini.com/archives_news/2000/oct/oct16/news3.htm)).

while the latter strongly opposed it. The Epfas controversy came to light in summer 2000 when MTUC secretary-general Rajasekaran advised members not to invest in the scheme. Zainal, who was also a member of the Employees Provident Fund (EPF) Board of Directors, however, argued that Epfas was an optional scheme worthy of consideration, provided Epf could solve issues like the high premium rates and low returns. The controversy over Epf annuity scheme eventually encouraged MTUC president and senator, Zainal to take legal action against one of his union leaders the Non Metallic Mineral Products Manufacturing Employees Union(NMMPMEU) for RM250 million when the latter demanded his resignation.<sup>44)</sup> Zainal and Rajasekaran clashed again over the amendment to Section 58 1) and 2) of the 1991 EPF Act.<sup>45)</sup> The amendment slashed beneficiaries' claim to a flat rate of RM2 000 instead of a maximum of RM30 000 for death, physical and mental disability. Zainal argued that the EPF amendment would benefit the poor and that the reduced rate would ultimately translate into higher dividends for all members. Rajasekaran who insisted that the poor would lose in the end, refuted this. Then Rajasekaran openly accused president Zainal for failing his duties to represent workers' rights. He criticized MTUC representatives on the EPF Board for their failure to inform the union.<sup>46)</sup>

The rift between two union leaders was not new. When Zainal became senator in November 1998, a crack between union leaders was revealed. His supporters welcomed his promotion, by arguing that the voice of labour would finally be heard, whereas his opponents emphasized that he was now under the direct influence of a dictatorial government, and that labour issues would now be no longer represented at a higher level. In short, those who opposed Zainal's senatorship were generally associated with the opposition, while his supporters were pro-establishment. This big gap was confirmed in the last general election.<sup>47)</sup>

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43) Susan Loone, "Don't sign for annuity scheme, MTUC advises," Malaysiakini [Malaysia Today] Web site, ([http://www.malaysiakini.com/archives\\_news/2000/aug/aug29/news10.htm](http://www.malaysiakini.com/archives_news/2000/aug/aug29/news10.htm)); Susan Loone, "MTUC president threatens to sue critics," Malaysiakini Web site, ([http://www.malaysiakini.com/archives\\_news/2000/sep/sep4/news12.htm](http://www.malaysiakini.com/archives_news/2000/sep/sep4/news12.htm)).

44) Susan Loone, "Take MTUC reps on the EPF board to task," Malaysiakini Web site, ([http://www.malaysiakini.com/archives\\_news/2000/oct/oct18/news8.htm](http://www.malaysiakini.com/archives_news/2000/oct/oct18/news8.htm)).

45) The amendment was proposed by EPF, approved by the Finance Ministry and passed in Parliament July 2000.

46) Susan Loone, "Open split in MTUC top leadership," Malaysiakini Web site, ([http://www.malaysiakini.com/archives\\_news/2000/nov/nov3/news12.htm](http://www.malaysiakini.com/archives_news/2000/nov/nov3/news12.htm)).

47) Susan Loone, "MTUC: A rift or adrift?," Malaysiakini Web site, ([http://www.malaysiakini.com/archives\\_news/2000/sep/sep5/news5.htm](http://www.malaysiakini.com/archives_news/2000/sep/sep5/news5.htm)).

All these conflicts have contributed to the ineffective and fragile trade unionism in Malaysia. It is no surprise therefore that there were not much significant industrial actions in the labour movement of Malaysia. The most notable case was the spate of industrial action during 1978-9 by Malaysian Airline System (MAS) employees who were members of the Airline Employees' Union (AEU). This strike was exceptional in the history of trade union movement in Malaysia, not only in terms of its intensity and extent, but also in its aftermath. The dispute was initiated by lower-grade MAS employees, who were negotiating a new collective agreement with the employer through their union, the AEU. In order to achieve a new agreement in favour of labour, they complied with a work-to-rule and refused to do overtime in late 1978. The government responded with cancelling all MAS flights and imprisoning 23 union activists under the Internal Security Act. All in all the MAS-AEU conflict ended up with a disaster for the union movement but the release of the detainees later. The AEU was de-registered on 14 April 1979, and its members were split into two new unions.<sup>48)</sup> Another example is the NUPW. Its 3-day strike in January 1990 aimed at achieving a monthly wage, rather than the existing daily wage, which plantation workers and the NUPW had championed for decades without success or without serious attempts to push the matter. With encouragement from the government, the "plantation companies reluctantly agreed to guarantee a minimum amount of work monthly in lieu of conceding a monthly wage".<sup>49)</sup> The union had no choice but to accept this given its weakened bargaining power due to substantially diminished membership and the plentiful cheap, non-unionized contract immigrant labour.<sup>50)</sup> Socialists who have also suffered through division along ethnic lines have not rescued the weak and divided the labour movement. Next the relationship between trade unions and radical political parties will be elaborated.

