SOCIAL CAPITAL, CIVIL SOCIETY AND DEMOCRACY: THE CASE OF SELECTED MALAYSIAN CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS

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The most recent variant of current democratic theory reveal an intense interest in the relationship between social capital and democracy. This theory posits that a vigorous associational life is beneficial for the creation and maintenance of democracy. This article challenges this conventional wisdom. Here, we argue that the existence of social capital per se may not bring about democratic consolidation. While we maintain that social networks are an important part of the social structure, democratic consolidation may only be attainable if social capital is converted into political capital.

The concept of social capital has gained much currency not only in academia but also in policy circles. Multilateral institutions such as the World Bank and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), for example, now view social capital as an important emerging area of inquiry. This fascination with the notion of social capital could well be attributed to the fact that some influential scholars (Putnam, 1993, 1995, 2000; Fukuyama, 1995, 2000) have forcefully argued that the existence of an ample "stock" of social capital within a particular community, region, or nation could well act as a panacea for various social ills. Social capital, it is claimed, can reduce transaction costs, lower crime rates, and improve governmental responsiveness and efficiency. While social capital has been mainly associated with positive externalities, scholars such as Portes (1998), Lin (2002), and Sobel (2002) have cautioned that the concept of social capital suffers from definitional fuzziness, and that there is a dark side of social capital as well.

While social capital may have its strengths and weaknesses as a social scientific explanatory tool, we do have to take into account that the concept of social capital is relatively new, and is still evolving. This

paper is designed to look at one particular aspect of social capital, that is, the relationship between social capital and democracy with the hope of generating further discussion on the subject and contributing to further refinement of the concept. Democracy here is looked upon not in a purely Schumpeterian (1976) "procedural" sense but as deliberation amongst citizens as a way of both increasing participation in democratic governance and enhancing the justness of public policies (Gutmann & Thompson, 2004). Here, we argue that the existence of social capital that is defined as "not a single entity but a variety of entities with two elements in common: they all consist of some aspect of social structures, and they facilitate certain actions of actors – whether persons or corporate actors within the structure" (Coleman, 1988) *per se* will not bring about democratic consolidation. Social capital as defined by Coleman is functional in the sense that it is a feature of the social structure that can aid individual or corporate actors in achieving their goals, however defined. For social capital to have any impact on democracy, we argue that it has to be transformed into political capital. Political capital consists, in the first instance, of resources which are part of the social structure that individuals or corporate actors can utilize in their interaction with the state, which in turn may influence the state in formulating policies favorable to them. Additionally, political capital refers to organizational activities or activism that promotes civic norms that support democratic governance (support for democratic liberties) and conventional political participation. This argument is based on case studies of selected Malaysian civil society organizations that have been at the forefront of demanding for the state to democratize, and be more receptive to participatory decision-making.

SOCIAL CAPITAL, POLITICAL CAPITAL AND DEMOCRACY

The most convincing argument linking social capital to democracy was made by Putnam (1993) in *Making Democracy Work*: *Civic Traditions in Modern Italy*. Put simply, Putnam argues that the basis of responsive, democratic government lies in civic tradition. It follows that "civic communities" – patterns of social cooperation based on trust, tolerance, and widespread citizen participation involving "norms and networks of social engagement" – are essential to democracy. Civic communities are based on "a dense network of secondary associations" that build trust and cooperation, which in turn lay a firm foundation for democratic

development (Putnam, 1993: 90). In other words, social capital defined as a feature of social life, networks, norms and trust that enable participants to act together more effectively to pursue shared objectives (Putnam, 1993: 26) matters, and is positively correlated to democracy. This argument is by no means a novelty. Scholars have long noted that sociocultural characteristic of a given society can either facilitate democratic consolidation or lead to a democratic deficit. Almond and Verba (1963) pioneering study of political culture, for example, has shown that the relative strength of a civic culture was demonstrated by the potential for citizens to participate in a network of organizations. Interest in structural conditions that are suitable for democracy can be traced back to the French aristocrat Alexis de Tocqueville. Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* has illustrated that one of the most striking characteristics of the United States was a general equality of conditions that pervaded American society and institutions. Equality of conditions in the United States was therefore maintained because "private citizens, combining together, may constitute great bodies of wealth, influence, and strength, corresponding to persons of an aristocracy" (Tocqueville, 1960: vol. II, 387). This is despite the presence of wealthy bourgeoisie whose presence could destroy public life by atomizing it and isolating people.

