

THE CONTEST FOR MORAL POLITICS: INTERROGATING THE CULTURAL POLITICS OF MALAYSIAN CULTURAL GROUPS

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This paper argues that the studies of post-2008 Malaysian political structures have overlooked the cultural politics articulated by artists, film makers, cartoonists, musicians, committed social actors and academicians. Their languages of politics do not manifest into ideologies or policies of political parties, but the construction of ideas, non-official histories, life stories and alternative citizenry re-construct the moral politics that the regime of Barisan Nasional (BN), the ruling party, has failed to provide. This political terrain has begun forming within the Malaysian society since the 1970s and became more critical and overt during the 1998 Reformasi period. Following the changing (political) nature of Malaysian civil society groups and the 'opening up' of spaces for more freedom of expression, this political terrain elevated to a new height in 2008.

Keywords: art, contestation, cultural politics, moral politics, the state

INTRODUCTION

This paper argues that the politics in Malaysia has changed and the politicking has crossed beyond the electoral and institutional domains, such as party politics, constitution, elections, the judiciary, legislative, executive branches and so on. Understanding such political participation requires us to capture the 'cultural' sites of the politics articulated by the cultural groups.

Studies of post-2008 Malaysian political structures have overlooked the terrain of cultural politics articulated by artists, film makers, cartoonists, musicians, committed social actors and academicians. Their languages of politics do not manifest into ideologies or policies of political parties, but the construction of ideas, non-official histories, life stories and alternative citizenry to re-construct the moral politics that the regime of Barisan Nasional/National Front (BN), the ruling party, has failed to provide. This political terrain has begun forming in Malaysian society in the 1970s and became more critical and overt during the 1998 *Reformasi* period. Following the changing (political) nature of Malaysian civil society groups and the 'opening up' of spaces for more freedom of expression, this political terrain elevated to a new height in 2008.

In this paper, I refer to culture as a system of representation that produces meaning. This meaning is understood, constructed, and shared by agencies through language (media, music, electronic symbols, etc.) to express thoughts and feelings or emotions (Hall, 1997). Culture is not depicted as given, essential, discrete and bounded (Keesing, 1991; Kahn, 1991) but arbitrary and constructed by human agency. From the political perspective, I refer these agencies to groups of people who are in constant contestation with, rather than adapting to, the state in claiming social power in the realm of cultural politics. Thus I depict the following perspective on cultural politics:

We interpret cultural politics as the process enacted when sets of social actors shaped by, and embodying, different cultural meanings and practices come into conflict with each other. This definition of cultural politics assumes that meanings and practices—particularly those theorised as marginal, oppositional, minority, residual, emergent, alternative, dissident and the like, all of them conceived in relation to a given dominant cultural order—can be the source of processes that must be accepted as political. Culture is political because the meanings are constitutive of processes that, implicitly and explicitly, seek to redefine social power. That is, when movements deploy alternative conceptions of woman, nature, race, economy, democracy or citizenship that unsettle dominant cultural meanings, they enact a cultural politics. (Alvarez et al., 1998: 7)

Culture of this sort is political because it pertains to power relations. When cultural conceptions of lifestyle, identity, ethnicity and gender are challenged or marginalised, the practices of resistance and negotiation arise in the quest for social power. These are not explicitly articulated into formal political institutions or taken as political strategies to reclaim power; yet such struggle for power relates to recognition, respect, status and manifestation of their vision and views of reality. More importantly, cultural politics is not just a response to hegemony, nor is it shaped by a dominant cultural order. Instead, the subaltern's contestations are manifested in their own rationalities derived from their daily life activities, redefining and defending of their origins and definitions of social concepts (Alejo, 2000). In other words, cultural politics provides the 'powerless' ways to claim social power within their own languages, cultures, politics, economy, and space.

This paper consists of three parts. First, the paper analyses the general studies of post-2008 political development in Malaysia and the ways they explain the weakening of BN's political authority after the 2008 General Election. Second, it briefly describes the shape and form of the construction of political legitimacy of BN, focusing in particular on the notion of 1Malaysia as the political construction

of moral politics by Najib administration to (re)gain power after the 2008 election. Finally, the paper indicates that these studies have overlooked the change in scopes and forms of the civil society groups, namely the cultural groups. The write up continues to identify their ways of political struggles, participation, and 'mundane' roles in engaging with the society to re-excavate (the lost) moral politics vis-à-vis the state.

The Weakening of the State's Legitimacy: Malaysian Politics Post-2008

In this section, I provide a brief account of the recent studies on 2008 election, focusing on their analyses of the (new) structures of Malaysian (party) politics and their explanation on the weakening political legitimacy of BN.

The 2008 election results that saw BN, led by the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) losing its two-thirds majority in the Parliament since 1969 has caught many political observers and laypersons by surprise. Many studies have attempted to determine the cause of this sudden change in Malaysian politics. In the election, the opposition coalition of Pakatan Rakyat/People's Coalition (PR), consisting of the Democratic Action Party (DAP), Parti Islam Se-Malaysia/Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS) and Parti Keadilan Rakyat/People's Justice Party (PKR), gained four states: Penang, Selangor, Kedah and Kelantan. Perak returned to BN after three state assemblypersons became independents. Such an outstanding result for the opposition coalition has led to something 'a little beyond' semi-democracy or quasi-democracy, with possible creation of a two-party system in Malaysian electoral politics (Ufen, 2009; Moten, 2009b; Case, 2010).

Political legitimacy in post-2008 Malaysia has been caught between democracy and ethnicity. On the one hand, the weakening of BN's political legitimacy was due to the emerging and maturing of a multi-cultural, multi-ethnic society that will most likely lead to further democratisation (Moten, 2009a; Pepinsky, 2009; Thomas, 2008; Toh, 2008). On the other hand, while ethnic politics might not have lost its weight in Malaysian politics, it depends on existing elites and those coming into power (Jawan and Yusof, 2009; Arakaki, 2008).