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<sup>48)</sup> Jomo and Todd, *Trade Unions and the State*, 142-143.

<sup>49)</sup> Jomo and Todd, *Trade Unions and the State*, 152-153.

<sup>50)</sup> There are currently about 200 000 estate workers in all types of plantation estates in Peninsular M, including some 100 000 foreign workers. NUPW represents about 50 000 permanent local workers in the plantation sector, while the rest are contract and casual workers. *Business Times*, 20 July 2000; Archived news at Ministry of Human Resources Home Page (<http://www.jaring.may/ksm/issuebi.htm#a47>).

## V Trade Unions and Politics

Radical socialists in Malaysia were frustrated by the lack of a significant labour movement, and by being marginalized by the colonial and post-colonial governments, which suppressed the communist movement. Class-consciousness was eclipsed by the historical pattern of franchise extension, and ethnic division, further discouraged the development of a socialist movement. Let me examine this last point.

First, the right to vote in Malaysia was given to all eligible citizens regardless of their class position, gender, and educational levels during the post-colonial transition period. In most European countries, however, socialist parties had to fight for universal suffrage exclusively for men at first and then including women.<sup>51)</sup> Their fight for political inclusion of excluded groups served to advance the ideologies, organizations, and collective identities of social democrats.<sup>52)</sup> Without this struggle, there was no achievement of united and institutionalized socialist parties in Malaysia.

Second, the left in Malaysia was divided along ethnic lines Malays versus non-Malays - mainly Chinese on matters of independence colonialism and of national identity and integration.<sup>53)</sup> The left was divided over issues of national identity and integration: citizenship, culture, education and equal representation or opportunities. It is basically a conflict between Malays who claimed their special sovereignty to the country, and non-Malays who argued for equal rights. The Malay left, for instance, argued that Malays have a privileged position in the country. The KMM propagated *Kemerdekaan Melayu Raya* sometimes interchangeably called *Indonesia Raya*, the Greater Malay nation-state. It stressed

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<sup>51)</sup> In Denmark and Switzerland universal male suffrage was introduced before the birth of socialist parties. Przeworski and Sprague, *Paper Stones*, 34-36.

<sup>52)</sup> Michael Mann, "Ruling Class Strategies and Citizenship," *Sociology* 21, no.3 (August 1987), 343; quoted in James V. Jesudason, "Statist Democracy and the Limits to Civil Society in Malaysia," *Journal of Commonwealth & Comparative Politics* 33, no.3 (November 1995): 343.

<sup>53)</sup> The non-Malay (Chinese) left groups in Malaya were symbolized by MCP or Malayan Communist Party, and MPAJA or Malayan People's Anti-Japanese Army. While Malay left organizations included KMM or the Kesatuan Melayu Muda (Union of Malay Youth), KRIS or Kesatuan Rakyat Istimewa (Union of Peninsular Indonesia), PETA or Pembela Tanah Air (Avengers of the country), MNP or the Partai Kebangsaan Melayu (Malay Nationalist Party), API or Angkatan Pemuda Insaf (Conscious Youth Force) and PUTERA or Pusat Tenaga Rakyat (Center of People's Power). Muhammad Ikmal Said, "Ethnic Perspectives of the Left in Malaysia," in *Fragmented Vision: Culture and Politics in Contemporary Malaysia* eds Joel S. Kahn and Francis Loh Kok Wah (North Sydney: Allan & Unwin, 1992), 254-281.

the unity of all Malays in the region - as one race, speaking one language, and thus belonging to one nation. This view was affirmed by Ishak Hj. Muhammad, a leader of the KMM and later, the President of the MNP and Chairman of the Labour Party of Malaya in 1957-58. Melayu Raya was also championed by radical Malay political organizations during the Japanese Occupation - KRIS (Kesatuan Rakyat Istimewa), PETA (Pembela Tanah Air) - and after the World War Two - the MNP, API (Angkatan Pemuda Insaf, Conscious Youth Force) and PUTERA (Pusat Tenaga Rakyat, Centre of People's Power). The MCP program was shared by the Malayan Democratic Union (MDU) which was dismantled in 1948, however. The non-Malay left wing reemerged under the Labour Party of Malaya (LPM) in the mid-fifties.<sup>54)</sup> On the other hand, the Malay left consolidated into the Partai Rakyat Malaya (PRM, People's Party of Malaya).

The ethnic division of the left had thus persisted between the PRM and LPM. The former supported the idea of Melayu Raya (Greater Malaya) which was strongly rejected by the latter. The non-Malay left have, since the LPM, either merged into the right-wing parties or was neglected in the Malaysian political scene while the Malay left-wing (PRM) has not made any significant influence on the Malaysian politics. In short, the development of class-consciousness and thus of socialist forces was discouraged by the lack of struggle for franchise extension and by division of the left along ethnic lines.

