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The Profound Impact of the BERSIH Movement since 2007

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A protester wears a mask during a rally organised by election reform group BERSIH against a bill to redraw electoral boundaries near Parliament House in Kuala Lumpur on 28 March 2018. Picture: Mohd RASFAN, AFP.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- The Coalition for Clean and Fair Elections, best known by its Malay acronym, BERSIH, organized five massive rallies in Kuala Lumpur between November 2007 and November 2016. While BERSIH failed to achieve its original goal to reform the electoral system, the movement made a significant impact on the Malaysian political milieu.
- BERSIH's deeper influence was shown by the dynamic ways in which each rally developed its key message of popular dissent and gave voice to grievances beyond the core issue of electoral reform. The most profound meaning of the entire BERSIH progression was seen in an unfolding popular re-imagination of community and nation across ethnic and non-ethnic divides. The movement progressively mobilised civil disobedience across diverse groups throughout the country and among Malaysian communities overseas.
- The defeat of Barisan Nasional in the general election of 2018 brought hopes of far-reaching electoral reform but those were dashed by the collapse of the Pakatan Harapan government in February 2020. Presently BERSIH continues to campaign for electoral reform as a crucial basis of democratic politics.
- While current conditions inhibit open mass mobilization, BERSIH offers a valuable living political memory to new and young activists exploring 'clean and fair' solutions to the social and political problems highlighted by the Covid-19 pandemic.

The Coalition for Clean and Fair Elections, best known by its Malay acronym, BERSIH, is a movement formed in 2005–6 that is dedicated to the reform of Malaysia’s electoral system.¹ In its Joint Communiqué of 23 November 2006, BERSIH expressed a goal of correcting structural flaws, institutional biases and administrative malpractices in the electoral system that systematically and disproportionately favoured the ruling coalition over the opposition parties.² There could not be ‘clean and fair elections’, BERSIH reasoned, unless the Election Commission (EC) removed such obstructions to democratic politics as extensive gerrymandering, constituency malapportionment, restricted media, unequal access to public facilities and resources, et cetera.³

In pursuit of its cause, BERSIH organised five massive rallies, each attended by tens of thousands of participants, in Kuala Lumpur between November 2007 and November 2016. These rallies were internationally famous for their dramatic challenges to successive regimes that tried in vain to suppress them. The first rally, BERSIH 2007,⁴ launched by the main opposition parties with the support of 32 non-governmental organizations (NGOs), carried a slate of four points of electoral reform. In 2010 a committee of civil society members rebranded the coalition ‘BERSIH 2.0’ under which name they led four rallies, namely, BERSIH 2.0 in 2011, BERSIH 3 in 2012, BERSIH 4 in 2015, and BERSIH 5 in 2016. At these rallies, BERSIH 2.0 raised more demands for reform, added its NGO allies, diversified the social composition of its marchers, and extended its geographical reach.

Despite all that, BERSIH failed in its basic mission to make the regime and its Electoral Commission (EC) reform the electoral system ahead of the 12th General Election (GE12) of 2008, the 13th General Election (GE13) of 2013, and the 14th General Election (GE14) of 2018. What, then, did BERSIH accomplish? How did the five rallies influence Malaysian politics?

These questions cannot be answered by narrowly evaluating BERSIH’s performance against its stated intents. In fact, BERSIH will probably be remembered less for not achieving its goals and more for its intangible ways of moving popular struggles to change social and political thinking over a decade. This essay interprets BERSIH in this manner by reviewing the movement from three angles – the distinctive imprint of each rally, the changes in praxis from rally to rally, and the meanings which BERSIH in its entire progression created that were as significant as they were unsuspected.

MOMENTS AND IMPRINTS

The standard coverage of BERSIH sees it as a social movement of electoral reform which places the scrupulous conduct of ‘clean and fair elections’ at the heart of a functioning democracy.⁵ There is nothing at all wrong with that view. From BERSIH’s inception, its organizers had campaigned to end fraud and injustice related to the integrity of electoral rolls, the use of postal ballots for the uniformed forces, access to public facilities, freedom of the media, the duration of election campaigns, the intervention of public institutions, the practices of ‘money politics’ and ‘dirty politics’, and so on. Moreover, the masses of people who joined the rallies or variously supported them shared the ultimate goal of ‘clean and fair elections’. But each BERSIH rally turned on different matters and took unexpected

directions as its organizers and marchers faced the regime and its enforcers under uncertain conditions. Each of the five rallies, therefore, had its definitive moment and left a distinct imprint on the political terrain.