Using the above premise, proponents of social capital have hypothesized that citizens' involvement in community affairs in the form of face-to-face social networks, voluntary associations, and community institutions is vital in maintaining the health of democracies. Presumably, involvement in such social network builds trust and norms of reciprocity. Apart from building trust and norms of reciprocity, voluntary associations such as churches, social clubs, choral societies, and other forms of civic engagement could also act as integrative mechanisms that bridge particularistic concerns and involve citizens in networks of social interaction around common activities and shared goals (Minkoff, 2001: 185). As Stolle (2003) has noted, the claim is that in areas with stronger, dense, horizontal, and more cross-cutting networks, there is spillover from membership in organizations to the values and norms that citizens develop. In areas where networks with such characteristics do not develop, there are fewer opportunities to learn civic virtue and democratic attitudes, resulting in a lack of trust (Stolle, 2003: 23). In this formulation, social capital is seen as important because it benefits the functioning of democratic institutions. At the

micro-level, this entails the relationship between an individual's membership in associations and networks, and an individual's values and attitudes. Membership in voluntary associations is therefore a proxy indicator of how social capital is generated. It is also taken as a given that membership in voluntary associations functions as a school of democracy. This in its turn raises the following questions: Are all associations alike? Does involvement in associations, regardless of its activities, nurture democratic norms and values? Scholars such as Stephan Knack (Knack, 2000) have cautioned that informal socializing and involvement in clubs are more ambiguous, representing social interactions that in some cases tend to instill habits of public-spiritedness, as Putnam hypothesizes, but may sometime have no effects, or even negative effects depending on the characteristics of these social ties and the goals pursued by groups. Similarly, Pamela Paxton (Paxton, 2002) has cautioned that different associations need not have equivalent effects on democracy. Putnam, for example, seems to imply that even associations that are purely pursuing social/philanthropic goals such as the Lion clubs are likely to promote a healthy and effective democracy as human rights groups. She went on to say that some types of associations may actually be detrimental to democracy. According to Paxton, nationalist groups are likely to exacerbate social cleavages and interfere with democratic consolidation due to the fact that such associations could reduce levels of tolerance and undermines the overall democratic political culture. Hence, the question of the types of associations and their effects on democracy still remain elusive.

In order to address the issue of the types of associations and their effects on democracy, we have to elaborate on our claim that the existence of social capital *per se* may not necessarily lead to democratization. Social capital as conceptualized by the major theorists on the subject (Coleman, Bourdieu, Putnam, Lin) is seen as either a collective asset or a privilege good. Coleman and Putnam, for example, stress that social capital should be conceptualized as a public good and available to all members of the group, be it a social group or a community, and regardless of which members actually, promote, sustain, or contribute to such resources. Bourdieu, on the other hand, holds that social capital is just another form of economic capital which will inevitably contribute to inequality. For Bourdieu social capital is a privilege good because it is linked to "possession of a durable network of institutionalized relationships of mutual recognition – or in other words, to membership

in a group" (Bourdieu, 1986: 248). In Bourdieu's sociology, social capital represents a process by which individuals in the dominant class, by mutual recognition and acknowledgement, reinforce and reproduce a privileged group that holds various forms of capital (economic, cultural and symbolic). In this theoretical formulation, social capital is an individual asset and its value is determined by the size of one's connections and the volume of capital in these connections' possession. More importantly, social capital as an asset is only available to members of a particular group with clear boundaries, obligations of exchange, and mutual recognition.

While social capital may be conceived as either a private or a collective asset, there seems to be an emerging consensus among scholars that social capital consists of resources embedded in social relations and social structure, which can be mobilized when an actor wishes to increase the likelihood of success in a purposive action. Social capital is therefore an investment in social relations with expected returns either in the form of a tangible or intangible good. In searching for employment, for example, the amount and quality of an individual's social capital can either facilitate or impede success. A person's position in the social structure also plays an important role in determining the likelihood of attaining the desired position. This is consistent with the *homophily* principle which holds that when a certain group clusters at relatively disadvantaged socio-economic positions, the general tendency is for individuals to associate with those of similar group or socio-economic characteristics. One's social capital could also come in handy in furthering one's business interest and in organizing for a purposive action. We are nonetheless still faced with the unresolved issue of the quality of a person's social capital which is determined by his or her socio-economic standing. Ultimately, no two persons can have equal amounts of social capital, and the quality might differ as well.

