Arts and culture in Malaysia are marked by tensions that are both a result of and indicative of currents arising out of the nation’s political, economic and social dynamics. While the state has made consistent efforts to shape culture and the arts to reflect and reinforce its hold on power, the field is also influenced by other factors, some of which have supported the state’s hegemonic project, and others which have provided counterpoints to it. What follows is an attempt to identify the many moving parts that circulate and collide in the field of cultural practice and arts production.

**Background**

Modern Malaysia’s arts and culture are rooted in practices indigenous to the Malay archipelago and the region’s absorption of external cultural and religious influences. Traditional art forms such as *wayang kulit* and *mak yong* reveal lasting vestiges of the Hindu and Buddhist empires that dominated Southeast Asia in ancient times. Their strategic location within Indian Ocean trade routes brought indigenous Malays into contact with traders from China, the Middle East and India. Islam, which was first introduced in the twelfth century, had, by the height of the Melaka Sultanate in the fifteenth century, become a dominant force in the culture of *Tanah Melayu*, the Malay land. The Portuguese, who occupied Melaka in 1511, and the Dutch, who replaced them in 1641, contributed to this diversity. A residual effect of these early colonisers can be found in the use of Western instrumentation in ostensibly traditional Malay folk performances, for example.

The British colonial era, which began formally in Penang in 1786, was to have an enduring influence upon the shape of modern Malaysia. While Malaya had welcomed various communities to its shores for centuries, it was the British who brought in Chinese and Indians in such significant numbers as to change the socio-cultural character of Malaya significantly. The British administration practised a policy that kept these groups largely separate. After World War II, however, as the colonial government became aware that calls for independence could no longer be contained, it took steps to foster a multicultural vision of Malaya.
The National Cultural Policy

When Malaysia achieved independence in 1957, the state was largely absent from the artistic and cultural arena of the newly formed nation. There were no provisions for culture and the arts in the Constitution, although religion and language were prominent features. The Culture portfolio was first managed by the Ministry of Social Welfare (1953–57), followed by the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting (1957–964). When the Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sports was established in 1964, it was placed under a junior minister (Mohamed Taib 1988: 276).

Although plurality was a key characteristic of the newly formed Malaysian nation, state attempts to construct a national identity via the formulation of a cultural policy began only in direct response to the communal riots of 1969. A National Cultural Congress was held in 1969, with the aim of formalising a cultural policy to unify the multi-ethnic nation. The National Cultural Policy (NCP) was launched in 1971, with three principles. The first was that the national culture of the country would be based on that of the indigenous inhabitants of the region; second, elements of other cultures, where suitable and reasonable, would be incorporated if compatible with Malay-Muslim culture; and third, Islam was a crucial component of the national culture. A caveat clarified that ‘Suitable and reasonable referred to in the second principle must be understood in the context of the first and third principle, and not from other values’ (KKBS 1973: vii).

Miller and Yúdice note that cultural policies are a ‘privileged terrain of hegemony’ (2002: 8) that reproduces and supports the ideological framework of the dominant group, even as it is framed in the rhetoric of unity and nationhood. Indeed, the NCP was part of a network of prescriptive polices, including the National Economic Policy (1971), the National Language Bill 1967 and the Education Act 1961, designed to entrench Malay political and cultural hegemony in response to the riots of 1969. While the stated aim of the NCP was to create a common identity to unify the multi-ethnic nation, its ideological kinship with divisive post-1969 policies hampered its efficacy in establishing the hegemony of Malay political dominance through culture and the arts. Unlike those policies, the NCP was never tabled in parliament, nor was it supported by a clearly articulated roadmap, affecting both its legitimacy and implementation, particularly amongst those who felt themselves marginalised by it.

The NCP presented the elements of what comprised national culture, but within a set of parameters that may be described as highly subjective, if not arbitrary. The two core principles of indigenous culture and Islam are themselves fluid and would be subject to multiple inscriptions and reinscriptions over time. This would in turn modify the criterion of ‘suitability’ weighted against minority cultures, resulting in a highly unstable concept of arts and culture. The ambiguity of the wording of the three principles would provide more room for challenges and counter-challenges to what precisely constituted national culture by both those seeking to establish Malay-Muslim hegemony and those opposed to it. The battle over the nature of national culture was deeply fraught, given the notions of group identity embedded in expressions of culture and arts practice.