Shattering stasis

On 10 November 2007, the first BERSIH rally was launched with four demands made of the EC: the use of indelible ink on polling day, clean electoral rolls, abolition of postal ballots, and equal access to print and broadcast media.⁶ The EC ignored the demands,⁷ and the regime met the rally with police repression. That introduced a pattern of face-off between regime and rally whereby BERSIH failed in its declared mission but gained striking success of another kind.

As the largest street mobilization up to that point, BERSIH 2007 shattered an apparent political stasis set by Mahathir Mohamad's retirement in November 2003, the stunning victory of the Barisan Nasional (BN, or National Front) at the 11th General Election (GE11) in April 2004, and Anwar Ibrahim's release from prison in September 2004.⁸ The Democratic Action Party (DAP), Parti Islam SeMalaysia (PAS, or Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party) and Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR, or People's Justice Party) had deployed the non-divisive issue of 'clean and fair elections' to convince themselves and the electorate that they were ready to reconstruct an alternative front against the regime. A free Anwar acted as the parties' bridge and broker. As he recalled, if DAP, PAS and PKR were 'focused on a common platform, they [could] set aside their differences and ... work together to fight corruption, ensure better governance and restore the integrity of our institutions'.⁹

By coincidence, the original BERSIH rally took place between two other protests in 2007 – a Bar Council-led 'Walk for Justice' against judicial corruption on 26 September, and a Hindu Rights Action Force (Hindraf)-organised march against 'Indian marginalisation' on 25 November.¹⁰ No one coordinated the three events but their proximity appeared to connect the causes of judicial reform, electoral reform, and social reform. The regime had exorcised the spectre of Reformasi only to meet its rebirth in BERSIH.

Goaded into defiance

At GE12, the opposition made unprecedented gains. Yet neither BERSIH 2007 nor the election result prodded the regime towards electoral reform. In response, many NGOs established a politically unaffiliated BERSIH 2.0 in 2010 to promote a non-partisan campaign for electoral reform.¹¹ (On 23 November 2021, the Steering Committee announced that it would drop '2.0' from its name. From this point in the essay, BERSIH 2.0 will only refer to the rally of 2011¹²). When the EC refused to reform the conduct of elections, the BERSIH Committee organised a second rally on 9 July 2011.¹³

This time BERSIH 2.0 raised its demands from four to eight – to no avail. The regime replied with repression. It refused to permit BERSIH 2.0 to be held at Stadium Merdeka, and banned paraphernalia associated with the rally. On 9 July 2011, the police locked down Kuala Lumpur. The confrontation between regime and rally defined a moment of resistance:

people had not forgotten electoral reform but regarded BERSIH 2.0 as nothing if not defiance of the regime. Tens of thousands of citizens breached the lockdown, with one of them exulting: ‘they did not give us the stadium, so we took KL instead’.¹⁴ Many protesters who did not join BERSIH 2007 were ‘goaded’ into marching with BERSIH 2.0.¹⁵ As they shed passivity for activism, tear-gassed but spirited first-time protesters claimed to have lost their fears of protest, the police, and arrest.¹⁶ Later, the BERSIH Chairperson, Ambiga Sreenevasan, noted, ‘People don’t feel safer to attend protests – they’re just less afraid of the consequences.’¹⁷

A memory of disenfranchisement

On Federal Territory Day, 1 February 2012, Lembah Pantai Member of Parliament Nurul Izzah Anwar declared that, ‘The time has come for us to enjoy a [Kuala Lumpur City Hall] that can be held responsible to the ratepayers, and can be replaced if it refuses to listen.’¹⁸ Adding that, ‘The time has come [to have] ... a mayor who is elected by the people,’ she urged, ‘Let’s rise up, Kuala Lumpur!’¹⁹ On 28 April 2012, Kuala Lumpur rose in the shape of BERSIH 3 in such manner as to recall a 40-year-old struggle over the political space of the national capital.

