



# SOCIAL MOVEMENTS IN MALAYSIA

From moral communities to NGOs

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# 1 Malaysian NGOs

## History, legal framework and characteristics

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### Introduction

Though it is only relatively recently that the terminology of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) has been adopted in Malaysia and that issue-based advocacy groups have gained prominence, various sorts of civil society organisations have long played a role in the country. Contemporary Malaysian NGOs have their roots in a range of organisations, including Chinese secret societies, Indian nationalist associations and Malay-Muslim progress organisations. Moreover, the laws governing NGO activities date back to the colonial era, though they have been refined since then. The longevity of these strictures is testament to the ongoing tensions between state and civil society in Malaysia and the desire of both the colonial and independent state to control societal organisations. Today's advocacy-oriented NGOs are heterogeneous in structure, membership and ideology. Still developing as a political and social force, many of these NGOs remain constrained not only by the restrictive political environment, but also by personalistic structures, a shortage of funds, difficulties in rousing an often disengaged mass public, and ethnic and religious divisions. Regardless, Malaysian NGOs have made important contributions to fostering a democratically inclined and socially aware citizenry, bringing key issues to public prominence and nurturing a significant core group within civil society able to rally mass opinion at crucial junctures in support of political, social and economic reforms.

Little has been written about NGOs and civil society in Malaysia, even amidst the burgeoning interest in these topics in neighbouring countries. The government does not encourage such research by either local or foreign scholars and NGOs themselves have limited resources for critical analysis of their own or other groups' efforts. Most of the studies that have been done are either relatively superficial overviews of

### **The shape of civil society**

Fascination with the nature and potential of civil society has burgeoned worldwide since Poland's Solidarity and its counterparts toppled the communist order in the late 1980s. Reformers elsewhere have searched for clues of how they, too, might have such an impact, while scholars have traced the minutiae of civil societal organisations and activities to specify more precisely how this sphere links up with others. The concept of civil society was developed in the West, however, to refer to an essential part of liberal democratic regimes. Most of the polities in which civil society is now so anxiously watched and nurtured are far from liberal; nor do many aspire to such status.

Civil society both provides for needs not met by the state and helps transform states in line with citizens' preferences. Adrian Leftwich (1993) defines civil society as consisting of those cultural, political or economic areas of social life that are organised by private or voluntary arrangements between individuals outside the direct control of the state. Within it are mechanisms that function in conflict resolution and in building trust and networks to link citizens. By their collaborative activities, civil societal associations thus foster not only opportunities for individuals to further their specific interests but also societal and institutional linkages to enable community building (Yamamoto 1995). Implicit within the notion of civil society is a principle of civic virtue and an emphasis on rational, co-operative and moral interactions both among the members of a society and between them and their government (De Lue 1997).

Iris Marion Young specifies a niche for civil society by contrasting voluntary associational life with the state and economy, based on how each co-ordinates action and its relative control of systematic power. In her formulation, the state co-ordinates action through the medium of authorised power, the economy through money, and civil society through communicative interaction. These are not three spatially distinct spheres, but different kinds of activity or levels of association among which citizens may move freely (Young 1999: 144–5). As she describes:

civic associations and public spheres outside state and economy allow self-organization for the purposes of identity support, the invention of new practices, and the provision of some goods and services. Perhaps even more important, public spheres thriving in civil society often limit state and economic power and make their exercise more accountable to citizens.

(Young 1999: 141)