



POLITICAL NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS

IDEALS AND REALITIES

Saliha Hassan

Considering the complexity of Malaysia's multi-cultural, multi-ethnic and multi-religious society, the Barisan Nasional (BN, or National Front) government represents a success story in political accommodation, survival and power sharing. Critics of BN have focused on its relativist interpretation of democracy and justification for limiting its scope. In response, however, Prime Minister Dr Mahathir Mohamad has contended that 'the duty of government is ensuring peace and harmony through political stability which also creates a conducive environment for economic prosperity' (*The Sun*, 18 April 1997). For Mahathir, democracy should not be treated as a religion.¹ The point is to maintain a 'realistic democracy'; hence,

Malaysia is not over-zealous about the democratic system to the point where we accept without question everything that is done in the name of democracy. If the people and the country benefit, then we will accept practices which are said to be democratic. If the people and the nation get only the worst from any practice that is said to be democratic, we will give priority

1. 'It is clearly dangerous to make a religion of an ideology... the present malady assailing the Western nations, the weakness in their leadership in particular, is due to democratic extremism' (Mahathir, Speech to the Council of Foreign Relations in New York, October 1993, cited in Jesudason 1995: 339).

to what is good for the country and the people, and put aside the questions of whether or not it is democratic (*Sunday Mail*, 12 May 1996).

As several scholars have observed, the Malaysian political system is neither truly democratic nor completely authoritarian in that BN has ensured economic advancement and social stability but maintained ideological dominance and consolidated executive power, albeit by operating within a constitutional framework (Case 1993; Crouch 1996; Jesudason 1995). The regime's 'statist democratic' feature lies in a willingness to hold regular elections, although the regime enjoys a high degree of leverage in determining the rules of political competition.

To the extent that BN continues to hold the support of voters, the election results may be taken as evidence of the people's endorsement of BN's policies, political values and mode of effective governance: specifically, the effectiveness of the government in maintaining law and order, achieving economic growth, and providing for the welfare of the citizens (Tandon 1996: 293). Malaysian non-governmental organizations (NGOs), however, tend to hold to a different conception of governance that supports 'a pluralist polity with a capacity to influence and check executive power and protect human rights' and an administrative apparatus based upon 'an open, efficient, accountable and audited public service which has the bureaucratic competence to help design and implement appropriate policies and manage [the] public sector' (Leftwich 1993: 607). Within this context of somewhat differing conceptions of democracy and governance, this chapter discusses the role and discourses of politically engaged NGOs or social action groups (SAGs) as a way to assess more accurately state-civil society relations, and the NGOs' ability to reshape those relations.

THE PARAMETERS OF DEMOCRACY AND CIVIL SOCIETY

Democratization is so pervasively accepted as the definitive political dimension of globalization that Mahathir has reportedly said: '[C]hallenge democracy and you will be branded as a heretic, an unbeliever, a renegade' (cited in Jesudason 1995: 339). In this context, 'Western liberal democracy', and often its American model, is offered as the standard system for the world. The parameters of this liberal democracy include an emphasis on equality of rights, a relatively weak state, a strong moralistic insistence on the accountability of leaders and governments, and a presumption that society is relatively more important than the political and administrative centre. Current discussions of civil society

– based on a concept of plurality that encompasses popular organizations not part of or controlled by the formal institutions of the government – have been mostly located within this ideal model of democratic polity. While such a conception of civil society is often taken to refer to NGOs, in fact it includes other organized groups such as political parties, media, interest associations, labour unions, co-operatives, religious organizations, fraternal societies, women's groups and credit unions. Civil society, thus, lies within a modernized society that practises democratic principles where important channels of communication are not monopolized by a dominant group, including the government (Lipset 1995: 240). Principles of accessibility to information and policy-making processes, and responsible exercise of public deliberation, underlie this idea of the fundamental links between state and civil society.

Malaysian democratic practices would fall short of such mainstream or universalist standards. The political NGOs have been critical of forms of democracy found since the 1970s. Their criticism, which intensified during the 1980s, can be clearly gauged from NGO publications produced, among others, by Aliran Kesedaran Negara (ALIRAN, or National Consciousness Movement), the Consumers' Association of Penang (CAP), Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia (ABIM, or Malaysian Islamic Youth Movement) and the Civil Rights Committee (CRC) of the Selangor Chinese Assembly Hall (Saliha 1991). The English daily, *The Star*, and the Malay tabloid, *Watan*, which enjoyed wide circulation then, provided a forum for NGO discourses, until both publications were banned during the mass arrests of October 1987 (better known by its police codename of *Operasi Lalang*). The NGOs had sought to provide a democratic conscientization of the public which was deemed to be politically apathetic or ignorant of their fundamental rights and duties. In particular the Malaysian public was urged to be 'more aware of how and why freedom is curtailed, whose interests are served by curbs upon freedom, what are the consequences of concentration of power with the executive, how people should respond to the emasculation of democracy and what alternatives are available to those of us who are committed to greater freedom and justice' (Chandra 1986: vi).