The demands were the same and so was their rejection by the regime. Two things were crucially dissimilar. First, timing was important: a general election could be called in 2012, and the opposition might better its previous result if elections were ‘clean and fair’. Second, the regime did not prohibit BERSIH 3.0 but City Hall barred the rally from its intended terminus of Dataran Merdeka (Independence Square).

From the whole country came the participants some of whom unveiled their own concerns besides electoral reform. Yet the progress of the rally enacted a remarkable ‘Kuala Lumpur-centred’ spectacle. At the instruction of City Hall, the police cordoned off Dataran Merdeka, rendering it an isolated spot ringed by an estimated 200,000 marchers. In reality BERSIH 3 practically mocked a moment 40 years earlier, when Kuala Lumpur was excised from Selangor and made ‘Federal Territory’. So reconstituted, the capital lost all its former state constituencies, and its residents were disenfranchised at state level.²⁰ Consequently, whoever led the federal government would control City Hall whatever the result of Kuala Lumpur’s parliamentary elections – which at GE12 had BN winning only one of the capital’s eleven parliamentary seats. In a wholly unplanned way, BERSIH 3.0 unearthed a memory of disenfranchisement that enabled rule by fiat instead of electoral mandate. Besides, the momentary ‘siege of Dataran Merdeka’ showed how remote the regime stood from the populace. The impact of BERSIH 3.0 apparently caused GE13 to be put off until 2013.²¹

Flux and realignments

The fourth part of the BERSIH progression was bewildering. Superlatives abounded: BERSIH 4 drew the largest number of participants ever, lasted 36 hours (29–30 August 2015),²² and effused a carnivalesque air. The rally was simultaneously swept into a flux: Anwar was again imprisoned, Hadi Awang took PAS out of Pakatan Rakyat (PR, or

People's Pact), Najib was engulfed in a huge financial scandal, and Mahathir began to attack Najib and UMNO.

Having striven to be a non-partisan promoter of electoral reform, BERSIH was suddenly a site of passionate politics. The BERSIH Committee declared BERSIH 4 'the manifestation of the people's ... vote of no confidence [against] Najib,'²³ and demanded his resignation. But PAS, whose members swelled the sizes of past protests, boycotted BERSIH 4, thus shrinking its Malay presence. The PAS move hinted of its tentative accommodation with the Najib regime. The resulting massive Chinese majority at the rally confirmed the Chinese voters' contempt for Najib and UMNO-BN.²⁴ The Chinese were angered – as only urban, financially savvy, middle-classes could be – by exposés of 'disappeared' money of unimaginably large sums. And they found an unlikely ally in Mahathir! His participation in the rally was not unanimously favoured by the BERSIH organisers, or his NGO critics who regarded 'Najib's rot' to be part of 'Mahathir's legacy'. But Mahathir warmed to BERSIH 4 and joined it on both days – discarding his lifelong disdain for dissident demonstrations as he groped towards a political comeback.

The agenda of electoral reform was once more decentred as BERSIH 4 retrieved the anti-corruption discourse of Reformasi at a dizzying juncture of power realignments. Never before had major political fractures happened simultaneously – to PAS, PR, and UMNO. Evidently, not obedience but dissension, and not unity but rupture defined the order of the day. Since GE12 and GE13, the regime and the opposition had been locked in a stalemate.²⁵ On principle, the BERSIH Committee abjured a scenario of 'regime change' via disorderly demonstrations and street battles.²⁶ On the ground, spirited slogans and evocative expressions revealed the rally-makers' intent: the crisis of the regime had ripened – it was time to push UMNO-BN off the cliff, albeit by democratic procedures.

Culmination: a different campaign

By 2016, dissident civil society had expended much time, energy, money, and emotion in street protests, multimedia networking, and election campaigns without achieving electoral reform, let alone BN's defeat. The BERSIH Committee sensed 'the frustration of Malaysians who have passionately worked for change for many years'. Pleading that 'our work is not yet done',²⁷ however, the Committee decided to hold a fifth rally. In its call to 'continue the struggle for reform, justice, and human rights',²⁸ BERSIH 5 went beyond electoral reform and the format of a rally in Kuala Lumpur. The Committee issued a long list of explicitly political demands and planned for a BERSIH 5 rally in Kuala Lumpur on 19 November 2016 to be preceded by a seven-week BERSIH Convoy that popularized its message to the rest of Peninsular Malaysia, Sabah and Sarawak.