Conflicts

As issues of language, education and the affirmative action policies of the NEP grew more vexed in the aftermath of the riots, culture became the site of proxy battles between the state and those who saw their political power and influence diminish in the face of the rising influence of the Malay political elite. Early controversies included the purported unsuitability of
the lion dance, an integral part of the Chinese culture, as part of national culture, and Chinese and Indian groups’ opposition to the use of jawi script on road signs.

Despite serious flashpoints over the NCP, the state did not suppress minority art forms or cultural practices outright. The NCP, while prescriptive, was intent on establishing a hierarchy of value that placed Malay-Muslim expressions of symbolic identity at the forefront of national culture rather than in repressing or eradicating minority cultures. Indeed, a system of attention versus neglect might best describe the early years of the NCP, as the state’s resources and focus were assigned in favour of culture that reflected its hegemonic desires.

As is often the case when states seek to marshal the past to fit contemporary needs, some measure of reinvention was present. The original wording of the NCP references the indigenous inhabitants of the region, evoking the diverse cultural influences that had historically shaped arts and cultural practices in the Malay archipelago. The idea of Malay culture became essentialised, however. As a result, under the aegis of the NCP, traditional art forms were remade into the image of Malayness as envisioned by the state. For example, bangsawan, a form of Malay opera characterised by its diverse cultural elements, was refashioned by using Malay-based stories to keep with the principles of the NCP (Tan 1993: 177–80). The resurgence of Islam in the 1970s altered the scope of national culture further, with contemporary Malay-language theatre particularly vulnerable to accusations of being un-Islamic (Jit 1984).

The art forms and cultural practices relegated to the margins by the NCP were disadvantaged by a policy delegitimising their stake in the national, and limiting access to public resources. Yet, an unexpected outcome of the NCP was the resurgence, in the 1970s and 1980s, of culturally distinct art forms and practices amongst minority communities, as ethnic consciousness amongst those marginalised by the NCP heightened and certain forms of arts and culture received renewed community support as emblems of ethnic identity (Tan 2000).

Liberalisation and growth

In 1991, the Mahathir government launched Vision 2020, appearing to promote a more open configuration of Malaysian identity. The liberalisation of the country’s economy in the 1990s as part of global deregulations and its own economic ambitions turned previous points of contestation into assets. Francis Loh (2002: 21) describes the period as marked by cultural liberalisation. The state softened its stance against the use of English in education. In its pursuit of the tourist dollar, it began to promote a more inclusive, multicultural vision of the country internationally.

The cultural terrain appeared less stressed and the arts blossomed in this period. A number of major public institutions were established, strengthening arts infrastructure in general. The National Arts Academy was created in 1994, while the National Theatre and the National Art Gallery were finally housed in purpose-built buildings in 1998 and 2000, respectively, after decades of delays. These institutions formed different sites of influence and funding that expanded arts practice and provided opportunities across a wide range of artists and art forms, signalling a more accommodative application of the idea of ‘suitable’ in the NCP.

The prosperity that came with economic liberalisation saw the emergence of a stronger arts market and the entry of corporate and private art galleries, such as Galeri Petronas (1992), established by the national petroleum company, Petronas, and Valentine Willie Fine Art (1996), respectively. Art critic Michelle Antoinette notes that despite their own institutional imperatives, both played important roles in the growth of arts practice in Malaysia. The
growing middle class expanded the audience base for live performing arts further, although few companies could sustain themselves purely on ticket sales.

The inflow of corporate sponsorship was essential, helping to foster the growth of arts practice not only through financial support, but also through the validation of the artists as worthy of support. In particular, corporate sponsorship was instrumental in creating venues for the performing arts. These include Kuala Lumpur’s first privately owned theatre, The Actors Studio’s Theatre Underground (1995), which was supported by Transfield, Carlsberg and Malaysian Airlines; then Actors Studio Bangsar (2001), supported by Bandaraya Development; the Kuala Lumpur Performing Arts Centre (2005), supported by YTL Malaysia; The Annex (2007), an alternative arts space attached to the Kuala Lumpur Central Market; and mapKL (2010), housed in an upmarket mall.