In response, government leaders defended some of its allegedly undemocratic practices by placing priority on the importance of socio-economic well-being and the necessity of keeping differences between 'Western' and 'our' political values. It was claimed that 'our' values had their roots in the traditional practices of despotism, feudalism and

authoritarianism. It was conceded that these traditions had contained elements of elite consultation and popular participation, but they were deemed to be limited and rare. Governments, according to traditional Chinese, Hindu and Malay politics, as well as the tribal communities of Sabah and Sarawak, were responsible for maintaining order, ensuring economic growth, safeguarding the welfare of the people and defending state sovereignty. In short the criteria of good governance were not those of liberal democratic states, but those of effective government. Or, as has been asserted, 'strong, stable governments prepared to make decisions which, though often unpopular, are nevertheless in the best interests of the nation, are a prerequisite for economic development' (Mahathir and Ishihara 1995: 82).

In fact, the Malaysian political leadership has long held that any political system, democratic or not, must win 'hearts and minds' to survive over the long term. Given the regular conduct of general elections, successive governments have been able to claim that Malaysia is a democracy albeit 'one [cast] in our own mould', as *demokrasi à la Malaysia*, according to Tun Abdul Razak, the second prime minister, who contended what was required was a democracy 'suitable for a developing country with different communities'.² Underlying this defence of a limited democracy was a political argument that the multi-ethnic political system, having neither democratic tradition nor values, but requiring constitutional provisions for the Malays' 'special position', needed to place more power in the hands of the executive than is usual in a democracy. Hence, the resulting political structure is a combination of strong central government, executive dominance and controlled democratic practices.

'Malaysian democracy', therefore, has restrictive laws (Gurmit Singh 1987) to regulate, monitor, depoliticize and if necessary, eliminate critics of government, especially since their opposition is regarded as a disruption of established political and development agendas (Crouch 1996). While Part II of the federal Constitution enshrines 'fundamental

2. Another prominent government leader, Tan Sri Ghazali Shafie, once declared that 'one of our major miscalculations at the time of Merdeka [Independence] was to welcome uncritically the concepts and precepts of a Westminster-type democracy. ... We did not realise how irrelevant it was to our society as it exists today ... Let us therefore admit that at this stage of our constitutional development to mimic the democracy of Westminster in 1957 without the comparative economic and social foundation is to court self-destruction' (cited in Chandra 1986: 279).

liberties', these liberties have been circumscribed in the interests of safeguarding ethnic harmony and political stability. For example, the right to freedom of speech does not include a right to discuss 'sensitive issues' – including matters relating to Islam as the official religion, Malay as the national language, the position of the Malay rulers, and the 'special position' of the Malays – not even by elected representatives in parliament. Another argument for circumscribing the scope of democracy thus was that Malaysians did not have the sense of broad equality and political effectiveness essential to meaningful popular political participation. In other words, the polity lacked 'the necessary social and economic infrastructure' for Western-style democracy, by which was meant the absence of an 'authentic' middle class as the basis of a viable civil society. In particular, the politically dominant Malay community controlled the state machinery, but had limited access to wealth (Abdul Rahman Embong 1995: 41–46). This led UMNO leaders to declare that they needed 'an industrialization and urbanization programme in order [to] build an authentic Malaysian middle class to sustain the kind of democracy we want' (cited in Chandra 1986: 279). That programme of industrialization and urbanization was incorporated into the New Economic Policy (NEP) and scheduled for implementation between 1970 and 1990.