The demands, old and new, were couched in the familiar idiom of civil society – fair elections, clean government, strengthened parliamentary democracy, the right to dissent, and empowering Sabah and Sarawak. Yet BERSIH 5 was willy-nilly drawn into an electoral campaign to defeat the 59-year-old regime and create a 'New Malaysia'.²⁹ Radically changed circumstances left little room for a non-partisan 'people's movement'.³⁰ The political terrain had been cloven by the core crisis of 1MDB.³¹ On one side stood Najib and

UMNO and their use of state power to preempt a thorough investigation of ‘the heist of the century’,³² and Najib’s suspected complicity in it. On the other was an opposition coalition that was re-built, almost unbelievably, on an Anwar-Mahathir rapprochement to ‘Save Malaysia’ from kleptocracy and its economic and political consequences.

A decade of tortured politics served up a semblance of the milieu and mood of BERSIH 2007. Before that rally, there was mass public disappointment that Abdullah Ahmad Badawi had reneged on his promises to prosecute ‘high-profile corruption’. Now there was anger that Najib forestalled investigations of the most brazen financial scandal. Public discontent with fuel price increases, among others, during the Abdullah years resurfaced over rising costs of living blamed on Najib’s Goods and Services Tax which was in turn attributed to the loss of state revenue due to 1MDB. In 2016 as in 2007, the opposition urgently needed revival. Its frayed coalition launched the original rally to regain cohesiveness and a sizeable social base before GE12. For the final rally, an unsettled coalition tested its viability and expanded its constituency ahead of GE14. As they met at the displays of dissent in BERSIH 5 and the BERSIH Convoy, the opposition, civil society, and unaffiliated voters could gauge their own strength vis-à-vis the regime.

STRUGGLES AND THE IMAGINATION OF COMMUNITY

Perhaps it was unsurprising that BERSIH’s demands for electoral reforms met the regime’s unyielding rejection. By the time of BERSIH 2007, the UMNO-led regime had assumed that it would rule with an incontestable majority, without interruption, and, by default, with no end. In UMNO’s scheme of things, these features of the political system rested on the exact opposite of ‘clean and fair elections’ that formed BERSIH’s goal. Were it not so, the regime might have found it less costly to accede, at least partially, to BERSIH’s initial, limited, demands. But a stubborn refusal to recognize the legitimacy of the campaign for electoral reform, aggravated by fumbled attempts to suppress it, provoked several notable results. Every rally left its special imprint at a separate moment. But the BERSIH progression produced a profound socio-political transformation. The critical signs of the changes that arose from rally to rally were the multiplying demands that cohered around the issue of electoral reform, the eventual shift in the target of protest, and the unsuspected re-imagination of community and society.

First, BERSIH and its protesters became more numerous, experienced, nuanced, and emboldened in dissent from rally to rally. Between 2007 and 2016, the ‘latent meaning’ of BERSIH’s mobilization could not be ‘read off its literal slogans and proclaimed aims’.³³ It was not a question of the BERSIH Committee concealing its actual objectives. Behind the single issue of electoral reform, rather, ‘a much wider world of associations and affects contaminate[d] it and transform[ed] it into the expression of much more general trends’.³⁴ The rally-goers marched for ‘clean and fair elections’ but also to reclaim their right to the city and its public spaces, enact a history of elected local government before disenfranchisement, resume a battle against oligarchic corruption, and so on.

Second, the ambit of BERSIH increasingly incorporated other social groups whose own objectives were dismissed by the regime. As it were, ‘the frustration of a plurality of

demands by [the regime] created a spontaneous equivalence between them³⁵ – as people whose demands were unmet in one area became aware of demands unmet in other areas. An early instance of ‘equivalence’ was glimpsed in September and November 2007. The coincidentally close staging of the Bar Council, BERSIH and HINDRAF protests made the legal profession, the opposition parties and their NGO allies, and the Indian community aware of one another’s unresolved problems.³⁶ Over the subsequent decade, the BERSIH progression crafted an imagined unity of electoral reform with other unsatisfied appeals and frustrated initiatives. The convergence of different streams of dissent was established as a feature of BERSIH as its rallies were joined by movements with their distinct concerns, such as Anak Felda,³⁷ Anti-Lynas,³⁸ and Kelantan oil royalty.³⁹ The multiplying demands for reform – judicial, electoral, social, ecological, and political – all rejected *by* the regime, fused as a general rejection *of* the regime.