As we have mentioned at the outset, social capitalists' interest in the correlation between social capital and democracy emanates largely from a Tocquevillean perspective. The most important mechanism for the generation of norms of reciprocity and trust is identified as regular social interaction. Following the Tocquevillean tradition, associations are seen as creators of social capital because of their socialization effects on democratic and cooperative values and norms. Nevertheless, this assumption takes it as a given that all associations are alike and that all

associations promote democratic values and norms. Empirical evidence, on the other hand, suggests that associations whose *raison d' etre* is to promote an exclusivist agenda or associations of the bonding type may inculcate negative attitudes such as intolerance of individuals from other ethnic groups and this in turn can be harmful to democracy. More importantly, Putnam's (1995: 664–665) conception of social capital as "features of social life – networks, norms, and trust that enables participants to act together more effectively to pursue shared objectives," deviates substantially from Coleman and Bourdieu's original usage of the term. Put simply, social capital at its core may be conceptualized as: (1) quantity and/or quality of resources that an actor (be it an individual, group or community) can access or use through; and (2) its location in a social network (Lin, 2000: 786). In other words, these resources will only translate into social capital if an actor's social connections can enhance the likelihood of a positive return (material or symbolic) such as an increase in sales or getting better jobs or a promotion. Social capital therefore can be utilized not only for expressive action but instrumental action as well.

In relation to the political system, however, there is still a gap in the literature as to how social capital can actually contribute to democratization. Social connections alone are unlikely to contribute to democratization if the state remains unresponsive and continue to be repressive. While it is true that authoritarian states will try to atomize its citizens, it is an exaggeration to say that citizens in autocratic states are totally helpless and disconnected even though democratic institutions permit the formation of voluntary associations to a greater extent than do non-democratic institutions. Putnam's conception of social capital as stated above is not only vague but also problematic in that it does not specify how social capital impinges upon the political system. Social capital is essentially a by-product of citizens interacting in the public sphere. A precursor for social capital to emerge is some degree of associational freedom whereby civil society can at least mediate between citizen and state. As Booth and Richard (1998) have noted, Putnam never elucidates how group involvement affects citizen behavior or attitudes so as to influence government performance or enhance the prospects for democracy. We therefore are proposing that social capital has to be paired with democratic norms and values (political capital) for it to have any bearing on democracy. In other words, organizational type and activities are a crucial component of civil society in that they must

complement their own issue-driven agendas with implicit and explicit demands for political democracy therefore adding to the pressures on the state to open up.
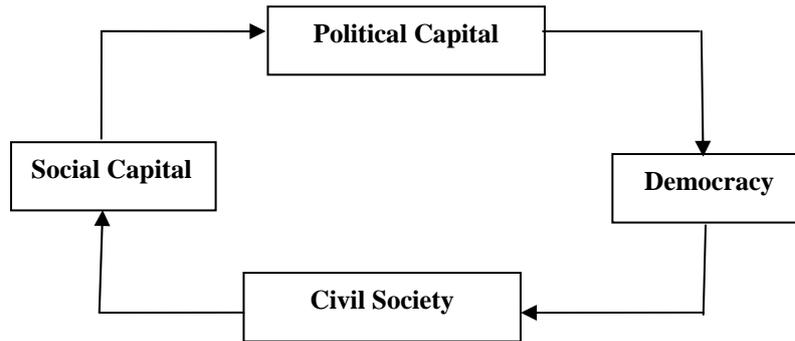

Figure 1: The Dynamics of Civil Society and Social Capital

Figure 1 shows our proposition that in order for democratic consolidation to take place, social capital has to be transformed into political capital. Civil society is the arena where citizens organize activities, deliberate, create networks of like-minded individuals around a host of issues/interests, and attempt to improve society as a whole, but it (civil society) is not part of government or business. Out of this interaction, citizens (individual actors, groups, communities) will develop ties ("weak" or "strong") with other citizens, and if these ties can be called upon in instrumental action (e.g., finding jobs or to preserve gains in expressive actions), it can be said that it has been converted into social capital. Social capital therefore arises out of activities in civil society. Nevertheless, we have to take into account that social capital can be generated not only in civil society but also in other formal and informal settings. Our ties with our colleagues or neighbors also have the potential to be converted into social capital. Since we are primarily interested in how social capital might bring about democratic consolidation, we will leave individual's private ties or face to face interaction that is not political in nature out of this model.

