Social movements in contemporary Malaysia
The cases of BERSIH, HINDRAF and Perkasa

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The emergence of civil society movements like Gabungan Pilihanraya Bersih dan Adil (BERSIH, Coalition for Clean and Fair Elections), Hindu Rights Action Force (HINDRAF) and Pertubuhan Pribumi Perkasa Malaysia (Perkasa, Malaysian Indigenous Empowerment Organisation) has been among the fundamental forces behind a changing political landscape in Malaysia. In breaking away from past traditions, these movements have brought about new, vibrant, politically engaged activism, often 'confrontational' with the state and radical in achieving its objectives. The emergence of these movements has also created a sense of political awareness that has successfully mobilised Malaysians. Although these movements are deeply rooted in issues of ethnic discontent (in particular HINDRAF and Perkasa), BERSIH's successful multi-ethnic mobilisation has set a promising precedent in Malaysian politics. In fact, had it not been for BERSIH and HINDRAF rallies, it would arguably have been impossible for the Malaysian opposition political parties to gain a more secure foothold in Malaysian politics. On the other hand, Perkasa has showcased Malay race-supremacy debates more openly than ever.

Past studies have indicated that social movement activism in Malaysia is very ethnic-oriented and hence has failed to influence political outcomes. As a matter of fact, the nature of social movement advocacy is mainly related to the welfare of ethnic or religious groups. For instance, various Islamic *dakwah* movements emerged in the late 1960s and 1970s, like Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia (ABIM, Malaysian Islamic Youth Movement), which promoted and supported Islamic revivalism in Malaysia (Kessler 1983: 8). Tan (1997) notes that Chinese educationist movements such as Dongjiaozong have fiercely defended the right to Chinese mother-tongue education in Malaysia since the 1950s. To stop such advocacy efforts, the government used legislative enactments, including the Universities and University College (Amendment) Act 1975, to crush Muslim students' activism, and detained many leaders, for promoting Chinese mother-tongue education in the 1980s (Collins 2006).

As Weiss and Saliha (2003) note, the *reformasi* movement which was created in the late 1990s, right after the sacking of then Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim, can be considered as a turning point in Malaysia's politically related civil society activism. In a study on the *reformasi* movement's failure, Brown (2004) argues that in an ethnically divided society like Malaysia, differences between ethnic groups have blocked effective mobilisation of social
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movements. His observation was based on Malay-Muslim domination of the reformasi movement. He further notes that the slippage between a multi-ethnic civil society and the ethnic bases of movement mobilisation in Malaysia has hampered the emergence of an effective opposition to the state in Malaysia (Brown 2004: iv).

By analysing the activism of BERSIH, HINDRAF and Perkasa, this study argues that in contemporary Malaysia, while ethnic issues are still central, BERSIH’s advocacy suggests greater potential for effective, multi-ethnic social movements in Malaysian politics, particularly since 2008. In tracing such changes, the first section of this chapter focuses on BERSIH’s multi-ethnic mobilisation, the second section primarily focuses on HINDRAF’s working-class Indians’ rally, and the third section explores Perkasa’s Malay supremacy in Malaysian politics. The chapter concludes by considering these social movements’ meaning and implications for Malaysian politics and civil society.

**BERSIH’s multi-ethnic mobilisation**

BERSIH is an electoral reform movement which became a household name in Malaysia in late 2000. It was officially launched on 23 November 2006. Prior to that, BERSIH was a small joint action committee that pushed for meaningful electoral reforms in Malaysia, supported by more than eighty non-governmental organisations (Tan 2011: 2–3). In 2010, BERSIH was relaunched as BERSIH 2.0 and came under the multi-ethnic co-leadership of Ambiga Sreenevasan (former Malaysian Bar Council President) and A. Samad Said ( Malaysian National Laureate). Since its formation, BERSIH has mobilised Malaysians irrespective of race, religion or political affiliation. BERSIH also has global solidarity movements, or international chapters, which have been supported by the Malaysian diaspora in at least nine countries. Though BERSIH maintains its stance as non-partisan, its prime backers are the three main Malaysian opposition political parties – Pan-Malaysian Islamic party (PAS), Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR) and Democratic Action Party (DAP), which together form the Pakatan Rakyat. In fact, it can be argued that without Pakatan Rakyat, BERSIH’s success at multi-ethnic mobilisation for various rallies would have been highly questionable.