We also observe that studies of Malaysia's political change after 2008 have examined the role of civil society vis-à-vis the state (Weiss, 2009) and within institutional and electoral political analyses (Chin and Wong, 2009). Political parties remain at the centre of the studies, which means that political change and the demise of BN/UMNO legitimacy in Malaysia cannot be implicitly concluded without looking at political parties' performances in electoral politics.

Arguably, the understanding of post-2008 Malaysian politics is (still) based on ethnicity, authoritarian regime analyses and democratisation, perpetuating the role of party politics as the essential unit of analysis in Malaysian political change. They subsume Malaysian politics under the realm of institutions, in turn making Malaysian voters, who includes the middle class, susceptible to institutional political change and in constant struggle with state institutions via political activism for direct influence. This policy-orientated advocacy is a manifestation of politicking in public spheres for political civility.

Another aspect of politicking at play by the state is the construction of good governance and Malaysian 'society'. Philip Khoo argues that the future in the aftermath of the 2008 election to both BN and (more specifically) PR is to build a political legitimacy that 'care[s] for all its members' and to give a 'more holistic accounting of social solidarity' (2008a: 10 and 11). Khoo Boo Teik (2008: 6 and 8) advocates sound economic management with the flavour of social democracy, that prioritises the 'little folks', such as a combination of "Anwar's concept of a caring society, the Parti Rakyat Malaysia's plebeian concerns, DAP's old socialist claims and PAS's Islamic welfarism". As will be discussed below, these political proposals can be seen in Najib Razak's 1Malaysia concept as a vehicle to (re)gain the legitimacy lost in the 2008 election.

1Malaysia: The Latest Product of Malaysian State Political Myth/Legitimacy

Since the 2008 General Election, which dealt a severe blow to the BN government led by Abdullah Badawi, Dato' Seri Najib Razak has been quietly building up his support and positioning himself to become the Prime Minister. Since his premiership, Najib has been constantly propagating a new rhetoric to build equal and performance-oriented governance through the launching of the 1Malaysia campaign.

1Malaysia can be seen as an ideological construct by Najib to create a political moral order for Malaysia. It fits in well with the present political scenario because UMNO/BN has seen its own weaknesses. Najib's 1Malaysia campaign is vibrant and consistent. It has entered various public spheres such as public seminars for civil servants, television shows discussing its viability, the Formula one race car sponsored by the TuneGroup, Naza Group, and Litespeed (UK), and the display of 1Malaysia logos on Penang buses and billboards.

During his inauguration speech in April 2009, Najib urged the nation to transform the country and came up with the slogan "One Malaysia. People First. Performance Now". Based on his slogan, he is not only encouraging a united, non-discriminatory form of governance, but also a governance that puts words

into actions that prioritise the Malaysian people regardless of ethnicity, culture, or religion.

In the economic realm, Najib has removed the 30% *bumiputra* equity requirement for 27 service sub-sectors, such as health and social services, tourism, transport, business and computer and related services, to produce a non-ethnic-based economic podium. As regards social aspect, he promised, on his 100th day of premiership, to reform six National Key Result Areas, namely crime reduction, quality of life, fighting corruption, education, rural infrastructure and public transport by 2010–2012 (*Sinchew Daily*, 27 July 2009; *Merdekareview*, 12 July 2009). Besides these changes, Najib also announced 11 new people-oriented initiatives. Among them are: 20% discount for frequent highway-users; construction of 44,000 low-cost houses; an RM15 million project for small businesses and hawkers provisioned under 'Tekun'; and an additional RM1.5 million for developing Indian Malaysian enterprises (*Merdekareview*, 12 July 2009). In the political realm, Najib granted conditional releases to 13 ISA detainees in mid-April. Soon, the then Home Affairs Minister Syed Hamid Albar promised a comprehensive review of the ISA (*Bernama*, 4 April 2009). Najib also announced that 16 September will be a national holiday to celebrate the formation of Malaysia that includes Sabah and Sarawak.

1Malaysia consists of values that secure a *workable* society. According to Najib's website, 1Malaysia.com.my, 1Malaysia prioritises "*perpaduan di dalam kepelbagaian* (unity within diversity)". Diversity becomes the backbone of the nation. This 'diversity' is based on the experiences of the past, during which the citizens' ancestors were unified in fighting colonialism. Against the backdrop of selective history, Najib applies this notion of diversity to the present time. He encourages the nation to celebrate such diversity and use it to build a nation that is capable of facing global competition and engendering economic development. Diversity should be sung to the tune of unification to generate a stable nation. Despite differences in cultures, religions, genders, and ethnicities of our nation, 'togetherness' should be prioritised through mutual respect, mutual understanding and open dialogue, and the citizens are to be united as one to bring about a developed and stable nation.

Thus, 1Malaysia consists of eight basic values: a culture of excellence, perseverance, humility, acceptance, loyalty, meritocracy, education and integrity. From these values, 1Malaysia is a product of the commodification of morality and ethnicity. Morality is being used as a commodity to spur the economy at the expense of democratisation and the freedom to express differences. For instance, to move forward, a construction of a culture of excellence is needed that emphasises meritocracy, the principle of accuracy (*ketepatan*) and performance-based leadership (*kepimpinan berasaskan prestasi*). The system of education

functions as a mechanism to cultivate a culture of reading to 'open' society's mindset, not for creativity but for the ability to gain the knowledge needed to face challenges. Besides that, education [read: 'vision schools' (Malakolunthu, 2009)] allows for interaction that emphasises mutual values (*nilai bersama*), so that stability will be retained without chaos.