In Figure 1, it should be noted that the field of civil society is very wide and inhabited by many organizations with different purposes and qualifications. Some examples of Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) are charitable organizations, ethnic organizations, religious

organizations, professional organizations, unions, resident associations, consumer associations, and environmental organizations. It is nevertheless important to point out that some CSOs are openly political, and others are apolitical in nature. Some CSOs may promote generalized trust among a variety of citizens, while others divide their members from the rest of society. When CSOs interact with one another, they constitute a social network. This social network is a vital component of social capital because it has the ability to mobilize a wide range of personal social contacts, and is crucial to the effective functioning of social and political life. Like-minded CSOs thus can utilize their social capital to build coalitions around a particular issue and consolidate their resources. CSOs' social capital in its turn may be converted into political capital if the social network (any organization that seeks to make demands or tries to influence the state has to seek out allies) provides a mechanism through which citizens can define and articulate a broad range of interests, meet local needs, and make demands on government. Moreover, the importance of this "stock" of political capital lays in its ability to educate the wider public on the awareness of the need to police the state, and check the tendency of the state to centralize its power and evade civic accountability and control. In addition, political capital can also be used as leverage against the state in demanding for the inclusion of certain policy initiatives which will ultimately benefit the citizenry. In this process of accommodation and struggle between the state and civil society, democratic consolidation may be attainable.

In conceptualizing the interaction between state and civil society as dynamic, we are postulating that even though actors are constrained by the social structure, they may act within the structure to change it. The effective use of the resources (social and political capital) rests with the actors and they need to perceive that resources are available and ready for use before effective mobilization of social and political capital would yield a positive return. Finally, this model of social capital is interactive and context dependent because access to resources requires the right social connection, and this partly explains why different networks provide access to richer or poorer resources. We also assume that not all individuals or groups will make effective use of social and political capital (civil society is not a unified force) thus explaining the degree of intensity and the interaction between state and society of which democratic consolidation is one of many outcomes.

The Political Context of CSOs in Malaysia

In order to determine the types of associations that are conducive for democracy to consolidate, it is quite instructive to look at a regime that has yet to consolidate, and described as "neither authoritarian nor democratic", and as a "semi-democracy". The Malaysian regime, which has often been characterized as a "half-way house" is a hybrid polity. It is democratic because elections (free but not necessarily fair) were held religiously since the country gained its independence in 1957 but it is also authoritarian because the state does have under its belt a host of repressive laws such as the Internal Security Act (ISA) which permits the detention without trial of individuals that the state feels is a threat to national security. More often than not, opposition politicians were incarcerated as the incumbent government felt that they were out to undermine "national security". Nevertheless, as Crouch (1996) has noted, "the government has been careful to respond to the expectations of a large part of the society…because competitive elections have continued to be held" (114–35).

To its credit, the Malaysian regime has successfully managed ethnic relations in a plural society, which if not properly handled, could lead to instability, and has managed the economy rather successfully as well. As such, democratic consolidation has remained elusive in Malaysia because of the aforementioned factors coupled with the emergent of the new political culture of developmentalism. According to Loh Kok Wah (2002: 21):

> This new political culture valorizes rapid economic growth, the resultant consumerist habits, and the political stability offered by BN (*Barisan Nasional* or National Front) rule even when authoritarian means are resorted to. Since no party has ever governed Malaysia, many ordinary Malaysian cannot imagine that political stability can be maintained in multi-ethnic Malaysia without BN rule. A "self-policing" system in support of BN rule which is believed to be essential for maintaining political stability, which then attracts FDIs and allows economic growth to occur, and ultimately for the enjoyment of higher standards of living and consumption, has kicked in.

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While Loh Kok Wah (2002) might give the impression that there is almost a consensus among Malaysians that BN rule is the only viable form of government, and that this new political culture pervades all Malaysians, it is important to highlight that this consensus is more prevalent among the middle class. We would also like to caution that the Malaysian middle-class is by no means homogenous. That the new political culture of developmentalism may be dominant among the middle class could be attributed to the fact that the Malaysian middles class has historically been supportive of the state as demonstrated by the elections results (Abdul Rahman Embong, 2001: 80). Nevertheless, since the late 1960s, a small segment of the middle class began to demand for a more participatory approach in decision-making– articulating their grievances in the language of democracy and democratization.

Since Malaysia had inherited a well-developed civil service from the British, and experienced robust economic growth, the state had, since independence, pursued a developmentalist strategy, which effectively blocked CSOs from providing direct services to the masses. For instance, Malaysian CSOs were seldom involved in relieving the immediate suffering of the poor, and meeting their short-term visible needs in the hope that the poor may get themselves back onto their feet to escape poverty. Alternatively, assistance to the rural poor and peasants was handed out through appendages of the dominant party in the ruling coalition – the United Malays National Organization (UMNO). One of the reasons for this could be attributed to the fact that UMNO relies heavily on rural Malay voters for its electoral supremacy and one way to win the crucial Malay votes in the rural areas is to be seen as the "protector" of the Malays. The party has managed to do this by virtue of being the dominant party in the ruling coalition and as such was able to dispense various forms of patronage through several mechanisms such as the local village council. We therefore can deduce that associational life of the political/social welfare type is not predominant among the Malays as most of their needs have been attended to by the state. This is not to imply that the pattern of associational life is static among the Malays. More specifically, associational life in the Malay community is characterized by religious affinity as opposed to civic or political ends. This partly explains the attractiveness of *Parti Islam Se-Malaysia* (Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party) as a viable alternative to UMNO in the Malay belt states.