Pakatan Rakyat’s support for BERSIH activism is due to their common understanding that the Malaysian electoral system is highly corrupted. That such issues have become a serious impediment to Malaysian democracy and that Barisan Nasional’s corrupt electoral practice has denied the opposition advancement in Malaysian politics have prompted the coming together of both Pakatan Rakyat and BERSIH. In fact, the impetus for the creation of BERSIH was the 2004 Malaysian general elections. SUARAM, an NGO, oversaw those elections and later noted that vote buying, phantom voters, multiple voting, rampant abuse of postal votes and prevention of equal access to media and coverage of political parties have been the main hurdles preventing free and fair elections in the country (Lim 2011). In addition, Loh (2004) notes that the very independence of the Malaysian Election Commission can be questioned, as there is a growing perception that the Election Commission is highly influenced by the government. He further argues that the ruling Barisan Nasional’s landslide victory in 2004 was the outcome of amendments to the Election Act and Election Offences Act in April 2002, which had reduced the Election Commission’s autonomy, as well as the redrawing of election boundaries. Both were an advantage to the ruling Barisan Nasional in the 2004 general elections (Loh 2009: 84–86).

In fact, the objective of BERSIH – to campaign for and create public awareness on the issue of clean and fair elections in Malaysia – was very similar to Pakatan Rakyat’s demand for electoral reform. In a memorandum submitted in 2007, BERSIH had put forward four
electoral reform demands: (1) usage of indelible ink to indicate who had already voted; (2) a clean-up of the registered voters list; (3) abolition of postal votes; and (4) providing access for all political parties to government controlled print and electronic media. With the relaunch of BERSIH in 2010, eight specific demands were proposed: (1) a clean electoral roll; (2) reform of postal ballots; (3) use of indelible ink; (4) minimum twenty-one days’ campaign period; (5) free and fair access to media; (6) strengthening of public institutions; (7) stopping corruption; and (8) stopping dirty politics.

From 2007–12, BERSIH organised three important rallies, which comprised an important part of its activism. A closer observation, however, reveals that the majority of BERSIH supporters who turned up for these rallies were also Pakatan Rakyat members. In fact, prior to these rallies, Pakatan Rakyat leaders like Abdul Hadi Awang (PAS), Anwar Ibrahim (PKR) and Lim Kit Siang (DAP) openly endorsed their support of BERSIH and galvanised their party supporters to attend such rallies. The close relationship between BERSIH and Pakatan Rakyat contributed to the significance of the series of public rallies, which had an important impact in the 2008 and 2013 Malaysian general elections, in which Pakatan Rakyat emerged as a solid opposition force in Malaysian politics.

The first BERSIH rally was organised on 10 November 2007. It was historic: for the first time, a social movement managed to mobilise somewhere between 10,000 and 40,000 Malaysians. BERSIH used non-governmental organisations, online media and blogs as tools for mobilisation, and also invited the ruling Barisan Nasional component parties to join the rally; however, a majority of the supporters for the BERSIH rally were mobilised by PAS, DAP and PKR. In fact, PAS's president, Abdul Hadi Awang, DAP’s Lim Kit Siang and PKR’s Anwar Ibrahim were on the scene, actively involved in encouraging their supporters to march to the Istana (Palace) in the 2007 BERSIH rally.

On the day of the rally, the country’s capital city, Kuala Lumpur, came under a heavy police cordon, and major roads leading to the city centre were closed. Nevertheless, BERSIH supporters, mainly Malays, managed to gather at three important locations, namely, Sogo Shopping Complex, Masjid India and Masjid Negara. The supporters were stopped halfway and forced to disperse when the police open fired with tear gas and water cannons. Later, several dozen BERSIH supporters – most of them were opposition supporters – were detained for various reasons. The most noticeable arrest was of the then PAS Deputy President Mohammad Sabu and PKR’s Tian Chua (Star 2012). Later that day, when BERSIH submitted its four-point memorandum to the Istana, the three opposition parties’ leaders were present, highlighting the importance of this BERSIH rally to the Malaysian opposition.