To build a trusting society, loyalty, especially to the leader, is a prerequisite, provided the leader is one with capability. Critiques can be asserted but should be done in a proper manner within a proper timeframe. Thus, a leader is someone who is capable of uniting peoples and bringing about peace and order. Trust should then be followed by acceptance, which is defined as the voluntary acceptance of differences without dissatisfaction. Tolerance is not the goal, as the tolerant accept differences but may not agree, wholeheartedly or otherwise, to receive criticism. Thus, citizens of a nation as diverse as Malaysia should act in unison as a group rather than be tolerant of one another as individuals.

In sum, Najib's 1Malaysia serves as a (new) moral politics in making moral values as commodities to achieve economic development through the construction of a society steered by a capable leader (with centralised power) to ensure these values guarantee security, at the expense of dynamism, creativity and differences. In other words, 1Malaysia serves as an 'ideology-in-the-making' to (re)gain political legitimacy.

THE QUEST FOR ALTERNATIVE MORAL POLITICS: A LOOK AT THE EMERGING REALM OF CULTURAL POLITICS

Besides previous discussions on political change in Malaysia post-2008 General Election, where else have Malaysian political 'culture' and legitimacy been formed? In other words, where does politics also go and where else can we locate political legitimacy? In this section, arguably another political terrain has been evolving in the realm of culture in contest with the state's ideology and growing outside the formal sphere of institutional politics.

To some extent, Philip Khoo's analysis on the outcome of the 2008 election is less dependent on the political parties' performances than on the behavioural pattern of the voters. He indicates that the election outcome was a result of the voters feeling *meluat* (an outpouring of disgust) at "the sleaze and excesses, the concupiscence and greed, and the arrogance of the incumbent ruling party (BN)", which made people want to *muntah* (vomit). Such feelings of *meluat* cannot be discounted as 'bread and butter' issues but a "sense of having been misled and betrayed" (Khoo, 2008a: 2 and 3) by a series of events, such as the ill-gotten wealth of certain politicians, the judiciary crisis, the ethical issues, the arrogance

of the incumbent ruling parties and many others. His analysis reflects that the voters' behaviour in the 2008 election was not limited to political parties' ideologies and rhetoric per se. People cast their votes more to teach BN a lesson rather than toppling it. Party politics was, in the context of the 2008 election, a way to express *meluat*, and not necessarily upholding parties' ideologies. The politics of *meluat* developed from an accumulation of issues and events before 2008. It was constructed within the everyday politics and the everyday struggles of morality and civility poised to contest against the state.

The focus of the paper is to articulate the sort of morality that Malaysian voters have sought that ultimately led to the collapse of BN regime. In Indonesia, Heryanto (1997) argues that the downfall of Suharto's regime after the economic crises in Southeast Asia was a result of the collapse of a complex collaborative mechanism between Suharto regime and businesses, his cronies, the military and most importantly the civil societies, such as NGOs, that emerged during the economic growth in 1980s. Conversely, Shiraishi (2001) indicates that a moral foundation based on nationalistic political legitimacy in Indonesia has collapsed, paving the way for the local politicians to construct a new political legitimacy based on anti-criminality rather than democratisation in the post New Order Indonesia. In the Philippines, political morality has migrated into everyday politics and religious institutions outside electoral politics. Among the poor, *pulitika* (loosely translated as politics) is the game of the rich competing for power and that election is a process filled with manipulation of votes (Kerkvliet, 1991; Soon, 2008).

Here, I would like to identify the sort of political morality Malaysian voters have constructed, mostly focusing on the cultural groups. Unlike Indonesia, cultural actors in Malaysia did not engage in any form of collaboration with the state before or after 2008, nor did they create a different form of politics that falls into the hands of particular local elites. Rather, they are, as ordinary citizens, in constant contestation with the state, which in a way is similar to the Philippines where politicking has transgressed beyond the electoral politics. They also do not play prominent role in the further democratisation of Malaysia, either in the realm of institutions or electoral politics. I would like to juxtapose this (re)excavation of political legitimacy with the 1Malaysia concept to indicate another sort of political morality articulated by the cultural groups in Malaysia in the realm of culture.

Departing from Philip Khoo's analysis, the notion of *meluat* can be expanded to the realm of culture. This cultural politics is not merely the expression of discontent or an attempt to create an opposite BN. It is an emerging political terrain which begins to provoke alternative ideas about nation, identity, history

and good governance by artists, filmmakers, academics, arts activists and cartoonists.

The politicking of the cultural and art groups is not a new phenomenon in Malaysia's cultural politics. Tan's (1989/1990; 1992) studies have indicated that since its independence, especially in the early 1970s, Malaysia has implemented a 'national' identity, which was predominantly Malay-cum-Islamic in orientation. Tan (1992: 303) argues that the state is not omnipotent. There were cultural groups and artists emerging from 'below' to contest against the state's construction of 'proper' performances, *Malay*-sian cultures and national identities. These art performers can be found in Chinese cultural associations, such as martial arts and lion dance troupes, modern and alternative theatres, popular music and the entertainment industry. However, the realm of performing arts remains as 'counterpoints' and fragments rather than as a platform that serves as a counter-hegemonic movement to the state.

Tan's 'counterpoints' have perhaps developed into oppositional politics, especially in the 1997–1998 *Reformasi* periods in Malaysia (and Indonesia). In a review essay, Khoo Boo Teik identified the rise of a 'Malay cultural revolt' in 1998–1999 through publications of newspaper articles by Amir Muhammad, Sabri Zain's diary account and Shahnnon Ahmad's novel, entitled *SHIT*, that "criticised, challenged and mocked Mahathir and his regime" (2002: 33). Mandal's works (2003) expand the cultural revolt groups—literature, art, drama, and music—and reiterate the rise of the art groups in Malaysia (and Indonesia) towards becoming more critical and oppositional in content and in form to challenge the authoritarian regimes of Mahathir and Suharto in the *Reformasi* period of the two nations.