With regard to the non-Malay communities, associational life of the "bonding" kind is rather vibrant. The Chinese community, for example, was attracted to voluntary association and this is not unique to Malaysia but has been a typical feature of immigrant Chinese communities everywhere. Voluntary associations in the guise of *Huay Kuan* and *Kongsi* groups, based on regional association and kinship were followed by *Miao* or temple organizations. These associations were primarily concerned with health, welfare and were formed out of concern for inadequate public facilities (Douglas & Pedersen, 1973: 71). It has been noted (Douglas & Pedersen, 1973: 72) that Chinese associations and guilds provided a shadow government whose authority competed with the political leadership of English-speaking Chinese in the federal and state assemblies. The existence of this network of interdependent associations could be considered as a form of "bonding" social capital for the immigrant communities because it reinforced a self-contained community life and traditional framework. These associations provided relationships to the otherwise fragmented Chinese community using ancestral establishments with common surnames that perpetuated ancestor worship, celebrated the traditional festivals, and cared for ancestral graves. As Kaneko (2002: 180) has noted, each of these associations offered numerous "semi-public" services ranging from helping members find jobs to managing schools. Similarly, the Indian community's involvement in associational is also vibrant. Since the Indians were brought in by the British to work in the rubber estates, the Indians were and are active union members. Caste organizations were also popular among early immigrants and trade organizations and guilds have continued to exert some influence, separating the Indian trading community from labor interests (Douglas & Pedersen, 1973: 73). Again, we see a similar pattern emerging among the non-Malay communities in that associational life was an important component of their social structure. Voluntary associations helped these immigrants to get acquainted with their new homeland, and subsequently cultural and religious practices were also kept alive through these associations. Some of these associations, especially those within the Chinese community, have developed into pressure groups that seek to protect Chinese cultural and educational rights.

As the Malaysian regime is characterized by a mixture of both authoritarian and democratic characteristics, associational autonomy is

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not one of its forte. Associational activities are heavily regulated by the state. The Societies Act of 1966 (revised in 1983) is the enactment that defines the relationship between the state and civil society. Any organization that has seven or more persons is required to register with the state and this requirement is applicable to all organizations be it business or social. The Registrar of Society (ROS) is the agency that is responsible for monitoring the activities of voluntary associations and is empowered to accept or reject any application to form new associations. In an attempt to tighten its rein on civil society, the state, in 1981, moved to amend the 1966 Societies Act so as to classify non-governmental organizations into two categories – "political" and "friendly". As Saravanamuttu (2001: 51) has noted, this would have effectively depoliticize a large number of urban based societies and associations from performing their legitimate role of lobbying or influencing government policy. This proposed amendment was unsuccessful as a secretariat headed by ABIM (Islamic Youth Movement of Malaysia) mobilized 115 civil society organizations which resulted in the review of the amendment and the offending section dropped by the government. This victory was, however, short-lived as the state then decided to amend the Official Secrets Acts (OSA) to include mandatory jail sentence for journalists and others who revealed materials obtained from government sources. This was done despite a heated protest from the National Union of Journalists and other key civil society actors. Civil society in Malaysia therefore operates under the "watchful eye" of the state, and has been characterized as being "encapsulated" (Jesudason, 1995: 335). While we have to recognize that the state remains a potent force and has an upper hand in dealing with civil society, it is also important to realize that civil society is not at all powerless. In whatever little room that is left in the public sphere, cause-specific civil society organizations have managed to organize and maneuver, and at times succeeded in influencing the state either to re-think its development policies or attempt to go on a public relation campaign to improve its human rights record. In sum, state-society relations in Malaysia is evolving and in suggesting that civil society is "encapsulated", we seem to fall into historical determinism.