The second BERSIH rally, famously dubbed BERSIH 2.0, was a walk for democracy on 9 July 2011. This time around, BERSIH rallies were also held simultaneously in at least nine countries around the world by overseas Malaysian communities. The rally was a follow-up to the 2007 rally, as the coalition’s demands had not been properly addressed by the Malaysian government. BERSIH co-chairperson Ambiga Sreenivasan noted that the Election Commission had totally rejected the movement’s call for electoral reform (Boo 2011). As a result, BERSIH put forward its eight-point solution to clean up the Malaysian electoral system.

The government under Prime Minister Najib Razak pointed out that BERSIH’s public rally could not be allowed as it would only create chaos; the government’s priority was maintaining the public’s safety. The government also pointed out that groups like Perkasa and the youth wing of United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) were planning to counter the BERSIH rally. BERSIH co-chairperson Ambiga Sreenivasan secured an audience with the Malaysian head of state. In the ensuing days, coalition leaders issued a statement agreeing to hold the rally indoors in the historic Merdeka Stadium (Syed 2011).
The government, however, rejected the use of Merdeka Stadium. BERSIH was adamant it would proceed with its plan to use the stadium and accused the Malaysian government of not being in favour of even indoor rallies. On 9 July 2011, 10,000–20,000 people gathered in various locations in Kuala Lumpur and began to march to the stadium. The police stopped their progress by firing heavy tear gas and water cannon. In the aftermath of this rally, one supporter was killed and more than 1,000 BERSIH supporters were arrested, including the BERSIH chairperson and six opposition politicians, under the Emergency Ordinance (Shazwan 2011).

Again in 2012, BERSIH organised another rally on 28 April, called BERSIH 3.0, following the government’s failure to include BERSIH demands in a Parliamentary Select Committee which was formed to give recommendations on issues of election reform in Malaysia. Once again, the rally was strongly supported by the opposition, Pakatan Rakyat. The government felt that the BERSIH rally was being used by the opposition to overthrow the ruling Barisan Nasional. Due to this, BERSIH’s initial proposal to hold the rally in Dataran Merdeka (Independence Square) was rejected, but eventually the government suggested the use of stadiums. This time, the stadium plan was rejected by the organiser. The rally, however, was the biggest in Malaysian history; it was recorded that more than 80,000 people turned up in support, although government-controlled media put the figure at around 25,000 (Alibeyouglu 2012). The use of force by the police and violent retaliation from supporters overshadowed the rally’s success (Shazwan 2012). In fact, several journalists covering the event were detained or had their cameras destroyed by the police. On a more positive note compared with the 2011 rally, the number of people arrested by police decreased to 388 (Ariffin 2012).

It can be said that BERSIH’s multi-ethnic mobilisation for clean and fair elections would be impossible without support from the opposition, that is, Pakatan Rakyat. To a large extent, the success of BERSIH rallies in mobilising thousands of Malaysians could be attributed to Pakatan Rakyat. Conversely, Pakatan’s support for the BERSIH movement was based on the assumption that a clean electoral system would increase the chances of the opposition’s forming the next government.

HINDRAF’s working-class Indian rally

HINDRAF was formed in January 2006 as an ad hoc committee comprising thirty Indian-based non-governmental organisations. The aim was to create a discursive forum among hitherto divided Indian organisations in the interest of the minority ethnic Indians.² HINDRAF became famous after a 2007 rally which saw thousands of working-class Indians take to the streets in various parts of Kuala Lumpur. In the aftermath of the rally, the government labelled this movement as radical, racist and terrorist. HINDRAF’s activism was very much restricted to working-class ethnic Indian issues and failed to get continuous support from opposition parties. It should be noted, however, that the emergence of HINDRAF and its November 2007 rally significantly changed working-class Indians’ perceptions towards the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC) and the ruling Barisan Nasional in Malaysian politics.