The resistance of the art and cultural groups against authoritarian rule can also be seen, in a subtle manner, leaning towards a less oppositional politics but more embedded in the realm of everyday life. Culture, arts and literature as terrains of everyday-life politics in Malaysia have been the focus of studies by several scholars, such as Tan Sooi Beng, Shakila Abdul Manan and Janet Pillai, who contributed to a recently published manuscript, "Building Bridges, Crossing Boundaries" (Loh, 2010), that highlights the 'unsung heroes' of the civil societies. Tan's analysis reveals that the *Bangsawan* Theatre and the Young Theatre Penang (YTP) performances manifest the diversity of culture and ethnicity in Malaysia, which promote a sense of community among performers (and audiences) through shared languages, performance vocabularies and common experiences (2010: 234). Pillai's *Teater Muda* and *Anak-Anak Kota*, through 'engaged arts', work to "increase appreciation of multicultural situations and expand perceptions of culture and religion" (2010: 242). Similarly, Shakila's work reiterates that literature and the creative arts not only generate knowledge and respect for

differences in identity and culture but also provide "an opportunity for cultural stereotypes and binary thinking to be destabilised" (2010: 271).

These studies apply aptly to the focus of this paper. Rather than seeing these art groups as 'counterpoints', I will further expand Mandal's thesis that the art groups are becoming increasingly critical and oppositional to the state and are incrementally pursuing their social and political engagements in the society both as oppositional politics and everyday-life 'politicking'.

I will focus only on three cultural groups that reflect cultural politics in the context of Malaysian politics. First, I will examine the political role of a political cartoonist who articulates politics and history through cartoons. Second, I will focus on my own readings of three cultural projects—two films and one art performance—that defy the notion of 1Malaysia championed by the Malaysian Prime Minister Dato' Sri Najib Razak's administration, providing an alternative form of Malaysian history. Third, I will study two cultural exhibitions, looking at how they express satiric, political messages pertaining to issues arising in the aftermath of the 2008 General Election. These entire cultural projects share one common mission, to claim for a (lost) moral politics as construed by the state.

Individual Agency: Zunar the Multifaceted Cartoonist

In most studies of political cartoon, much has been focused on the role of cartooning as a medium to articulate ideas and to reach a wide spectrum of audiences or readers in a less constrained structure (Yu-Rivera, 2009). While such studies have given cultural works a significant political role, most of them have remained silent on the cartoonists' roles as 'agents' of idea constructions. In this section, my purpose is to pay more attention to political cartoonists as 'agents' and less to cartoonists' work in Malaysian cultural politics.

Born in 1962 at Bukit Junun, Gurun, Kedah, Zunar (Zulkiflee bin S. M. Anwar Ulhaque) was encouraged to pursue an education that would guarantee a job. He studied science at the Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, which provided him a job as a lab technician. However, Zunar has always been passionate about cartoons. He published his first cartoon in *Bambino* magazine at the age of 12, followed by *Mingguan Perdana*, *Kisah Cinta* and *Gila-Gila* (darialmarikartun.blogspot.com). Initially, Zunar's cartooning style was less political due to the nature of the publishers and audiences. In *Gila-Gila* (1983), Zunar had to accommodate teenagers' interests which meant less politics and more humour in his cartoons. In 1993, while still working as a lab technician, he published a cartoon entitled *Papa* in *Berita Harian* and in the News Straits Times (NST).

Eventually, he was offered a permanent position as a political cartoonist. Unfortunately, his tenure as a real cartoonist was short-lived. Both *Berita Harian* and NST were/are mainstream news media in Malaysia. To Zunar, the lack of freedom of expression in the Malaysian mass media was deterring his political plane of cartoons to spread further. Even though he took up a replacement role for a fellow cartoonist, Lat at NST (Lat was on a one-year sabbatical leave), he did not stay long with the press. He felt that he could neither replace Lat nor become another *Lat* in the Malaysian cartooning landscape. Lat is a social commentary cartoonist, while Zunar considers himself a political cartoonist.

His father, his family, the environment and the schooling have never encouraged Zunar to be a political cartoonist. His love for cartoon drawing was instead inspired by Thomas Nast, a German-born American caricaturist in the 19th century, whose cartoons brought an end to Boss Tweed's leadership of Tammany Hall. Further study discovered that it was not Nast's cartooning style that attracted him but rather the impact of Nast's cartoons made on the corrupt and discriminatory practices in the U.S. society at that time.

During the *Reformasi* period in 1998, Zunar created copies of leaflets based on his cartoons and distributed to people. He visited the former Deputy Prime Minister, Anwar Ibrahim in jail, participated in the *Reformasi* demonstrations and created banners. Zunar was arrested during the *Reformasi* and upon his release, his cartoon drawings were discovered by Zulkifli Sulong, the editor of *Harakah Daily*, which is the newspaper of an opposition political party, PAS. He was approached to publish his cartoon in February 1999 even though cartooning was new to PAS. Since then, his cartoons have been well received and recognised by both publishers and readers. More importantly, he is free to draw without control and regulations.

Zunar has never bowed to the act of suppression. When his magazines were confiscated in a raid in August 2008 by the Ministry of Home Affairs for operating the magazine without a permit, Zunar fought for his right to continue drawing. Three months after the raids, Zunar and his *Gerdung Kartun* team came back into scene to produce an 80-page book with the title *Perak Darul Kartun*, focusing on the Perak political fiasco. Unlike magazines, under Malaysian printing law, publishing a book only requires ISBN and no permit is needed. The politics of suppression has seemingly failed to annihilate his politicking for change. In June 2010, his books (1Funny Malaysia and *Perak Darul Kartun*) were banned by the Home Ministry for allegedly being a "threat to national security" (*Malaysiakini.com*, 25 June 2010). Undeterred, Zunar launched another new book in September 2010 despite the government ban, and the online news portal *Malaysiakini*, which is the publisher of 1Funny Malaysia under its

subsidiary *Kinibooks*, filed a suit to lift the ban imposed by the Home Ministry (Center for Independent Journalism, 2010).