The Selected Malaysian Civil Society Organizations

We will, in this section, demonstrate the applicability of this model in the Malaysian context. For the purpose of this study, we have chosen six Malaysian civil society organizations namely Aliran Kesedaran Negara (Aliran), Suara Rakyat Malaysia (SUARAM), Consumers Association of Penang (CAP), Education and Research Association for Consumers, Malaysia (ERA), Malaysian Nature Society (MNS), and Penang Heritage Trust (PHT). These organizations were chosen as they are political in the widest sense and active advocates for political change and democratization. However, it must be made clear that not all organizations perform this democratizing function. Many Malaysian CSOs have conscientiously avoided the political label, choosing to concentrate on running specific activities for their members, or on delivering limited social welfare services in line with a more traditional conception of charity which is essentially palliative, and not discursively critical. This model, however, is primarily concerned with the ways in which CSOs have acted as an independent and critical force in mobilizing different interests in civil society. In the Malaysian context, it should be noted that CSOs or the "political NGOs" have historically developed as part of the public response to political authoritarianism and undemocratic development since the late 1960s, and especially during the 1980s. The diversity of organic bases of civil society mobilization – the consumer movement, environmental concerns, women's issues, Islam, and nation-building is cross cut by the concern for public accountability and the exercise of democratic procedures. This involves the advocacy of the freedom of expression, freedom of information, and the freedom for civil society to organize peacefully. This will be made clear in the case studies below.

Consumers Organizations

The consumers' organizations in Malaysia have been at the forefront of demanding for participatory and alternative forms of development. With the formation of the Selangor Consumers Association (SCA) in 1965, the interaction of social activists in the public sphere saw the consumers' organizations coming together in 1970 to form the Federation of Malaysian Consumer's Association (FOMCA). We therefore can infer that different actors, acting autonomously, with convergent interests in consumerism, managed to mobilize their social capital so as to form FOMCA. With the setting up of FOMCA, the disparate consumer organizations eventually achieved some degree of success in scaling up

their influence at the national level, and set to formalize their relationship with the state. In 1974, FOMCA managed to pressure the state to establish the National Advisory Council for Consumer Protection which saw the former participating in policy dialogues. FOMCA as such had developed not only the capability to influence government policy but also created the space whereby it is possible for consumers to air their grievances. Unlike FOMCA, the CAP had developed a more ambivalent relationship with the state, covering a spectrum of interactions ranging from critical collaboration to radical opposition. While CAP still performs the traditional functions of a consumer organization, it has also developed its own world-view which has moved it beyond the traditional remit of consumer organizations towards becoming an anti-systemic or counter-hegemonic social movement based on re-thinking development. CAP, for example, has taken up numerous public interests litigation cases against private companies and the state. By taking up such cases, it is hoped that loopholes in existing legislation (laws that are detrimental to the public) would then be rectified. The radioactive poisoning case in Bukit Merah and the Kerpan case are among the most notable public interest litigation cases taken up by CAP. In both cases, CAP provided free legal service and mobilized the local communities in countering both the state and private powers.

Education and Research Association for Consumers, Malaysia (ERA), on the other hand, is actively involved in alleviating the suffering of disadvantaged groups by pursuing programs that can enhance community participation in development programs. As the NGO perspective stresses the importance of empowering the disadvantaged, ERA had initiated a pilot study which found that consumer illiteracy was widespread in rural and suburban areas in the northern state of Perak and was higher in the villages and plantations. The organization therefore pressured the National Consumer Protection Council to develop mass-based consumer education programs to ensure that they (consumers) will not be exploited. In empowering the consumers and the disadvantaged groups, ERA is advocating a democratic form of development and challenging centralized technocratic and elitist discourses. ERA as such is propagating an alternative paradigm which is fundamentally based on the principle of self-determination that relies on getting the people to recognize and articulate their own aspirations and needs. This idea of economic empowerment and participation is consonant with the

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integrationist perspective. Economic empowerment and participation can be invoked to describe efforts by ERA to help the poor and marginalized groups to increase their participation in capitalist production. While both CAP and ERA might take divergent approaches in their interaction with the state and private powers, we should not overlook the area of convergence. For example, both ERA and CAP are a central force for alternative development approaches in Malaysia. Both campaigned for accountability and public participation in the decision-making process. In addition, both organizations have been at the forefront of the critique of undemocratic and unsustainable forms of development. CAP and ERA are therefore arguing that political development is best served through efforts to meet basic human needs. As such their independent and critical positions inevitably lead to some degree of contradiction and conflict with political leadership and allied capitalist interests.