There is, however, an additional, international dimension to this view of good government and effective governance which has resonances in the 'Asian values' debate of recent years (see Chapter 3, this volume). The government has sought to present Malaysia as the 'friendly face of Islam' as well as a stable, industrialized, prosperous, and information technology-savvy country profitably engaged with the global economy (Kamarudin and Hazami 1993; Mahathir 1991). This vision of Malaysian society having a forward looking agenda – *Wawasan 2020*, or Vision 2020 – incorporates the prospect of developing a 'mature consensual, community-oriented Malaysian democracy that can be a model for ... developing countries' (Mahathir 1991: 2–4). This 'model' requires the dominant Malay community to accept technological advances, progressive aspects of economic development, and intellectual achievement while reforming Malay culture and society in conformity with Islamic teachings. To this end, Mahathir's policy of 'Islamization' had initiated a gradual and incremental assimilation by the system of administration of 'Islamic values' to ensure that leadership was based on good character, fairness, accountability and enlightened attitudes. For the then deputy prime minister, Anwar Ibrahim, the policy of Islamization was 'guided by moral precepts and faith reawakened' (Anwar

1997: 5) to create an ethical political system and *masyarakat madani*, the latter being a civil society based on a greater scope for fundamental liberties and a broader role for citizens that was simultaneously responsive to the government's agenda.

Beyond that, the policy of Islamization was not intended to alter the secular structure and orientation of the existing polity, certainly not in the direction of establishing an Islamic state. The government promoted its 'Islamic values' as 'universal values' meant to accommodate the non-Malay and non-Muslim communities which constitute 45 per cent of the population, and whose values are derived mainly from Confucianism, Hinduism, Buddhism and other indigenous cultures and belief systems. To this end, the government had sponsored a series of academic 'civilizational dialogues', mainly between Islam and Confucianism, given some similarities in values between these two religions, an absence of clashes between them, and the importance of Confucianism to Chinese Malaysians.³ In Mahathir's and Anwar's political thinking, these 'Asian' values were critical to building a 'democracy according to our own mould' that would be popularly accepted, legitimate, and safeguard Malaysia's intricate plural society.

However, this top-down definition of 'Malaysian democracy' and civil society has not gone unchallenged, not least by NGOs which have been critical of this state project and its circumscription of the scope for democratic participation in politics.

POLITICAL NGOS: PROFILES AND POSITIONS ON CIVIL SOCIETY

Non-governmental organizations perform important functions in modern society, the complex problems of which are rarely capable of solution by isolated individuals. As a rule, the more open a society's political system is, the greater will be the chances for individuals to secure the implementation of their public intentions by merging together their expertise, voices and influence. Governments are often too preoccupied with their own agendas of managing balances

3. At one stage, serious consideration was given towards expanding and institutionalizing this dialogue. A Centre for Civilization Dialogue was set up in Universiti Malaya with Dr Chandra Muzaffar, a well-known Malaysian academic, social analyst and human right activist, as its director. The Centre was set up, in principle, because 'the Asian at heart is persona religious. Faith and religious practice, not confined to the individual, permeate the life of the community' (Anwar 1997: 4).

between those in power to be able to address local interests, marginal interests or alternative views that emerge at grassroots levels. Governments frequently exert pressure on NGO interests by asserting state interests, which they claim should subsume individual or minority interests, state interests being generally offered as being synonymous with the general good. Thus citizens' associations, people's organizations, interest groups, pressure groups, non-profit organizations, social action movements or simply NGOs can become effective alternative channels for collective action.

Under the impact of globalization, NGOs have been regarded by some quarters as constituting a third sector in society that can play an intervening role between the state and private enterprise. By the standards of liberal democracy, NGOs can mediate between the legitimate rights of the state and individual fundamental liberties. NGOs, too, provide a buffer between state power and authority and the human and civic rights of individuals; they thereby promote legitimate individual rights. In relation to democracy and the process of democratization, therefore, NGOs and grassroots organizations can form networks, coalitions and links with other societal elements to form what may loosely be termed social movements oriented towards change or reforms (Eldridge 1991; Johari 1993; Korten 1990; Lim 1995; Marcussen 1996; Saliha 2000).

In Malaysia, there are myriad NGOs promoting or espousing a wide range of social, economic, cultural and political causes, interests and agendas. There are three basic ways by which NGOs relate to the state. Many of the welfare and recreational types of NGOs complement the state's activities by providing welfare and social services. These NGOs tend to work closely with state agencies, for example, the Ministry of National Unity and Social Development. Other NGOs, however, challenge the government's ideals, whether these are set forth in concepts and policies such as 'Malaysia Inc.', Vision 2020, ethnic power sharing or 'democracy in our mould'. But even among them are NGOs that try to engage the state to negotiate points of difference by working with the grassroots to raise their concerns at state level, or with government agencies to improve policies, or by directly confronting the government with alternatives.