Third, BERSIH’s intervention re-imagined ‘the people’ differently from the static and divisive ethno-religious identities the state had packaged for a passive populace.⁴⁰ The BERSIH movement progressed by building physical and virtual coalitions. Coming off Reformasi, BERSIH 2007 had a preponderant Malay presence. Even so, its social composition was re-shaped by the multiethnic professional profile of the Bar Council and the mobilization of HINDRAF.⁴¹ For BERSIH 2.0, deepening social dissent drew a Malay majority, a visible non-Malay presence, and a significant representation of environmentalists, FELDA settlers, and supporters of Kelantan.

The formation of the multiethnic civil society-based BERSIH Steering Committee marked a key moment when the BERSIH rallies began to recompose the nation symbolically with successive waves of mass participation that bridged ethnic, urban-rural, generational, gender, territorial, and other divides. As an observer noted, the first and best known BERSIH Chairperson, Ambiga Sreenevasan, broke ‘three Malaysian glass ceilings’ when, as a ‘woman who is neither Malay nor a Muslim’, she led ‘the first successful multiracial mass movement in Malaysia.’⁴² The Chinese formed a conspicuous majority in BERSIH 4 when PAS withdrew its support. But the Chinese, ethnically speaking, were the last to rally in large numbers because so many other components of ‘the people’ were already part of the BERSIH movement. The protest of the Chinese, not bound to ‘old Chinese politics’, reflected the anger of the largest urban professional and middle-classes at the scandal of 1MDB. Mahathir’s attendance at BERSIH 4 ironically recalled a Malay epiphany during Reformasi: a government without UMNO was not unthinkable.

Finally, BERSIH went global from BERSIH 3 onwards. Solidarity rallies held by Malaysians in numerous cities around the world captured a telling facet in BERSIH’s symbolic constitution of ‘the people’. Many of those protesting Malaysians were emigres who experienced nationhood again in a common vision of ‘clean and fair elections’ and all else that the slogan had come to embrace.

WHAT OF BERSIH TODAY?

‘A single detail is sometimes enough to sketch an ideological picture.’⁴³ The ‘single detail’ here is the spirited response by a PAS veteran to an UMNO MP’s harassment of Ambiga:

... the Seri Gading MP was wrong to ask only for Ambiga to be hanged. Why didn't he ask for National Laureate Datuk Samad Said to be hanged? For his demand to be fair and non-racist, he should ask for Pak Samad to be hanged. Let all who protested in the series of BERSIH rallies be hanged. Have a special grave for all.⁴⁴

The 'ideological picture' is of a fresh appreciation of the levels and channels of popular solidarity that the BERSIH progression achieved across ethnic and non-ethnic lines.⁴⁵

Composing the people on the basis of equivalences in shared struggles is dynamic and fluid, even unstable, as the BERSIH progression showed.⁴⁶ Yet it is valuable to dissident forms of participation in public life which uphold a high sense of morality – of doing what is principled with non-partisan spirit, practising non-violent civil disobedience, and building communities based on unity and empathy in common struggle.

A detached observer might conclude that BERSIH lost the battle for electoral reform but won the war in GE14, only to watch the prospects for far-reaching change dashed by the manipulated 'regime change' of March 2020.⁴⁷ Today, BERSIH continues its campaign of electoral reform and the democratic politics that remains the ultimate objective.⁴⁸ But under current conditions which deter open mass mobilization, perhaps the long-term political value of the BERSIH progression lies elsewhere. The many-faceted betrayal of the Pakatan Harapan government in March 2020 exposed exactly the kind of politics that was anathema to the BERSIH organizers and their multitudes of supporters, as well as young and otherwise disillusioned activists. Many new groups emerging on the ground and in social media are wary of the 'same old, same old' in the sterile politicking of the day. They prefer to explore innovative ways of promoting solidarity under conditions of pandemic, economic difficulties, and social suffering.⁴⁹ No one can peddle simplistic takeaways, or quick fixes, let alone any panacea, to them. But in the multiple meanings of BERSIH, perhaps they may creatively discover 'clean and fair' solutions to the many problems that remain since BERSIH began.⁵⁰

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¹ Bersih means ‘clean’ in Malay; the full Malay name of the coalition is Gabungan Pilihanraya Bersih dan Adil. On the origin of BERSIH, see Khoo Ying Hooi, *The BERSIH Movement and Democratisation in Malaysia: Repression, Dissent and Opportunities*, Petaling Jaya, Selangor: SIRD, and Singapore: ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, 2020, pp. 63–66.