It is important to note that HINDRAF did not set out to become a major force. It had no symbol, membership, organisational chart or ideology, and initially had no anti-government agenda. In fact, many of the thirty organisations that originally signed up to HINDRAF were avowedly pro-government (Govindasamy 2009). Yet, it was in the nature of even this limited brief that HINDRAF would clash with the government. Soon after its formation,
many organisations that had initially been associated with HINDRAF left or became inactive, largely in response to HINDRAF’s continuous criticism of the MIC and the government. In the wake of these departures, HINDRAF changed its character: it came to be dominated by a small group centred around the energetic and charismatic Ponnusamy brothers. Wathayamoorty Ponnusamy became the president and his brother, Uthayakumar Ponnusamy, became the main legal adviser and de facto leader. Even before the formation of HINDRAF, both brothers were known for their activist orientation, especially Uthayakumar. The brothers also handled other Indian cases such as those concerning issues of birth certificates and the plight of Tamil schools.

Although HINDRAF was famously known for defending Hindu temples in Malaysia, the real impetus for the creation of HINDRAF dated back to an episode that occurred in December 2005. When Maniam Moorthy – a Malaysian Indian who was famous as a hero who had climbed Mount Everest – died on 20 December 2005, the nation witnessed an extraordinary tussle over his body between his wife, Kaliammal, and the state religious authorities. She claimed her husband was Hindu but the Islamic religious authorities, including the Syariah Court, rejected her claim, saying that Moorthy had converted to Islam and the body should be buried according to Islamic rites. The Malaysian High Court decided that it had no jurisdiction over the case because the Syariah Court had already ruled and ordered Moorthy’s body to be buried according to the ruling of the Court (Fauwas 2005). This episode sparked the coming together of the thirty non-governmental Indian organisations that formed HINDRAF to address the socio-religious interests of Malaysian Indians. Although many of these NGOs left when HINDRAF became increasingly critical of state policies pertaining to Indians, HINDRAF stayed on, hence becoming the sole participant representing the community against the Malaysian government.

This history notwithstanding, the issue of defending Hindu temples from demolition made HINDRAF popular among working-class Indians in Malaysia. In 2006, several incidents highlighted the fact that local governments in states like Selangor had taken aggressive stands against temples built ‘illegally’ in public and private land by working-class Indians. In some cases, these temples had been built when the land was still under British plantation estates. MIC, the sole Indian representative in the ruling Barisan Nasional, had pleaded several times to stop such exercises of temple demolition, but had failed to get a positive response from then Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi (Malaysiakini 2006).

MIC’s failure and continued temple demolition exercises gave HINDRAF a valid reason to emerge as the voice of marginalised working-class Indians. In fact, from 2006, HINDRAF had been sending various memorandums to the government on the issue of temple demolition, which had become a sensitive one to the working-class Indian community. When this strategy failed, it turned to small-scale rallies, normally held near the demolished temple. At the same time, HINDRAF also organised various public forums throughout peninsular Malaysia to explain to the Indian community about the MIC’s failure to protect Indians’ rights in Malaysia, as part of its drive to mobilise Indians. The government, however, ignored HINDRAF’s requests; it maintained its stand that any issues pertaining to Malaysian Indians’ would be dealt with only by the MIC.

The second stage of HINDRAF activism was with the intent to internationalise the issue of Indian marginalisation in Malaysia, in order to put pressure on the Malaysian government. The continuous refusal of the Malaysian government under Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi to negotiate and find amicable solutions, particularly regarding the issue of temple demolition, forced HINDRAF to stress the issue on a global scale. For instance, in 2007, on the fiftieth anniversary of Malaysia’s independence from the British, lawyers representing
HINDRAF filed a class action lawsuit against the government of the United Kingdom for US$4 trillion as compensation for transporting Indians from the mainland, who presently form the majority of the Malaysian Indian community, and leaving them unprotected, at the mercy of Malays, in Malaysia. Later, to create awareness, HINDRAF also organised a ‘100,000 signature’ campaign throughout Malaysia to explain the class action lawsuit and gain financial support for its course among the Malaysian Indian community.