These NGOs engage in public debates and the dissemination of information related to civil liberties, democratic rights, good governance, bureaucratic transparency, executive accountability and people-oriented leadership – all these being issues central to civil society and democratic participation. These NGOs, concerned with popular

political participation in theory and practice, regard themselves as significant actors within an evolving modern civil society, even as the conscience of the state. They therefore offer themselves as democratic channels for the political participation of concerned citizens and constitutionally legitimate interests. They distance themselves from the ethnic preoccupations of the main political parties and seriously offer themselves as society's responses to ethnic polarization. In other words, central to these NGOs' discourses and activities is the issue of good governance and how they can contribute to its realization.⁴

These political NGOs include Aliran Kesedaran Negara (ALIRAN), Dongjiaozong (DJZ, or the coalition of Dong Zong, the Association of Chinese School Boards, and Jiao Zong, the United Chinese School Teachers Association), Suara Rakyat Malaysia (SUARAM, or Malaysian People's Voice), Consumers' Association of Penang (CAP), Sisters in Islam, Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia (ABIM) and Al-Arqam (House of Arqam). Together they have represented major strands of social action movements that attempt to engage the state in political discourse, to champion the causes of specific non-mainstream interests, and to provide alternative perspectives on human rights, civil society and social justice over the past 25 to 30 years. Other important NGOs are Tenaganita (headed by Irene Fernandez), the JUST World Trust (established and led by Chandra Muzaffar) and the Centre for Peace Initiative (CENPEACE) (set up by Fan Yew Teng and others). In addition there are university student organizations and youth associations of various persuasions.

Presently ABIM is the biggest and most influential grassroots Islamic NGO, or, by its preferred definition, *harakah* (that is, a movement). ABIM claims a membership of over 50,000 people who come from all walks of life, including a sizeable segment of the Malay middle class. It was founded on 6 August 1971. Only 20 activists attended its first ABIM Conference (*Muktamar*) in 1972, but since then, ABIM has placed itself at the forefront of the Islamic resurgence (Chandra 1987; Hussin 1993; Zainah 1987). ABIM maintains a special relationship with its 'brother movement' the Pertubuhan Kebangsaan Pelajar Islam Malaysia (PKPIM, or National Association of Muslim Students of

4. Tandon (1996: 293) considers such NGOs to be reflective yet activist, and in his words, 'organisations that sit back and reflect on what they are doing and how their particular activity is related to the broader issues related to state, society and development in the present international situation'.

Malaysia) and has been for two decades the dominant organization for Islamic activists. While ABIM's discourses, activism and grassroots programmes, aimed at democratic participation, civil rights and societal development, are understandably underpinned by Islamic principles, they all stress the principle of moderation (*kesederhanaan* in Malay or *wasatiyyah* in Arabic). In general ABIM has maintained a non-partisan stance. It has often seemed to share the government's promotion of a progressive, moderate and friendly Islam (Muhammad Nur Manuty 1996) even while it denigrated a corporate sub-culture that was so unabashedly materialistic, profit-driven, hedonistic and ridden with many un-Islamic practices (Siddiq Fadil 1982, 1983; Muhammad Nur Manuty 1997). However, since the emergence of the *reformasi* movement in September 1998, following Anwar Ibrahim's dismissal from government and expulsion from UMNO, many ABIM leaders and members have joined Parti KeADILan Nasional (KeADILan, or National Justice Party). Since then, ABIM has more vigorously pursued its struggle against 'cronyism, corruption and nepotism' and for social justice and human rights. (Be that as it may, many older ABIM members have become affluent corporate figures and influential members of UMNO.)

The Al-Arqam movement developed rather differently. In contrast to ABIM, Al-Arqam was self-reliant and stood apart from UMNO and the state. Twelve Muslims, led by Ashaari Muhammad, founded Al-Arqam or Darul Arqam in 1968. Following the example of the *Hijrah* of Prophet Muhammad (*saw*), Ashaari led his followers to Sungai Pencala, located on the outskirts of Kuala Lumpur, where they cleared eight acres of land, and set up homes, a mosque and a school. Al-Arqam adopted a bottom-up approach out of the conviction that a true Islamic community must be established prior to the establishment of an Islamic state. Al-Arqam criticized the Parti Islam SeMalaysia (PAS, or Islamic Party) and ABIM for being rhetorical in approach and lacking a committed practical agenda. Al-Arqam denounced the Muslim-led government as a secular government and accused it of adopting Jewish and Christian practices. Instead Al-Arqam sought to offer a sample of a true Islamic alternative that should replace the existing Western-based political and economic systems (Jomo and Ahmad 1992: 80). However, in the late 1970s, Al-Arqam appeared to have withdrawn from public involvement and focused on internal matters. But by 1986, Ashaari's teachings and Arqam's cultist practices were subjected to charges of heresy. In 1988, the religious departments in several states pronounced Ashaari's teachings to be 'deviant' and banned Al-Arqam's publication, *Aurat Muhammadiyah*. Al-Arqam was finally banned as an organization