Zunar is political because he desires to reform the society. He reiterates, "it is not politics, it is about reform". He sees politics as embedded in everyday life. "I like politics and to be involved in politics. It is about our own daily lives". Through cartoons, he hopes the messages (on human rights, the environment, animals, the corruption issue in the Port Klang Free Zone, the death of political aid Teoh Beng Hock, the murder of Altantuya, money politics, education, ethnicity issues and many more, can reach the readers more directly, easily, informally and universally.

Akin to a researcher, Zunar would search for and grasp any chances for alternative references (from non-mainstream media) to enrich his knowledge on Malaysian socio-political issues. "I draw with my heart and I sketch with my brain", highlights Zunar on his cartooning principle. As a political cartoonist, reading alone is not enough to take hold of the substance of political issues. Instead of drawing a cartoon based on instructions from others—"this is an illustrator not a cartoonist"—he notes that "you need to make a stand before finding a joke". He would seek confirmation on unverified issues or unclear incidents with relevant politicians, lawyers and many others.

Zunar's cartoons are direct, forward, contemporary, issue-oriented, non-historical, urbanised, satiric and political. Zunar's works highlight present-day Malaysian political issues in a very bold manner; readers cannot miss the simple, direct, sarcastic and humorous, yet critical messages. All these point to Zunar's persistent for change. Change is construed as a 'puzzle'—a puzzle that needs to be solved in a stern and legitimate way. To Zunar, Malaysia is caught with a big puzzle that has not been looked upon seriously by policy-makers, politicians and power-holders. It dissatisfies and frustrates the *rakyat* (people). Although there is the existence of the New Economic Policy that, to some degree, has improved the society, no other real changes have taken place since. What is this puzzle? Zunar indicates that it consists of a volume of unfinished works, namely the judiciary, human right issues, poverty issues, corruption problems, money politics, freedom of speech, education, racial issues and many more. For Malaysia to change, Zunar gives a metaphorical explanation that the struggle is an 'uphill battle'. Thus, a method that cuts straight to the core is necessarily; "why pinch when you can punch?", asks Zunar. The Malaysian society has been caught for 50 years in this puzzle; a punch is highly needed.

In my casual conversation with one of Zunar's fans, he gave me his perception of Zunar as an artist. According to him, Zunar is an artist who is not 'individualistic' but who '*jalan ke bawah*' (goes down to the grassroots). Zunar works with the

people surrounding him to promote reform. He does not suppress others' new ideas just to hang on to his personal views. Zunar allows compromising within a larger context. This, by any way, does not mean he is a man without principles or his own style. He does not create a Zunar-style cartoon at the expense of the other cartoonists' styles and ideas. No, this is not Zunar. He is a loner or 'individualistic' only as far as his passion was not yet shared or articulated within the larger structures of the Malaysian political context.

To create a culture of political cartooning, an individual effort is not enough. It requires group work. His *Gerdung Kartun* is an evidence of his passion to promote a generation of new, young artists who can continue drawing and express their ideas through cartoons. Zunar said that "the young have fresher ideas which sometime I do not have". In his interviews with *Merdekareview* after the raid, Zunar indicates that *Gerdung Kartun* is just a medium or a tool. To him, the raid on the magazines is not a problem. What is more essential is to create a space for the new generation of cartoonists to express their views and ideas critically, without control. He asserted that this is the purpose of *Gerdung Kartun's* existence. Zunar's non-individualistic attitude as an artist has made him a visionary man. From this interview, Zunar indicates that he seeks a creation of history; a history that depicts how the cartoons can influence and change the Malaysian society. History, which I presume Zunar has seen it, needs to be continued and expanded to the younger generation. As an artist, Zunar's vision is not only to change society but also to help generating new young artists who will create and write history through cartoon. "Cartoonists should be the agent for change", indicates Zunar.

Zunar's cartoons have been effective in creating a space for alternative politics. This sort of politics does not directly involve political parties or policy-making. Rather, it flows into the realm of media (magazines) through the language of arts (cartoons) to articulate his politics for change to redefine nation and citizenry. Perhaps Zunar is an exceptional case of political cartoonist in Malaysia, but his vision and role has begun since his childhood and expanded especially during the *Reformasi* period. To Zunar and his compatriots, politics is not confined to political institutions but one that flows into the everyday lives of ordinary people. To him, being an artist allows him to play a more important role in changing the Malaysian political scenario, especially in toppling the BN government.

Cultural Projects: Engaging People for an Alternative Malaysia

In this section, I will focus on three cultural projects that I have observed: two filming projects made available on the internet and a cultural project held in Penang. These projects are examples of cultural politics in Malaysia manifesting in alternative interpretations of Malaysia as a nation. Their articulation of the

concept of 'Malaysia' has not influenced policy advocacy nor is it parallel to any political party's ideology. Their cultural politics derive from the realm of ordinary people's private life experiences, and their ways of "advocacy" are manifesting into the sphere of public by reconstructing personalised ideas about nation and everyday life history.

Films: A Reflection of Alternative Malaysia

The production of 15Malaysia short films produced by Pete Teo and directed by 15 Malaysian directors was an attempt to manifest to the audiences the many versions of Malaysia vis-à-vis the idea perpetuated as 1Malaysia. The project attempts to feature the characteristics of the Malaysian society. It provides a space to articulate the reality of everyday life in Malaysia to manifest people's own versions of their lives and histories. It covers the religious ignorance of Malaysians, the ethnic biases of both Malays and non-Malays, the potential cross-ethnic romance among the youths, the ugliness of corruption, sexual harassment incidents, the current political chaos in Malaysia, the hardship of everyday life caused by price hike of essential items, the water issue, the health issue and many others. 15Malaysia showcased the realities of everyday lives in Malaysia and the 'many' versions of Malaysia, showing differences not only in ethnicity but in politics, economy and social aspects.