One week before Deepavali (the Hindu festival of lights) in 2007, a temple in the working-class area of Padang Jawa was demolished by local authorities, sparking major outrage among Malaysian Indians (Lee 2008: 190). HINDRAF used this incident to organise a peaceful rally on 10 November 2007 to submit a petition to the British High Commissioner in Kuala Lumpur. One of the key points in the petition, which was addressed to then Prime Minister of the United Kingdom Gordon Brown, was the accusation of ‘ethnic cleansing’ of Indians in Malaysia (Vinood 2007). On the day of the rally, clashes were reported in various places between HINDRAF supporters and police; the most notable one was around the famous Hindu temple in Batu Caves and a large crowd also gathered around the iconic Petronas Twin Towers, considered symbols of a modern, vibrant and progressive multi-ethnic Malaysian society. The government responded by sending nearly 5,000 armed police to disperse the crowd. This action, however, failed to stop the Malaysian Indians from showing their support for HINDRAF. It was reported that nearly 20,000–50,000, mostly working-class ethnic Tamils turned up in various parts of Kuala Lumpur – the biggest ever Indian rally against the government in Malaysian history (Lee 2008: 190).

In the aftermath of this rally, nearly 200 HINDRAF supporters were detained. Furthermore, the organisation was accused of having links with the Liberation Tamil Tigers of Elam (LTTE) in Sri Lanka and was later declared to be a terrorist organisation. The government also accused HINDRAF of distorting the actual picture of Malaysian Indians to the international community and planning to create racial unrest in Malaysia. Later, its five main leaders, namely, Uthayakumar, Manoharan, Kenghadharan, Ganabatirau and Vasanthakumar, were detained under the Internal Security Act (ISA) (Yeng 2007).

The Malaysian government felt the impact of HINDRAF in 2008, when working-class Indians largely deserted the MIC and the ruling Barisan Nasional government lost its two-thirds majority in parliament. Since then, the government has taken various measures to win Malaysian Indians’ support, such as releasing the leaders who were detained under ISA in May 2008, as well as recognising various splinter groups of HINDRAF, such as the Makkal Sakthi Movement. And just before the 2013 general elections, the Malaysian government formally recognised one such splinter group, known as Persatuan HINDRAF Malaysia, and signed a memorandum of understanding to improve the socio-economic position of Malaysian Indians (Ng 2013).

In the case of HINDRAF, it can be concluded that its activism primarily focused on working-class ethnic Indian issues in Malaysia. HINDRAF’s November 2007 rally was the first and last of its kind and played an important part in changing working-class Indians’ perceptions of MIC and the ruling Barisan Nasional. Among the majority Malays, this movement’s method of activism, which questioned Malays’ special privileges and demanded equal rights, seemed radical for Malaysia.

**Perkasa’s Malay supremacy**

Perkasa was formed in the aftermath of the 2008 general elections. It was officially registered under the Malaysian Registrar of Societies on 12 September 2008. Perkasa is a conservative,
extreme-right-wing Malay movement. The core of Perkasa’s ideology is to protect and defend *bumiputera*, in particular the majority Malays and their rights as stipulated in the Malaysian Constitution. This movement is famously known for its critical view of non-Malays and the Malaysian opposition coalition, Pakatan Rakyat (Teo 2011). The movement’s current president is Ibrahim Ali; former Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohammad is its adviser. Perkasa is the radical face of UMNO. Its core members are UMNO supporters and it was formed to win back the Malays’ support UMNO lost in the 2008 general elections.