in 1994, after the National Fatwa Council declared that Al-Arqam had deviated from the true teachings of Islam and Al-Arqam members were made to undergo government-sponsored Islamic rehabilitation programmes. Al-Arqam had been politically significant since it was prepared to challenge the state's secularist philosophy and policies at both discursive and practical levels. Its potential lay in its organizational discipline, economic independence and direct interaction with the grassroots, which was maintained through daily economic and social dealings. However, since banning Al-Arqam, the government has continued to monitor the movement of its ex-leaders and members who have generally been dispersed.

Such Islamic NGOs as ABIM and Al-Arqam have been the only NGOs that have addressed the role of Islam as a defining factor in the political life of the nation, a subject generally avoided by non-Islamic NGOs, as is common for non-Muslim Malaysians. Non-Islamic NGOs have collaborated with Islamic political NGOs wherever their positions on issues have found congruence, especially on human rights issues, but they have maintained their distance from issues directly involving the Muslim community. Nor have they questioned the political and constitutional position of Islam, or the increasing adoption of Islam and Islamic values as the moral underpinnings of the nation, mainly because 'a multi-ethnic society that is delicately balanced like ours has a greater tendency to persuade people to conform to the dominant political sentiment, if only because they do not want trouble' (Chandra 1986: 35).

A notable example of a non-Islamic political NGO is ALIRAN, that was launched on 12 August 1977 by Chandra Muzaffar and six other 'concerned individuals', namely, Gan Teik Chee, Ariffin Omar, S.P. Subramaniam, Siew Kam Poh, Ismail Hashim and Nor Rashid Ariffin. ALIRAN defines itself as a reform movement whose objective is to raise social consciousness and encourage social action that will lead to social justice in a multi-ethnic society that upholds equality, civil and democratic rights, and racial and religious tolerance. Its first public forum, officiated by the first prime minister, Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra Alhaj, was devoted to a discussion of 'Democracy in Malaysia'. Its monthly publication, *Aliran Monthly* (previously the *Aliran Quarterly*) which was launched in 1982, continues to highlight issues pertaining to civil rights, political participation, judicial independence, democracy, executive accountability, responsible and people-oriented leadership, ethnic relations and religious tolerance. ALIRAN's positions on civil society and democratic processes coincide on many points with

the Western liberal democratic tradition that itself rests upon notions of fundamental liberties and the inherent rationality of mankind. With like-minded NGOs, including ABIM, ALIRAN continues to agitate for the repeal of the Internal Security Act (that allows detention without trial), Societies Act, Official Secrets Act, University and University Colleges Act, and other laws that limit the activities of political and non-political organizations while enhancing the powers of the executive. As can be judged from the contents of *Aliran Monthly* over the years, ALIRAN has held fast to its mission of building public awareness of the importance of human rights issues and social justice that it sees as being central to truly democratic parliamentary government (Saliha 1997, Goh G.P. 1998). ALIRAN's commitment to awakening ordinary citizens to the necessity of political participation in a parliamentary democracy has been summarized thus by its present president, P. Ramakrishnan (1989):

Parliamentary democracy ... concerns the entire nation. Parliamentary democracy requires the participation of the people. Only then will people care for parliamentary democracy; only then will it be meaningful to them; only then would they want to defend it for they would see themselves as having a stake in parliamentary democracy.

In contrast with these relatively newly formed NGOs, Dongjiaozong has been operating in a localized and less formal form since Chinese schools were established during British colonial rule. DJZ was initially formed to undertake the organization, management and propagation of Chinese education that had always been important to Chinese immigrant communities. But in 1951, DJZ became an official organization at the national level at a time when the Chinese community was increasingly uneasy about the implications of colonial state policies for the future of Chinese education (Chua 1998; Tan 1992). Since then DJZ has worked closely with other Chinese associations that have expressed similar concerns over the Chinese community's civil rights in education and culture (Chua 1998; UCSTAM 1987). One such organization is the Civil Rights Committee (CRC) of the Selangor Chinese Assembly Hall (SCAH). DJZ has long been closely monitored by the government for posing a challenge to the government's Malay-based language and cultural policies, and its national education policy that adopts Malay as the sole medium of instruction. Instead, DJZ has promoted a 'pluralistic (*duoyuan*) approach to all aspects of cultural policy' (Tan 1992: 182). In fact, DJZ took the government to court

when the latter rejected an application made by certain segments of the Chinese community to establish a Chinese-medium Merdeka University. In the event, the court dismissed DJZ's suit and held the government's decision to be constitutional. Significantly, prominent DJZ leaders were subsequently detained under *Operasi Lalang* in 1987. Prior to that mass arrest of dissidents, DJZ, and especially the CRC, had begun to cooperate more and more with other NGOs over human rights and development controversies. Compared to its previous levels of activism, especially in the late 1980s, DJZ in the 1990s has maintained a lower public profile even though it remains very much in touch with Chinese politicians and Chinese based political parties.