For example, the short film 'Potong Saga' illustrates the religious ignorance in Malaysia. It was directed by Hong Yuhang with Namewee (who had composed a controversial song based on the Malaysian national anthem) as its main cast. 'Potong' means 'to cut', and 'Potong Saga' is narrowly adapted from the name of Malaysia's first national car, the 'Proton Saga'. In the story, a man (Namewee), who plans to open an Islamic bank account is told by his friends that one of the requirements is the applicant must have been circumcised. Thus, he had to endure the painstaking circumcision process, only to realise later that it was not actually part of the requirement. This comedy film attempts to project to the audiences the state of religious ignorance among Malaysians. Malaysia has seen many ethno-religious tensions in recent years, such as the body-snatching of a Muslim-converted Hindu by the state religious department; the conversion issues; and the raiding of Inter-Religious Faith Dialogue.

The most important feature of 15Malaysia is its honesty in expressing ideas and views without a constructed version of what Malaysia should and should not be. In his blog, Pete Teo asks, "...did we change? Or had it been a myth all along? It does not matter. What matters is that we dwell in a cesspool of corruption, hypocrisy and stagnation. And since this is home, one is duty-bound to protect it from further dilapidation. So I recruited filmmakers, actors, musicians, activists and politicians to make 15 socio-political short films. We called it 15Malaysia"

(peteteo.com/weblog/?p=575). In a nutshell, the project allows diversity to speak for itself without interference from the 'centre'.

15Malaysia does not portray one Malaysia but many versions of Malaysia, which is closer to the reality of people's life experiences and diversities. Furthermore, it attempts to manifest a sort of resistance against the state's creation of one national culture, such as 1Malaysia, that prioritises history from the centre. The involvement of children and former drug addicts manifest into many versions of Malaysian history and stories besides the slogan of '*perpaduan etnik*' (ethnic unity). 15Malaysia projects the diversity of people's lives. Rather than focusing on economic development and stability, it shows the reality of not only order but also chaos that allows us to interpret and learn about the differences surrounding our environments. It allows us to recognise our problems and challenges without marginalising others and limiting ourselves to one version of a cosmetic construction of a 'nation'.

Another film is a historical documentary, 'Sepuluh Tahun Sebelum Merdeka/10' (10 Years Before the Independence), by Fahmi Reza which is made available on Youtube, Vimeo, Google Video and websites such as 10tahun.blogspot.com/ and facebook.com/sepuluhtahun. Fahmi's documentary, filmed only using a low-tech Panasonic DVX100 with himself as the director, producer and editor, attempts to recreate the history of Malaya/Malaysia and traces events that had happened long before Malaysia gained its independence. '10' critically provides numerous documents and interviews with 'not-known' political figures and leaders outside the Alliance leaders (now BN), who also fought for Malayan independence, such as Lim Kean Chye, 88, of the Malayan Democratic Union (MDU); Yahya Nassim, 88, of the Parti Kebangsaan Melayu Malaya (PKMM); Hashim Said, 85, and Zainuddin Andika, 84, of Angkatan Pemuda Insaf (API); and Majid Salleh, 84, of the Johore State Federation of Trade Unions (JSFTU).

The documentary was made in a 'funky' and 'cool' manner different from the conventional way of making historical documentaries. Fahmi uses 1970s British punk tracks as background music; the text is filled with colourful and artistic graphics. Adding to that, the messages of the documentary are clear and straight forward, bringing the audience into each event with one clear message at a time and without collapsing the event and message together. One of the methods that Fahmi used was slide shows, contrasting the UMNO-Royal-British construction of the Malayan Constitution and the PKMM version of the People's Constitution. Besides that, the content of the Constitution was showcased not through lines of words but through the candidly articulated bodily movements of three major ethnic groups.

Fahmi's '10' is an attempt to (re)construct Malaysian history in juxtaposition with the Malaysian state's construction of history. High school text books, mainstream TV and newspapers portray the first Prime Minister, Tunku Abdul Rahman, together with his other counterparts, such as Tun Hussein Onn, Tun Razak and others as the heroes of Malayan independence, all of whom from BN/UMNO. Fahmi (re)constructs this history by looking at the 'process' leading to the conjectured event, from the aftermath of Japanese occupation leading to independence. Re-excavating a series of events, the movements of people, the variety of parties involved, the various perceptions at the time and the different ways of dealing with the British by different groups that led to independence. By re-excavating a non-linear and multi-faceted understanding of the history, '10' manages to provide an alternative history of Malaysia as opposed to the linearity of the (state) official history. One particular example is the perception of ethnicity during the mid-1940s in Malaya, which the film has successfully articulated. During the struggle for independence or even long before the period, the everyday lives of ordinary people and political struggles were not ethnically based. In other words, the documentary provides the audience a sense of 'emptiness' or 'not-an-issue' with regard to ethnicity and politics. In other words, ethnicity was not a crucial concern for people during the ten years before the independence.

In sum, by bringing in an alternative history in a less formalistic presentation through arts (graphical movements of the content) and music (pop music rather than patriotic songs), Fahmi's '10' was able to (re)construct a history of the past and contextualise it for the present. This has allowed the audience to obtain sort of a different 'reality' to make judgment on the present political developments and changes. More importantly, '10' re-excavates the lost past in (re)defining a renewed present.

The 'Bangun' Project: The Rise of People's History

In August 2009, a group of young artists called Lost Generation Space (KL), in conjunction with *Anak-anak Kota* (Penang), organised a project called '*Bangun*' at the clan jetty of Penang. A series of activities were presented: workshops on poetry, dance, Chinese opera, installation art, mural paintings and performances, as well as presentations focusing on local history, heritage, community and culture.