In the aftermath of the 2008 general elections, Perkasa gained popularity mainly among Malays for defending the Malays’ socio-economic and political rights in Malaysia. Perkasa has argued that it is not a racist organisation, claiming that it is only demanding the rights of the Malays and *bumiputera* in Malaysia. As a matter of fact, Ibrahim Ali has noted that the welfare of the Malays, who comprise 60 percent of the Malaysian population, should be taken care of in order to maintain security and political stability in Malaysia. He further claimed that should Malays remain poor economically, the possibility of a ‘fresh’ race riot will be very high in Malaysia (Anbalagan 2013).

This organisation also argued that since 2008, the Malaysian government has tolerated and given in too much to minority demands. When Najib Razak took over as prime minister, one of his main strategies was to win back Chinese and Indian support for the ruling Barisan Nasional. Toward that end, the government was even willing to negotiate with radical Chinese and Indian organisations. In fact, prior to the 2013 general elections, the government held negotiations with ‘radical minority groups’ such as Dong Zong (United Chinese School Committees Association) and signed a memorandum of understanding with HINDRAF splinter group Persatuan HINDRAF Malaysia (Ding 2013).

Such governmental actions and poor support from minority groups for the ruling Barisan Nasional in the 2013 general elections made Perkasa question minority Chinese’s and Indians’ loyalty and sincerity to the government. The group demanded the Malaysian government immediately stop giving handouts to minorities and focus on Malays, who are the main supporters of the government. Right after the 2013 elections, Perkasa’s youth wing chief told Prime Minister Najib Razak to step down if he continued to support minorities and failed to prioritise the Malays (Mohd 2013). Most Perkasa members, who number over 500,000, are also UMNO members, and their main aim is to maintain UMNO’s status quo in Malaysian politics (Anbalagan and Awang Chik 2013).

Since its formation in 2009, Perkasa’s activism has been mainly linked to mobilising for, creating awareness of, fighting for and defending Malay rights in Malaysia. The central part of Perkasa’s activism is to monitor, identify and counter any statements or action by organisations or minority groups which are interpreted as questioning Malay rights in Malaysia. In this process, Perkasa has been actively involved in issuing various radical-racist statements, which undermine the Malay supremacy that undermines minority ethnic groups. Perkasa has also organised counter-demonstrations against any organisations which are deemed as opposing Malay rights in Malaysia. Unlike BERSIH’s and HINDRAF’s activism, Perkasa’s activism has enjoyed wide coverage in government-controlled media, and authorities’ responses to its more radical-racist statements have been lukewarm.

For instance, Perkasa was one of the key organisations which promoted a ban on the Malay-language Bible in Malaysia (Athi 2013). In January 2013, its president, Ibrahim Ali, issued a statement asking Muslims to seize and burn copies of Bibles that contain the word ‘Allah’ as the only way to stop non-Malays from using the term, and hence protecting the sanctity of Islam in Malaysia. Again in October 2013, he issued another statement asking the government to ban the Malay Bible, called Alkitab in the East Malaysian states of Sabah.
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and Sarawak, which have used Malay Bibles for centuries (Netto 2013; see also Puyok, this volume). In March 2013, Perkasa’s vice president insulted Malaysian Hindus by mocking their religious practice. Although these actions conflicted with Prime Minister Najib’s ‘1Malaysia’ slogan, which glorifies ethnic and religious diversity in Malaysia, the government has maintained its silence on these issues.

In December 2012, Perkasa reminded the Malay community that the Chinese-dominated DAP’s growing political influence in Malaysia since 2008 could turn out to be a national security threat. Perkasa argued that given their strong economic background, the Malaysian Chinese’s increasing influence in politics would lead to the reoccurrence of the 13 May incident, which saw a race riot mainly between Chinese and Malays (Hoi 2012). Perkasa also noted that Malaysian Chinese are not sensitive towards the majority Malays and told Malays to put aside their political differences in order to unite to protect their rights in Malaysia. For example, the case of Lim Guan Eng, who has successfully defended his post as the chief minister of Penang for the second consecutive term, reflects the growing dominance of the DAP in Malaysian politics. Perkasa has frequently accused Lim of discriminating against the Malays in Penang in not safeguarding their socio-economic interests, such as through business tenders and public housing.