In 1989, Suara Rakyat Malaysia (SUARAM; Malaysian People's Voice) crystallized as a formal organization out of the post-*Operasi Lalang* support group that was formed to assist the 106 detainees – of whom NGO leaders and social activists formed a large proportion – and their families (CARPA 1988). Currently SUARAM identifies itself as a human rights group, networks with national and international human rights organizations, and takes the lead in organizing activities that promote the protection of human rights. These activities have included providing legal aid and support services to individuals and groups whose human rights have been abused, and organizing public forums, seminars and talks on human rights issues. Some of the themes addressed by SUARAM have included housing for the poor, the abuse of power by the police and executive, the plight of indigenous and marginalized people dislocated by development projects, the rights of women, workers and urban squatters and ISA detainees. One of SUARAM's major achievements was bringing together more than 50 disparate organizations – of Islamists, socialists, liberals, Hindus, Buddhists, Christians, feminists, indigenous peoples, academicians, unionists and the disabled – in a series of meetings in 1993–94 to formulate the *Malaysian Human Rights Charter* (1994). Under SUARAM's lead, several NGOs jointly published the *Malaysian Human Rights Report* (1998). In collaboration with some of the same NGOs, as well as with regional human rights groups, SUARAM played an instrumental role in setting up an ASEAN Human Rights mechanism. In adopting a universalist position on human rights, and drawing upon the United Nations Declaration of Universal Human Rights, SUARAM has persistently challenged the government's relativist position on human rights which has been used to justify the use of the ISA and other coercive laws. Over the years, SUARAM has taken clear positions

on such domestic and international incidents or issues as the banning of Al-Arqam, the suffering of the people in Iraq as a result of the continuation of the USA-led embargo, the difficulties of electronic workers attempting to set up unions, the fate of the victims of Myanmar's military regime, cases of domestic violence, and the repeal of the ISA and other coercive laws in Malaysia. In 1999 SUARAM, together with NGOs such as the Persatuan Hak Asasi Manusia Malaysia (HAKAM, or Malaysian Human Rights Association), Tenaganita (a women workers' support group), Jemaah Islah Malaysia (JIM, or Malaysian Islamic Reform Group), Sisters in Islam (SIS), PKPIM, ALIRAN and ABIM, actively contributed towards the debate on the establishment of Suruhanjaya Hak Asasi Manusia Malaysia (SUHAKAM, or National Human Rights Commission of Malaysia), which was eventually established in July 1999. Still, while welcoming SUHAKAM's establishment by the government, SUARAM and other NGOs remain critical of the government's use of a limited definition of human rights, insisting that a human rights commission should be fully independent of government, and that the public should have a voice in the appointment of the commissioners.

The Consumers' Association of Penang (CAP) had involved itself deeply in political discourses and activism related to the impact of development policies and projects on human welfare, society's collective well-being and the individual's rights. Based in Penang, CAP has played a prominent role in highlighting many development issues in the state, including opposing the state government's development projects for Penang Hill. Using its publication, *Utusan Konsumer*, CAP has often built an effective strategy of constructive engagement with the state with the aim of prodding the latter to show a greater responsiveness over consumer and environmental affairs and to undertake policy reforms. Much of CAP's energy and effort has been spent working out strategies to make itself acceptable to the government while promoting public awareness of its positions on social and economic rights. On a number of occasions CAP confronted the authorities by protesting against state-sponsored development projects that threatened sustainable development and ecological balance. Through networking with political NGOs, CAP has been more involved in political issues than other consumer groups, such as the Federation of Malaysian Consumers Association.

Sisters in Islam (SIS) was formed by a few Malay-Muslim women professionals in 1985, all close friends, but each having her own sphere of

influence in the legal, journalistic, social and academic fields. SIS focuses its attention and advocacy on areas concerned with policies that impact on Muslim women's domestic and legal rights and notions of democratic and Islamic states. SIS has carved for itself a niche in domestic and international arenas by drawing attention and discussion to

the plight of womenfolk in Muslim society [which suffers from] a state of complete chaos, a hotchpotch of competing forces: the remaining Islamic influence, our inherited traditions, and extraneous influences which have crept into our life as a result of the enveloping wave of blind imitation of the west (Said Ramadan 1985: 332-335).