² Bersih 2.0, *Joint Communiqué*, <https://www.bersih.org/rallies/bersih1/joint-communicue/> (accessed on 18 November 2021).

³ There are many studies of the defects of the electoral system. The non-specialist reader may find it handy to consult a single volume, *Elections and Democracy in Malaysia*, edited by Mavis Puthuchery and Norani Othman, Bangi, Selangor: Penerbit Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 2015, especially Chapters 1, 10, 11, and 17.

⁴ The rally was simply known as BERSIH then. Here ‘2007’ is appended to distinguish it from later rallies that bore numerals.

⁵ The latest, extended, study of BERSIH, informed by social movement theory, is Khoo, *The BERSIH Movement and Democratisation in Malaysia*.

⁶ The demands reflected widespread suspicions of, respectively, repeated voting, electoral rolls padded with ‘phantom voters’, manipulated deployment of uniformed service voters whose balloting was allegedly supervised by their officers, and the ruling coalition’s monopoly of state and privately-owned media.

⁷ EC agreed to use indelible ink for GE12 but retracted its decision before polling day, which backfired on BN.

⁸ Mahathir’s departure removed the principal target of mass derision, BN’s triumph signaled UMNO’s recovery of Malay support, and Anwar’s freedom closed a traumatic incident.

⁹ *Asia Inc*, ‘A new alliance’, Interview with Anwar Ibrahim, May-June 2008, p. 34.

¹⁰ For a study of HINDRAF against a history of the Indians in Malaysia, see Farish Ahmad Noor, *The Hindu Rights Action Force (HINDRAF) of Malaysia: Communitarianism Across Borders?* RSIS Working Paper No. 163, Singapore: Nanyang Technological University, 2008, <https://dr.ntu.edu.sg/bitstream/10220/40159/1/WP163.pdf>, accessed on 29 October 2021. Also see Anantha Raman Govindasamy, ‘Social movements in contemporary Malaysia: The cases of BERSIH, HINDRAF and Perkasa’, in *Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Malaysia*, edited by Meredith L Weiss, London and New York: Routledge, 2015, pp. 116–126.

¹¹ The first 14-member BERSIH 2.0 committee excluded political party representatives because BERSIH 2007 had realized the opposition’s core objective, and, the new committee insisted on non-partisan advocacy of electoral reform in the national interest. Yet BERSIH and the opposition had a synergistic relationship. Only the latter could mobilize large numbers of participants; BERSIH 2.0 was a band of small NGOs with few troops. But BERSIH had civil society eminence that could move the politically uncommitted.

¹² Press Release from BERSIH, <https://www.facebook.com/BERSIH2.0>, accessed on 14 December 2021.

¹³ Nathaniel Tan, ed., *9 July 2011: What Really Happened?* Kuala Lumpur: Kinibooks, 2011, is a useful compilation of participant and other accounts of BERSIH 2.0.

¹⁴ Toffee, ‘No Stadium Merdeka but the whole of KL instead’, Tan, ed., *9 July 2011*, p. 41.

¹⁵ The idea of people being goaded ‘to do something about what they already know is wrong’ comes from one interpretation of Gandhi’s grasp of the purpose of non-violent civil disobedience (James Green, ‘An Interview with Norman Finkelstein’, *Counterpunch*, 28–30 September 2012, <http://www.counterpunch.org/2012/09/28/an-interview-with-norman-finkelstein-2/>, accessed on 2 October 2012).

¹⁶ An iconic case is told by Nigel Aw, ‘Auntie Bersih: The Arts Were My Awakening’, in Tan, *9 July 2011*, pp. 60–62.