Perkasa is also actively involved in countering various accusations against the government from non-governmental organisations and opposition political parties. For instance, when BERSIH organised its rally in 2011 for clean and fair elections, Perkasa threatened to organise a counter-rally and warned BERSIH supporters to stay away from the rally, as demanded by the Malaysian government. In another incident, Perkasa strongly supported the government’s position on lesbian, gay, bisexual and transsexual (LGBT) issues, accusing non-governmental organisations like SUARAM of conspiring with foreign countries to undermine Malaysian Muslims’ faith (Malaysiakini 2012).

Unlike BERSIH and HINDRAF, Perkasa has generally enjoyed a warm relationship with UMNO. This nexus was evident in the last Malaysian general elections, in 2013. Its president contested as an independent candidate when the Barisan Nasional candidate, from UMNO, withdrew from the competition. Perkasa’s vice president, Zulkifli Nordin, stood as an UMNO candidate under the Barisan Nasional banner. In fact, UMNO supporters, including the former prime minister, Mahathir Mohammad, campaigned for these Perkasa candidates.

It can be concluded that Perkasa, which was formed right after the 2008 Malaysian elections, was designed to engage Malay supremacy debates more openly in order to win Malay support back for UMNO. In fact, UMNO leaders have given silent approval for Perkasa’s radical approach in championing Malay rights in Malaysia. It can also be said that UMNO has overcome the limitations it faces on being too radical as a race-based component party in Barisan Nasional through Perkasa; to an extent, Perkasa is the radical face of UMNO.

Conclusion

BERSIH, HINDRAF and Perkasa have significantly contributed to the changing political landscape in Malaysia. These social movements and their activism have quite substantially impacted Malaysian politics, which, in turn, has provided the impetus for future debates regarding the role of civil society in strengthening democracy and race relations in an ethnically divided country like Malaysia. In fact, it cannot be denied that had it not been for BERSIH and HINDRAF, it would be highly unlikely that PKR, PAS and the DAP could have denied the Barisan Nasional government its two-thirds majority in parliament. Meanwhile, Perkasa, since its formation right after the 2008 elections, has made the Barisan
Nasional more exclusively Malay-centric than ever, setting the stage for the return of race supremacy discourse in Malaysian politics.

Unusually in Malaysian history, these social movements managed to successfully mobilise the peoples of the country for their respective causes. BERSIH, through vigorous activism, managed to mobilise thousands of Malaysians, irrespective of race, in 2007, 2008 and 2012, through illegal rallies against the state for clean and fair elections in Malaysia. Likewise, HINDRAF managed to mobilise thousands of working-class Malaysian Indians in its 2007 rally, changing their perceptions forever towards the MIC and Barisan Nasional. Perkasa’s consistent radical-racist approach toward non-Malays, particularly after the 2008 general elections, has mobilised rural Malays to some extent to return to UMNO.

The state’s responses to the demands outlined by these social movements underline the significance of the latter. In the case of BERSIH and HINDRAF, although the government initially reacted harshly by using police force and detaining leaders under draconian state laws, it eventually incorporated numerous demands that these social movements stipulated into its decision-making process. These provisions include the use of indelible ink during elections and the creation of a unit in the Prime Minister’s Department specifically to oversee Indians’ welfare. By the same token, the government’s launch of a new Bumiputera Economic Empowerment (BEE) initiative in 2013 is a direct result of Perkasa’s constant demand for the extension of national economic policies favouring bumiputera (Lee 2013).

As a whole, these three social movements’ origin, development and activism have set a promising new stage in civil societal discourse in Malaysia. These movements have not only successfully mobilised Malaysians, but have also managed to influence the government’s decision-making process as never before in Malaysian politics.

Notes
1 BERSIH’s Memorandum to the Election Commission on Immediate Electoral Reforms in Malaysia, 9 July 2011.
2 The early information on HINDRAF was obtained from interviews conducted with Datuk Vaithalingam, the former president of Malaysian Consultative Council of Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Sikhism and Taoism.

Bibliography


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