SIS persists in advocating greater intellectual and personal space for the Muslim women within the Quranic interpretation of human and civil rights, especially where they pertain to the status of women. Despite the expected opposition of the orthodox and traditionalist Muslim communities to SIS's cause, the government has been benevolent towards SIS since the group's existence and primarily intellectual activities have contributed considerably towards cultivating Malaysia's international image as a progressive, modernist and moderate Muslim country. Zainah Anwar, one of SIS's most prominent activists, was recently appointed as a member of SUHAKAM to represent NGO views in the commission.

Central to the discourses of political NGOs in the 1980s was how to delimit the boundaries of the state and create a more vibrant civil society. These discourses identified a broad set of issues and problems, including executive dominance, the erosion of the independence of the judiciary, a stronger opposition in parliament, greater executive accountability, social justice, guarantees for fundamental liberties, and greater participation in decision-making over development matters. In the 1990s, as rapid development occurred and consumerism became widespread, NGO discourses found newer issues such as rising authoritarianism, the politics of the new middle class, and the marginalization of certain social groups (Crouch 1992; Jesudason 1995; Mehmet 1986). Nowadays, the NGOs also regard the mainstream media as failing in their responsibility to the public. This criticism specifically targets the media's tendency to self-censor or abstain from critically analysing state policies and abuses that affect ordinary people. For example, it has been suggested that

without such analysis it will not be possible to show how society is developing ... the major social trends of the eighties

– ethnic polarisation, Islamic resurgence, the economic decline and the intensification of political competition – were hardly given any serious consideration by most newspaper minds in the seventies ... These newspapers failed, therefore, to fulfil one of the primary functions of any good newspaper: that of analysing social trends and changes (Chandra 1986: 46–47).

Hence, the discourse on civil society conducted by the political NGOs is targeted towards both government and citizens. While the NGOs strove to engage the government, they concentrated on disseminating their arguments among the public. Their collective objective, also an expression of their own involvement in democratic practice, has been to remove legal constraints, relax political controls and awaken the public to the need for wider political participation.

Yet the fact that these NGOs exist and operate, albeit under strict bureaucratic screening (Gurmit 1987: 8), is itself suggestive of a measure of democratic participation. Indeed, the overall aim of the NGOs is to redefine the limits and parameters of political activity so as to win greater freedom for themselves and the public. But this endeavour is marked by critical ideological differences, both between the political NGOs and the state, and among the NGOs themselves, particularly in terms of their varying interpretations of what 'good governance' should mean. Indeed, the political NGOs, by laying bare their own differences, often come to express political values and expectations that reflect a complex ethnic, religious and ideological mosaic. This is hardly surprising; the NGOs draw inspiration from different, and sometimes contradictory, ideological sources. The NGO movement is thus fragmented and even weak, certainly in contrast to the state, which has a clear position and acts firmly, even in an authoritarian manner, in delineating the boundaries of political space and setting the conditions of political participation.

POLITICAL NGOs AND THE STATE

Evidently the political NGOs are agreed that the state must be responsible for realizing social justice and developing a viable civil society. They also seem to view civil society as a separate sphere of interests existing outside the state wherein disparate interest groups, like themselves, jostle for political and manoeuvring space. The Malay-based economic, social and political configurations complicate the terrain upon which the NGOs operate. Thus, if the political NGOs are committed to building a vibrant civil society, one of their first tasks is to lay

down the 'necessary social and economic infrastructure' for this civil society, and to imbue it with the prerequisite 'democratic culture'. This task is vital since the transplantation of liberal democracy presupposes a transformation of culture, particularly at grassroots level. Undoubtedly, the Anwarist *reformasi* movement of 1998–99 has laid the necessary foundation for more genuine democratic practices. But *reformasi* has also shown that more than just social and economic infrastructure is needed to transplant liberal democracy. The process must also involve the transformation of a grassroots political culture that was previously rooted in a feudal and a colonial past and subsequently remoulded according to a so-called 'Asian values' model of democracy. Hence, the NGOs need urgently to address the Asian values found in Malaysian society in a responsible and accountable manner, as was perhaps shown by the energetic campaigns conducted by a coalition of political NGOs and opposition parties that addressed the realities and needs for political reforms and social justice prior to the November 1999 general election.