¹⁷ Laura Tribe, ‘Interview: Organizing Malaysia’s largest protests in over 50 years’, *Canadian Journalists for Free Expression*, 25 September 2012,

<http://www.cjfe.org/resources/features/interview-organizing-malaysias-largest-protests-over-50-years>, accessed on 8 November 2016.

¹⁸ ‘Pursue your right to elect your mayor, KL folk told’, *Malaysiakini*, 1 February 2012, <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/187996>, accessed on 1 February 2012.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ In Parliament, Prime Minister Tun Abdul Razak said, ‘When Kuala Lumpur becomes Federal territory, Selangor will no longer have power over Kuala Lumpur and *it will not be necessary for the residents of Kuala Lumpur to be represented in the State Assembly*’ (Malaysia, House of Representatives, *Official Report*, Third Parliament, vol. III, 26 April 1973: 821; emphasis added).

²¹ Parliament was expected to be dissolved in time for a June 2012 election after the regime accelerated the passage of several bills in a day while making time ‘stand still’ according to the ‘stopped clock’ in Parliament. After BERSIH 3, Najib thought the better of it. Interview with Jeyakumar Devaraj, Penang, June 2012.

²² Ending before midnight’s transition to National Day 2015.

²³ Kamles Kumar, ‘Bersih says fourth rally a vicarious vote of no confidence’, *The Malay Mail*, 15 August 2015, <https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2015/08/15/bersih-says-fourth-rally-a-vicarious-vote-of-no-confidence/952093>, accessed on 24 October 2021. Also see Shannon Teoh, ‘Bersih plans overnight rally in August to demand Najib’s resignation’, *The Straits Times*, 29 July 2015, <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/bersih-plans-overnight-rally-in-august-to-demand-najib-resignation>, accessed on 24 October 2021.

²⁴ They were ethnically the last to join the mass rallies. Absent from *Reformasi*, remote from HINDRAF, and under-represented in BERSIH 2007, they supported the BERSIH campaign from BERSIH 2.0 onwards.

²⁵ In the principal arena of Peninsular Malaysia at any rate.

²⁶ Thomas Fann, ‘Bersih 4 is not about regime change’, *Malaysiakini*, 5 August 2015, <https://www.malaysiakini.com/letters/307373>, accessed on 24 October 2021.

²⁷ Bersih Steering Committee, ‘Why Bersih is marching for the fifth time on Nov 19’, *Malaysiakini*, 14 September 2016, <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/355714>, accessed on 27 October 2021.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ ‘We urge all Malaysians to stand united – SATUKAN TENAGA – and participate in Bersih Convoy and Bersih 5 Rally for a reformed and new Malaysia – Malaysia Baru’ (ibid.).

³⁰ Which was how BERSIH continued to call itself; ibid.

³¹ The new conjuncture is examined in Khoo Boo Teik, *The Unrealized Mahathir-Anwar Transitions: Social Divides and Political Consequences*, Singapore: ISEAS – Yusof Ishak, Trends in Southeast Asia, Issue 15, 2021, pp. 18–23.

³² Sarawak Report, ‘HEIST OF THE CENTURY – How Jho Low Used PetroSaudi As “A Front” To Siphon Billions Out Of 1MDB!’, *sarawakreport.org*, 28 February 2015, <http://www.sarawakreport.org/2015/02/heist-of-the-century-how-jho-low-used-petrosaudi-as-a-front-to-siphon-billions-out-of-1mdb-world-exclusive/>, accessed on 18 September 2017.

³³ Ernesto Laclau, ‘Why Constructing a People Is the Main Task of Radical Politics’, *Critical Inquiry*, 32 (4), (Summer), 2006, p. 656. Laclau observes that, ‘To take the one-issue character of mobilization at face value would be the same as reducing the analysis of a dream to its manifest content.’

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ For Laclau, an ‘equivalential logic’ operates whereby ‘the frustration of an individual demand transforms [it] into a claim as far as people see themselves as bearers of rights that are not recognized’ (ibid., p. 655).

³⁶ 'If we are *for judicial reform*, if we are *for electoral reform*, and if we are *for social reform*, then we must all be Bar Council, Bersih *and* Hindraf' (Khoo Boo Teik, 'Rage Against the Machine', *Aliran Monthly*, 27, 9, 2007, p. 6.