For example, one of the performances presented a bone structure that represent the renewed life of the clan jetty inhabitants who had migrated from southern China to Malaya (*Sinchew*, 1 September 2009). Another presentation was by a Taiwanese installation artist who constructed four fishing boats, crafted with look-alike, yet different forms of characters that represent Penang's diverse

languages: Malay, English, Mandarin and Tamil (*Sinchew*, 22 August 2009). In one of the mural workshops, entitled '*Beralun*', by Aisyah Baharuddin, the message was, among others, to "increase understanding on the importance of encouraging individual responsibility (of the jetties)", while the project on "Mapping the Penang Clan Jetties" involved local children linking their personal experiences at the jetties and mapping out the locations of the jetties to encourage understanding and appreciation of the clan jetty culture and customs through the lenses of the younger generation. The project also involved marginalised groups, such as former drug addicts from the Fallen Leaves Theatre Company, performing their stories and struggles (bangunproject.wordpress.com).

The unique feature of the *Bangun* project was that it was a bottom-up, community-oriented platform to exert an alternative voice illustrating people's local history, which in this case, the surviving heritage and people's life histories. In addition, it revitalised abandoned areas of Malaysia through contemporary arts. '*Bangun*' is translated as 'to rise up', reflecting a sort of resistance to the modernisation and the encroachment of industrialisation that threaten the survival of old buildings, heritage structures and people's lives. Through art and music, *Bangun* attempted to raise consciousness about the disappearing history of the clan jetties, their role in development of Penang and its people's life experiences.

The Perak Fiasco and Hulu Selangor Exhibitions: The 'Silent' Resistance

This section focuses on visual art works by two cultural groups. One is by Lost Generation Space/LGS and the other one remains anonymous. LGS was established in 2004 by a group of artists with the purpose of providing an alternative space to encourage "originality, creativity and individuality as well as contemporary arts". Interestingly, the name was developed based on a saying by Hemingway that the ideas of the younger generation are always in a labyrinth under the dominant culture and values. A resistance to this dominance can offer an alternative to "mainstream single culture" (lostgenerationspace.blogspot.com).

LGS has been involved in many projects, and two of the continuous projects are 'notthatbalai' and 'Bangun'. 'Notthatbalai' was developed sometime in 2004/2005 as an underground art space. According to one of its founding members, Yeoh Lian Heng, 'notthatbalai' is oriented more towards artistic scenes and is a manifestation of the individual 'self' through art, and in the long run, it will become a 'high' art. To Yeoh and his team, the arts should become a culture. When art becomes culture, it relates to people. To build such a community, art needs to be known and seen to engage with people in the public sphere. Thus, 'Bangun' was established later as "an ongoing series of contemporary site-centric art projects focusing on history, heritage, community and culture" (bangunproject.blogspot.com). 'Bangun' engages with the public rather than the

self and connects to social issues at a grass-roots level; "I am from the grass root background", reiterates Yeoh. To Yeoh, art need not be reserved for one self but should venture into the public sphere or the people to strike a 'balance'. With such connections, art can be appreciated and manifested in a direct manner with clear messages to stimulate the mind and to create a sense of mutual understanding or *muafakat*. Thus, art becomes a culture.

Why engage the society through art or culture? First, it sends messages to institutions at the grass-roots level, and it is not confrontational. The messages travel through time, sometimes in an ad hoc manner, temporal, non-linear and selectively articulated in different spaces and locations. When art is placed in the public sphere (人群), it becomes a culture; its messages and meanings ebb and flow through time and space. What is important, according to Yeoh, once it is produced and sent out to institutions, it will be up to the audience to accept, reject and interpret it according to their backgrounds, experiences and contexts.

The motivation to manifest cultural politics of this sort derives from a sense of empathy (关心) and ability (能力). To Tsuji, another member of LGS, art is a tool to build a nation. In her view based on her involvement in art work, art provides a sense of direction and certainty for inner being built up in the midst of the fast-changing surroundings. One of the projects that Tsuji and Yeoh have produced was an installation titled "Because they wear black on May 7". The work was installed when LGS relocated to Taman Seputeh on 23 May 2009. The installation responds to the political fiasco in the state of Perak, where in the aftermath of the 2008 election, the opposition parties coalition lost the ruling mandate to BN.

The political drama began with the defections of Bota Umno state assembly member Nasaruddin Hashim, followed by the 'missing-in-action' of two PKR state assemblymen, Jamaluddin Mohd Radzi and Mohd Osman Jailu prior to the hearing of their corruption court cases. Later, in a surprising move, the two announced their decision to leave PKR and declared their support to BN. Another assemblywoman, Hee Yit Foong from DAP followed suit. All three appeared by the side of the Prime Minister-elect Najib Razak on TV news. A meeting was then held with the Sultan of Perak to obtain consent for a formation of a new, BN-led state ruling coalition. Without passing through the (much-debated) dissolution of the state assembly, the appointment of BN's Zambry Abdul Kadir as Perak new Menteri Besar (Chief Minister) has forced the ousted Menteri Besar, Mohammed Nizar Jamaluddin from the PR coalition, to take the matter to court. The fiasco continued with the hotly-debated issue of whether the Perak Sultan's decision has legal basis and is grounded in the constitution.

Bersih (the Coalition for Free and Fair Elections), a coalition of 71 political parties and NGOs, started a 1BLACKMalaysia campaign to urge Malaysians to wear black—a colour of grief to mourn the death of democracy—on 7 May, the date of the Perak state assembly sitting, in protesting the 'Perak coup' by BN (*Nutgraph.com*, 5 May 2009).

In "Because they wear black on May 7" art installation, visitors are let to spray black ink on a silver umbrella. Silver, in the Malay language, is 'Perak,' like the name of the state. The spraying of black ink onto the silver umbrella (see Figure 1) is made to present the death of democracy in the state of Perak.