This lack of significant numbers of social democrats does not necessarily mean that there was no attempt to mobilize political supports from workers, however. Trade unions endeavored to found political funds at the 1953 MTUC Annual Delegates' Conference. The Trade Union Amendments Bill (1955) which allowed unions the right to raise political funds boosted thus unions' attempt.<sup>55)</sup> Yet none of the unions created such funds partly because of their internal disagreement on this matter and also because of their meager financial resources.<sup>56)</sup> Until 1965, the trade union movement continued to maintain a policy of non-involvement in party politics.<sup>57)</sup> Although the government imposed policy of

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<sup>54)</sup> Jomo and Todd, *Trade Unions and the State*, 101 and 124.

<sup>55)</sup> However, this right was abolished by Parliament in 1971 after several unionists were elected in the May 1969 elections on opposition tickets.

<sup>56)</sup> Many unions in Malaysia remained in arrear over payment of affiliation. In 1962, for instance, that the MTUC had less than M\$1 000 in the bank. The MTUC thus had to embrace an ICFTU loan of M\$750 000 for its expansion program. Jomo and Todd, *Trade Unions and the State*, 101 and 120-121.

no direct involvement in politics, there had been frequent debates within the MTUC over the need for political action. In 1972, for example, a two-day MTUC seminar on trade union and politics passed the proposal to form a party and in 1978, the MTUC initiated a political bureau to develop political trade unionism as an useful medium of labor's political action. Similar attempts re-emerged in the late 1980s in response to the increasing pressure on labour from the government. Yet such resolutions have not translated into political actions of the MTUC.<sup>58)</sup> That was because the labour movement has divided over the issue of the suitable political role for unions. In short, the trade union's bargaining power and its economic clout had been constrained by trade union' restricted political involvement and the lack of direct political action by the MTUC.<sup>59)</sup>

Frustrated by their political isolation, union leaders of the main private federation, the MTUC, began to enter politics in the later 1980s, in the hope that their voice would be heard in the legislature. The MTUC openly supported an opposition party, Semangat '46 in 1990 after it promised to support its minimal labour program. It included a minimum wage, the recognition of a national federation of electronics workers, a five-day working week, and additional fringe benefits. But Semangat's poor performance failed to strengthen political power of labor. Rather the MTUC encountered a fresh threat from a rival organization, the MLO sponsored by the government, so the MTUC's incursion into politics proved costly. Beginning in 1989, the Prime Minister began to warn against political activities by MTUC and threatened it with the possibility of setting up a rival body. Almost immediately, the National Union of Bank Employees formed a new trade union called the MLO. This new organization, whose constitution forbade involvement in party politics, began to woo MTUC's 600, 000 members, gaining about 100, 000.<sup>60)</sup> The Working-class movement, small and weak to begin with, had become even more divided.

In conclusion, the labour movement in Europe developed and translated its influence into political power through social democrats and its struggle for

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<sup>57)</sup> Crouch, *Government and Society in Malaysia*, 89; Jomo and Todd, *Trade Unions and the State*, 123.

<sup>58)</sup> Jomo and Todd, *Trade Unions and the State*, 124.

<sup>59)</sup> Jomo and Todd, *Trade Unions and the State*, 164-165.

<sup>60)</sup> *Straits Times*, May 8 1990 and August 7 1990 quoted in Jesudason, "Statist Democracy", 349.

political rights universal suffrage. Once the support for socialist parties declined, social democrats resolved this crisis by forging a political coalition with other classes peasants or the middle class.

That was not the case in Malaysia where universal suffrage was given from above unlike in Europe. Without such struggle, there was no consolidated and institutionalized socialist party in Malaysia. More importantly, however, the weakness of the labour movement and socialist parties in Malaysia can be explained by the predominance of Malays who outmanoeuvred other ethnic minorities and by suppression by government and employers. In the 1940s, for example, the labour movement increased its bargaining power and enjoyed its peak of power under the leadership of the MCP. Yet offensive action from employers as well as from governments made the political left meaningless in the landscape of Malaysian politics and has overshadowed the power of organized workers since 1948. Ruling elites, governments suppressed the union movement through repressive laws and the mobilization of police, while economic elites, management dominated labour with its superior resources organizational capacity and finance. Combined with this external suppression, trade unions have been further weakened by internal division within unions among leadership, and between unions according to sector and ethnicity. In sum, the labour movement of Malaysia has been impeded by lack of autonomy against external structure and by internal division. Externally, economic elites, employers have dwarfed labour in organizational capacity and finance, and ruling elites, governments have silenced the labour movement through police and suppressive laws. In the process, political and economic elites capitalized on ethnic cleavage and overshadowed class cleavage. In other words, the ruling Malay elites were able to replace class cleavage with ethnicity in trade unionism in Malaysia and thus to enjoy dominant political status as well as economic benefit. By suppressing radical union leaders non-Malays and supporting moderate leaders the Malays they controlled the labour movement which in turn supported the UMNO and contributed to the predominance of the Malays. Combined with this external restriction, trade unionism has been limited by internal division within and among trade unions. These already weakened unions have thus failed to exert power in politics, let alone to establish socialist parties in Malaysia.



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