

Civil Society In Malaysia: The Panacea?

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The discourse of civil society in Malaysia is basically divided into two aspects: one emphasizes on its positive attributes to the immense space of democracy in the country; another alert the reverse implications that might agitate the existing political system. In what follows, it is undeniable that the term civil society marked a new stage in the evolution of government among the human agency. The concept of civil society has captured the imagination of people from all walks of life: politicians, activists, intellectuals and others. And it has now evolving into an indispensable factor in the democratization of socio-political life in the country.

The political tsunami in 2008 has brought about many changes in Malaysia; one of the most significant developments is the tremendous growth of the civil society groups. In the past, the civil society groups in the country are fragmented politically, socially and geographically. Furthermore, it is not seen as a unified entity working towards common goals. Notwithstanding, these 'flaws' are being adjust gradually and it is no exaggeration to decipher the recent development as the rising era of civil society in the country.

The democratization in the country has escalated in the recent years, part of it, due to the increased participation of the civil society groups in the process. And indeed, we now see an active debate about the ways in which the state should be shaping civil society. The citizens found the lack of rooms for civil and political liberties; state monopoly over economic and social transactions; and the absence of participative rights as objectionable and not in line with the country development. Therefore the civil society is smoothly presented as an answer to counter the ills of the political situation in the country. As how Neera Chandhoke puts it, the 'civil' in civil society is no longer indicates the non-political element; it is now means that people inhabiting the sphere outside the state has the right to debate about the nature of the state and the politics that it pursued.

If we examine the current atmosphere closely, the emergence of civil society movement in Malaysia is coincided with the increasing of middle class groups with accessibility in its demand for greater political participation and transparency. The global spread of democracy has also opened up new opportunities for the Malaysian civil society groups to participate in establishing rights, institutions and mechanism of accountability in a society where citizen participation not very long ago was curbed and discouraged. For many people, the civil society has even become a slogan that represents an alternative center for political advancement.

Alejandro Colás once says; civil society is not a given space, but a concrete sociological sphere which is simultaneously made and unmade by the human agency. This particular entity is influenced by the similar historical and social forces which operate upon other parts of the social life.

While the civil society was hoped for contributing to democracy and good governance, it actually had to re-evaluate its strategies and adjust itself as well, quite fundamentally and dramatically, in order to face up to the challenges and opportunities of a new situation. The uncertainty in the position and strategies of civil society in Malaysia is associated by the intensifying call for accountability. Right at the moment when there is ambiguity among the civil actors about what they are actually able

to achieve and how to achieve it, both the internal governance of civil society groups as well as their external performance in the public domain is becoming subject of greater scrutiny.

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