Figure 1: Spraying of black ink onto a silver umbrella, a symbol of the death of democracy in the state of Perak (photo obtained from LGS website)

By relocating their arts space, which has no relation to the political situation in Perak, LGS has 'incidentally' created a space to re-locate the 'coup' in Perak to Kuala Lumpur in Taman Seputeh. The installation aimed to create an impact to the audiences on the significance of the Perak 'coup', especially the re-creation of the memories of democracy that the Malaysian voters have obtained by casting their votes for the PR's coalition. Through the art, the Perak coup, which frustrates most of the Perakians and the disappointment on the Sultan's role, connected the feelings and grief of the Perakians with the people in Kuala Lumpur, thus creating an 'imagined community' in the realm of public exhibition.

Another art installation took place during the by-election in Hulu Selangor by a group of artists that wishes to remain anonymous. Following the death of Zainal Abidin Ahmad, the PKR's Member of Parliament for Hulu Selangor in March 2010, a by-election was held in April. The contesting candidates were PKR's Zaid Ibrahim and the Malaysian Indian Congress's (MIC, a component party of BN) P. Kamalanathan. The latter won the by-election, and this has shaken the confidence of the PKR, and especially the PR coalition. The campaigning period towards the election was marred with personal attacks and character assassination aimed mainly at Zaid, such as his alleged past involvement in alcoholism and gambling. Other issues such as defecting politicians, labelling of Anwar Ibrahim's as a 'pig' and his on-going sodomy trial were also raised. The campaign was seen more as a battle between PKR and UMNO. Kamalanathan had less significant role throughout the campaign; it was UMNO's prominent figures that had the most involvement. The series of events showcased the demise of moral politics among politicians, especially on the side of BN.

Prior to the election day, a group of artists silently put up their works in Hulu Selangor. Their paintings were installed without any notification, name or organisation, and without planning. The idea came from one of the artists who then recruited his team members for the project.

The messages of these painting installation include BN's corrupt practices in development projects; the involvement of APCO, an Israel-linked consulting firm employed by BN-led government to promote the 1Malaysia campaign; the conflict between an Australian mining company and the people of Raub, Pahang affected by from the usage of cyanide; the danger of returning the two-thirds majority back to BN; the betrayal of certain politicians to the *rakyat* (people) (see Figure 2); and many others. Interestingly, some paintings contained words or messages of moral warning, such as 'vote with your conscience' (depicted in an open-eye drawing of a backbone), 'vote wisely for the future generation', and 'immoral and selfish politicians' (see Figure 3).

The project portrayed the moral issues in silence prior to the by-election date. This project may be interpreted as a response to the way the formal campaigns of the political parties showcased the decreased moral politics of the parties involved. Thus, the use of art as an informal institution articulates another political campaign and regenerates a lost political morality in the sphere of formal institutions. To these artists, the painters are not essential to the campaign, but the messages are. These messages re-connect the voters with the real struggles that the people in Malaysia in general, and Hulu Selangor in particular, are facing and the desperate need to extinguish the ongoing gutter and demoralising politics.



Figure 2: A painting indicates BN (represented by the color of blue worn by the rat) damaging the rakyat (people) with its two-third majority power in Parliament. The rakyat is painted in black and may perhaps indicate the recent 1BLACK Malaysia campaign (photo obtained from facebook).



Figure 3: A spinal core backbone resembles the pride and conscience of the people to vote in honesty and wisely (photo obtained from facebook).

The art installation in Hulu Selangor reconnects the people (voters) with the issues at hand which formal political institutions failed to engage. This project also goes beyond formal institutions to re-generate and re-excavate the lost morality in politics that is people's welfare. The space of politics has not been limited within one particular locale or realm of politicking. Rather, it can be

produced without a formalised organisation, free flowing from one location to the other, and is not bounded by rules and regulations.

CONCLUSION

Arguably, the 2008 General Election has changed the composition of Malaysian party politics and given rise to the possible formation of a two-party system, with BN being challenged by another coalition party, the Barisan Alternatif (Alternative Front/BA), now PR. Thus, there is no doubt that party politics have played important role in the shaping of Malaysian politics. However, we should not overlook the importance of the role of the civil society in shaping politics beyond the political parties and institutions. These civil society groups have emerged since the 1970s, but the cultural politics of these cultural groups have become more overt, especially during the *Reformasi* period in 1998. These groups continued to exist and even expanded their roles up to 2008.

The art works and engagements serve as another terrain to reconstruct a political legitimacy traversing beyond the 'officialdom' of the state, embedded within the everyday life politics. This paper attempts to expand further the "doing" of politics by the cultural groups, NGOs and social activists. Their way of politicking are in direct contact with the state to transform the society, generate public civility and civic-ness at institutional and in the public sphere. This paper fills a gap by looking at the alternative way politicking travels beyond the institutional realm—engaging the issues of everyday life and providing alternative citizenries and histories—in an attempt to contest the state's political discourse and to re-excavate a 'renewed' moral politics.

'Politicking' of these sorts prompts us to rethink and re-locate the space of politics in Malaysia. Unlike institutional politics, which deal with constitutional and electoral politics, the realm of culture and arts (or media) has become an emerging space for political contestation in Malaysia. Such contestations are the construction of alternative ideas on 'nation', 'citizenry' and 'history', which offer a non-linear concept of history and everyday life and re-articulate moral politics by the people for the people—a people's politics.

NOTES

1. This section is partly based on the article published in *Aliran Monthly* 2009: Vol. 29(10): 7–11.
2. This section is based on the article published in *Aliran Monthly* 2010: Vol. 30(4): 19–23.
3. This section is partly based on the article published in *Aliran Monthly* 2009: Vol. 29(10): 7–11.

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