Human Rights Organizations

While CAP and ERA have implicitly or explicitly touched on the issues of democratic and alternative forms of development, there are also other Malaysian CSOs that have structured their struggle for democracy and development in the human rights discourse. The Malaysian human rights organizations are primarily concerned with universal issues of human rights and a counter-hegemonic discursive coalition mobilized and united around local and national issues of deteriorating democratic structures. As the Malaysian regime had become more assertive and less democratic, especially in the 1980s, human rights organizations such as Aliran and SUARAM have played an important role not only in educating the public but also in defending whatever little space that existed in the public sphere for safeguarding the public interest. Human rights organizations were and are at the fore-front of demanding for the repeal of coercive laws such as the ISA, the OSA and the Universities and University Colleges Act (UUCA). Aliran, for example, is a first generation non-partisan and multi-ethnic reform movement dedicated to spearheading democratic reforms in Malaysia. Aliran was founded in 1977 by Dr. Chandra Muzaffar, then an academic staff at Universiti Sains Malaysia in Penang. Apart from engaging in critical discourse with the state, Aliran had done much to engage in activities that could generate a political impact. In other words, its activities were designed to affect all stages of the political and policy processes. Aliran, for example, is the first CSO to call for election candidates to declare their

assets to the people. This campaign was held in conjunction with the 1978 general elections. Car stickers in English, Malay, and Chinese were distributed to the members of the public with the slogans "Fight Corruption" and "Election Candidates Declare Your Assets". As a follow up activity to further highlight the issue of corruption, Aliran held a seminar on corruption and society on November 2nd, 1980. This seminar was the first of its kind to be organized by any group in the country. The organization also had tried to develop bonds and solidarity with other civil society actors such as union members. Nevertheless, Aliran remains a "consciousness – raising" organization akin to the Gramscian conception of intellectuals as of vital significance in the emergence and diffusion of alternatives to dominant ideas and interests.

SUARAM, on the other hand, is an activist type organization. Founded in 1989, the organization originated from a support group consisted of family members of ISA detainees arrested in 1987 under the "*operation lalang*". SUARAM is therefore the third human rights group to emerge in Malaysia apart from Aliran and the National Human Rights Society (HAKAM). What sets SUARAM apart from the other human rights organizations is its objective: while there is no doubt that SUARAM is primarily concerned with promoting human rights as formulated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, it is also pushing the state to improve its human rights record especially those relating to civil, political, cultural, economic, and environmental rights. While Aliran essentially plays a role as an intellectual "counter-hegemonic" force, SUARAM, on the other hand, believes in empowering citizens through the process of participation, and realizing their rights through direct action and solidarity with other progressive organizations. SUARAM actively monitors the state's infringement on human rights by documenting cases of detention without trial and campaigning for the repeal of all repressive legislation and for the creation of public awareness of human rights. It has become a key actor in human rights campaigns and has also campaigned for community development, environmental issues, and the concerns of indigenous people. SUARAM was appointed as the Southeast Asian Regional Coordinator at the UN Conference on Human Rights and actively networks with international organizations such as Amnesty International, the Asian Human Rights Commission, Asia Watch and the International Commission for Jurists. It appears that SUARAM has progressed from an Aliran-type role of intellectual critic to a more professionalized approach that centers on

skills training for CSO activists. The role played by SUARAM in coordinating public protest against the Bakun Dam, for example, has demonstrated that it has emerged since its inception in 1987 as a leading Malaysian CSO with the ability to co-ordinate joint CSO action. It now plays a major role in CSO mobilization on current public interest issues. In sum, Aliran and SUARAM are important civil society actors that have continuously exerted pressure on the state to recognize the importance of granting its citizens civil and political rights.

Environmental/Heritage Organizations

Malaysian environmental organizations have campaigned extensively on environmental issues such as radioactive and hazardous waste pollution, logging and threats to nature reserves, noise and air pollution, the enforcement of Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) procedures and other environmental and conservation issues. The MNS, for example, has worked closely with the federal and state governments, the media, universities, schools, and commercial firms in promoting sustainable development in Malaysia. Formed in 1940, MNS is probably Malaysia's highest-profile environmental CSO. While MNS tries overtly to remain "apolitical", it has nonetheless exerted much pressure on the state to reform its environmental policies. The organization was instrumental in influencing the state to pass the Protection of Wild Life Act 1972 as a move in promoting conservation in Malaysia. More importantly, MNS has spearheaded a campaign to save the Endau-Rompin National Park in May 1977 which was a key milestone in the history of conservation and environmental protection in Malaysia as it stimulated the first national publicity campaign on such an issue. This campaign had forcefully brought to light the need to take the well-being of the environment into account as opposed to exploiting the economic potential of the virgin forest to the fullest by engaging in logging activities.