It should be noted that although the government does not adopt a liberal attitude towards the political NGOs, it has not tried to eliminate them altogether. The government monitors them closely and, on occasion, has taken repressive action against Al-Arqam (on grounds of its 'religious deviation' in 1994) and Al-Ma'unah (in 2000 for its alleged treason against the state). Yet the government has facilitated NGO activities that benefit its policies or give it political mileage domestically or internationally. Often, by being responsive to some of the NGOs' criticisms or opposition, the government neutralizes possible challenges to its power base. Hence, the government has occasionally encouraged NGOs to participate in state-sponsored forums to discuss specific public issues. To date, however, these forums have been limited to discussions of non-political matters, such as 'social ills', public health, prisoners' rehabilitation, drug addiction, alcoholism, promotion of healthy lifestyles, organization of youth activities and the promotion of Malaysian civic virtues.

But the government remains fundamentally wary of the political NGOs. Its attitude may be a legacy of colonial days when literary, religious and social organizations served as fronts for anti-colonial movements, or when organizations began as social, creative, welfare or religious associations only to turn political. In this context, Mahathir has best articulated the government's basic attitude towards the political NGOs:

Most of these pressure groups [NGOs] are harmless and can be useful. But there are pressure groups that can adversely affect the government or the nation ... The views and the consensus of the majority guide a democracy. A pressure group is a minority [but] can cause anarchy and the breakdown of law. Therefore the activities of pressure groups in our country must be monitored by the Government (Mahathir 1986a: ch. 9).

The government's response to political NGOs has taken many forms. One type of response is to counter their criticisms by warning the public against being taken in by 'irresponsible NGOs' who allegedly plan to disrupt government programmes and policies being implemented for the people. Another response is to coopt political NGO leaders which, when successfully undertaken, effectively raises the stature of the state and gains it additional public endorsement. In practice, the government frequently encourages and patronizes NGOs that are 'moderate' and supportive of state policies and ideology. A more manipulative type of response is for the government to set up parallel agencies within its ministries to counter the influence of dissident NGOs and to appropriate their causes. As a final resort, the government has resorted to the use of the Internal Security Act or Societies Act to monitor, discipline and curb overly critical and potentially influential NGOs.

CONCLUSION

The future of the political NGOs will depend on domestic social change and the impact of global developments. In domestic terms, the prospects for political NGO activity and influence will generally be critically related to their legal, political and cultural legitimacy, the expansion of civil society, the emergence of a policy consensus within a pluralist setting, the state of inter-ethnic relations, the coherence of state strategy, and economic advance and transformation (Leftwich 1993: 619). Malaysian society today contains some of these general conditions and may even look forward to an expanding civil society, partly because of global democratizing trends and contemporary political awakening among the people. Consequently, many youthful groups and proponents now call for greater space and freedom of participation within a more liberal and open political system. If these conditions continue, the political NGOs are well placed to expand and invigorate civil society since they can quickly escalate their levels of

networking, cooperation and 'outreach' to promote local participation even in relatively remote areas, based in part on their capacity to operate on low costs, and be innovative, experimental, adaptive and flexible in empowering target groups (Marcussen 1996: 12).

It is instructive to note, too, that most of the NGO activists are urban professionals who exhibit diversity in their philosophy, organizational approaches and practice. Many prefer to maintain a non-political identity, non-ethnic bias and independence from foreign funding which suggests considerable room for them to explore their future relations between one another and between them and the state (Lopez 1997; Syed Adam Aljafri 1995). One weakness of the NGOs is obvious. Other than, say, ABIM or DJZ, most NGOs do not have a mass base, which leaves them with little bargaining power vis-à-vis the state, even if they are vocal and to some extent influential in their advocacy and dissemination of opinions over broad fields of legal and human rights.

It may be argued that the political NGOs can make an important contribution to modifying 'conceptions of the appropriate range of activities of the state, the degree of access that different sectors of society should have to political power, the nature of the links between the sectors, and the kinds of benefits that different sectors of society should receive' (Lipset 1995: 242). In Malaysia's case, the political NGOs will additionally need to wean themselves from any tendency to represent narrow and exclusive class, ethnic or religious interests at the expense of developing a common social framework for sharing power and wealth. Any such tendency would pose impediments to the restructuring of the relations between civil society and the state, even to the extent of jeopardizing the continuity of constitutional-democratic regimes. Some of the NGOs may not realize that, paradoxically, strengthening civil society by extending political participation requires the precondition of strengthening the state (Marcussen 1996). From this point of view, because the Malaysian state continues its commitment of conducting regular general elections, the space available to NGOs and other political groups remains an important marker of possibilities for enhancing civil society.



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