³⁷ The National Association of Felda Settlers' Children, which was very critical of policies and practices of the management of the Federal Land Resettlement Authority (Felda) under the Najib regime.

³⁸ A 'green' campaign against rare-earth processing in Kuantan, Pahang, was named *Save Malaysia, Stop Lynas!*

³⁹ Kelantan, under PAS rule since 1990, demanded payment of royalty for oil extracted in the state.

⁴⁰ I am grateful to Donald Nonini for discussing the ideas in this section with me.

⁴¹ Rather than dwell on the 'Hindu' part of HINDRAF, Sim Kwang Yang noted that, 'The Hindraf leadership and their protesters were probably from the middle class within the Indian community. But they must have plucked a sensitive nerve of all Malaysian Indians, including all the far flung, widely scattered, and hitherto long-suffering silent Indian underclass' ('Hear Hindraf's cry for freedom', *Malaysiakini*, 18 October 2008, <http://www.malaysiakini.com/news/91519>, accessed on 18 October 2008).

⁴² Bakri Musa, 'BERSIH 3.0 Broke Many Glasses (Including a Few Glass Ceilings)', 8 May 2012, <http://www.bakrimusa.com/archives/bersih-3-0-broke-many-glasses-including-a-few-glass-ceilings>; accessed on 8 May 2012. As Bar Council President, Ambiga led the Walk for Justice in 2007.

⁴³ The line comes from Serge Halimi, 'Divided and conquered', *LE MONDE diplomatique*, September 2016,

<file:///C:/Users/Boo%20Teik/Documents/Working%20files%202016/ISEAS%202021%20Proposals/Serge%20Halimi.html>, accessed on 11 May 2021.

⁴⁴ Subky Abdul Latif, 'Gantung Ambiga atau gantung diri?' [Hang Ambiga or hang oneself?], *The Malaysian Insider*, 10 July 2012,

<http://www.themalaysianinsider.com/opinion/article/gantung-ambiga-atau-gantung-diri/>; accessed on 10 July 2012; author's translation. BERSIH 2.0 Co-Chairperson, A. Samad Said, brought his literary eminence, octogenarian presence and more to the movement, especially when he and Ambiga led the second rally. His poem, *Unggun Bersih* [The Flame of Bersih], is reproduced in Tan, ed., *9 July 2011*, p. 158. I wish to thank Nathaniel Tan for the English translation of the title of the poem.

⁴⁵ In a way, the ideological picture could take in such questions of shared civic consciousness as: 'What are our civic obligations in relation to the larger multicultural society we live in? What is in our Constitution? What are our rights? And how do we envision living and sharing the nation with each other? What is it like to be in someone else's shoes? How can we treat each other respectfully as equals and humans first?' (Khoo Gaik Cheng, 'Bersih 4, citizenship and civics in Malaysia', *New Mandala*, 7 September 2015, <https://www.newmandala.org/bersih-4-citizenship-and-civics-in-malaysia/>, accessed on 20 November 2021).

⁴⁶ Notably by PAS's withdrawal from BERSIH 4 and BERSIH 5.

⁴⁷ Khoo, *The Unrealized Mahathir-Anwar Transitions*, pp. 28–31.

⁴⁸ As the current BERSIH Chairperson reaffirmed recently, 'Bersih 2.0 is an electoral reform watchdog that pushes for reforms that strengthen our democracy' (Thomas Fann, 'In Response to Dr Kua Kia Soong's Allegations About BERSIH 2.0', *BERSIH 2.0*, 13 July 2021, <https://www.bersih.org/in-response-to-dr-kua-kia-soongs-allegations-about-bersih-2-0/>, accessed on 15 July 2021). The BERSIH 2.0 website provides the best source of information on the activities of the movement.

⁴⁹ Khoo Boo Teik, 'Recurring Themes in the Politics of Parti Keadilan Rakyat', *Perspective*, Issue 2021 No. 144, 11 November 2021, Singapore: ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, pp. 6–7.

⁵⁰ ‘The crucial role of the Bersih movement lies not only in triggering democratic transition thus far, but also in paving the way for continued political change’ (Khoo, *The Bersih Movement and Democratisation in Malaysia*, p. 181).

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