PHT, a Penang-based heritage organization, has been lobbying the state government to enact a comprehensive heritage legislation. Due to its non-confrontational style of engaging with state authorities, the organization has enjoyed a relatively high level of co-operation from the state agencies. Nevertheless, PHT has an ambiguous relationship with the private sector – the housing developers in particular. The Penang Housing Developers Associations (PHDA) and PHT, for example, were at loggerheads over the issue of conservation versus development. While

the conservationist is trying hard to push for heritage protection, developers are up in arms over what they see as an attempt to throw a spanner in the development wheel. PHT has been pushing for building guidelines on the redevelopment of inner city Georgetown to be immediately implemented before the architectural heritage of the town suffers wholesale destruction. While the state authorities have not acted on PHT's proposal, the State Heritage Conservation Committee has, in principle, accepted PHT's guidelines. The most challenging task for the PHT is pushing for a State Heritage Enactment which the state government has promised the people of Penang.

CONCLUSION

These case studies have attempted to show that the selected Malaysian CSOs, despite their divergence interests and orientations, do converge in demanding for more democratic space. In whatever little space that exist in the public sphere, civil society actors have managed to deliberate, organize, and act as a counter-hegemonic force. Cause-specific CSOs have built coalitions around various public interest issues such as demanding for the abolishment of the ISA and other coercive laws. More importantly, Malaysian CSOs embody counter-hegemonic criticisms of mainstream conceptions and programs of development, be it political development, economic development or sociocultural development. Civil society actors, on the other hand, constituted a network and their social resource (those resources accessible through social connections) is a form of social capital as it serves a particular purpose, and can be mobilized in forming cross-sectoral alliances, for example.

In their capacity as the organic intellectuals, Malaysian CSOs surveyed here have organized public discourse and participation in reaction to specific political events, legislative measures or development issues. As such, CSOs represent major agents for change in civil society, publicly criticizing, lobbying, protesting, and generally catalyzing public opinion on policies. Social capital may predispose civil society actors to cooperate and their existing networks have facilitated coordinated action, but in relation to democratic consolidation, especially where the external environment needs to be engaged, organizational activities have acted as a catalyst for generating political capital. Malaysian CSOs have

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played an important role in defending the democratic mechanisms available within the public sphere which made it possible to serve and defend the public interest. CSOs formed broad coalitions and engaged in an intellectual critique of the state in an effort to make state power more accountable. What makes these case studies illuminating is their capacity to bring out this relationship of accommodation and conflict in a context in which the struggles for further democratization deepen.

As a social scientific explanatory tool, social capital is a useful concept as far as explaining social connections, and their effects are concerned. These connections are nonetheless subject to various social structural constraints, and the success of a particular endeavor does not rest on social capital alone. The claims made by social capitalists that a person, a group or even a nation well-endowed with social capital is able to engage in mutually beneficial cooperation over a wide front needs to be re-examined. Social capital as originally conceived by Coleman and Bourdieu, despite their different theoretical positions, is particularly concerned with socially embedded resources which can be mobilized when an actor wishes to increase the likelihood of success in purposive actions. If social capitalists have it right, democracy is more likely to consolidate in an environment rich in social capital (as measured by vibrant associational life). Nevertheless, it is not exactly clear how, and to what extent, associational life can have an effect on democracy or national-level performance. It is not clear, for example, how members of any organization may agree on the ends toward which their social capital should be used and whether members of CSOs always want the same thing from the state for which they will be willing to work cooperatively with one another. As we have argued at the outset, the effect of social capital will only impinge upon democracy if it is converted into political capital. In other words, dense social networks are not enough. Social capital might act as sociological "super-glue" and may facilitate individuals to act together, but in dealing with the state, associational orientation matters. As our case studies have attempted to demonstrate, in order for CSOs to become agents of democratization, they have to actively engage with the state and the by-product of this engagement is political capital. Social capital cannot by itself spark the overthrow of an authoritarian state. CSOs nonetheless can utilize their social capital to build networks around issues of convergence. Democratic consolidation may be attainable if CSOs become politically relevant – generating political capital in the guise of complementing their own issue-driven

agendas with implicit or explicit demands for democracy which in turn bestowing the virtues of democracy not only to their own members but members of the public as well. In conclusion, CSOs that actively struggle for civil and political rights can act as a catalyst whereby individual or corporate actors can utilize in pressuring the state to democratize. Finally, CSOs that are struggling for democracy need mutual support from other CSOs in a process of horizontal relations of civil society within itself.

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