**Changing technology and venues**

Developments in technology have also left indelible marks upon the arts and cultural fields. The increased availability of new technologies such as digital cameras stimulated the emergence of a local independent film movement, which Khoo Gaik Cheng dates to the 2000 release of Amir Muhammad’s *Lips to Lips*. Khoo further notes that the movement may signal a reclaiming of the pluralist, hybrid, multi-ethnic national term ‘Malaysian cinema’ (2006: 123). International interest in films from beyond the traditional Western metropolitan centres has also benefited these young filmmakers. Proliferating regional and international film festivals present important platforms that offer validation that might otherwise be absent domestically. Two of Amir’s works, *Lelaki Komunis Terakhir* (*The Last Communist*, 2006) and its sequel, *Apa Khabar Orang Kampung* (*Village People Road Show*, 2007), for example, are banned in Malaysia but have been screened at festivals internationally.

The influence of the global DIY-alternative ethos has spawned a number of artist collectives and alternatives spaces, particularly in the visual arts. These provide an important counterpoint to the more commercial or state-driven institutions that developed in this period (Nurhanim 2012). This independent spirit is also evident in the emergence of several arts-related publications. Artseefartsse.com, established in 1997, and Kakiseni.com, launched in 2001, utilised new technologies such as online newsletters, electronic mailing lists and websites to build audiences and create sites of critical discourse on Malaysian arts and culture. In 2002, Kakiseni, with the financial support of Boh Plantations, launched the BOH Cameronian Arts Awards, an important source of recognition for the performing arts in Malaysia. Since 2011, the website’s new owners have focused on increasing funding for the arts and providing professional development for the arts community. *KLue*, a lifestyle and arts magazine established in 2000, launched Urbanscapes in 2002, a popular weekend creative arts festival that is now the longest running arts festival in Kuala Lumpur.

**Playing to multiple galleries**

The *reformasi* movement of 1998 and the new configuration of political power it spawned reinvigorated and intensified contestations over national culture. Over the past fifteen years, the opposition Parti Keadilan Rakyat (People’s Justice Party), a multi-ethnic, governance-oriented party headed by charismatic former deputy prime minister and *reformasi* leader Anwar Ibrahim, and Parti Islam SeMalaysia (Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party), have eroded the governing United Malay National Organisation’s (UMNO) dominance amongst Malay-Muslim voters. UMNO has sought to regain its position within its main voting block by
re-establishing itself as the champion of Islamic identity and Malay rights. Following its
dismal performance in the 2008 general elections (which UMNO's Barisan Nasional, or
National Front, coalition nonetheless won), UMNO redoubled these efforts, with a particu-
larly profound impact across the arts and cultural arena.

The state has taken an increasingly accommodative stance towards conservative voices
in society. Concerts by international acts, most recently the pop singer Ke$ha (2013), have
been cancelled following public pressure. In 2010, the annual Warrior’s Day ceremony
was moved from Tugu Negara (the National Monument) to Dataran Merdeka (Independence
Square) because the bronze soldiers of the monument flout the Muslim prohibition against
graven images; the ceremony was also changed, to eliminate the customary moment of
silence and laying of wreaths. In actual fact, a *fatwa* (religious edict) against the ceremony
had been announced fifteen years earlier, in 1995, but had not been enforced. A member of
the National Fatwa Council noted that the *fatwa* was not new but that ‘they are finally
listening . . . no prime minister was brave enough to follow it. I am glad Najib had the
courage to change the practice’ (Adib 2010). The state has increased its policing of Muslim
identity, particularly amongst the youth. Raids on nightclubs, beauty pageants and the
so-called ‘black metal’ subculture exhibit a highly performative quality, with agents drawn
from the religious department, volunteer forces and enforcement agencies, followed by lurid
headlines in the tabloids.

The complexities of the terrain, however, mean that despite increasing evidence of a
constricted space for arts and culture, there are also instances in which the state reconfi-
gures itself in apparently contradictory ways. In 2006, a *mak yong* performance was denied a perfor-
man ce permit in Kelantan. The state is governed by opposition party PAS, which deemed
the ritual elements of mak yong un-Islamic. The Minister of Culture, Arts and Tourism
condemned the ban and asserted the ministry’s support. This performance of moderation and
benevolence versus PAS’s hard-line position could be read as an attempt to reach out to a
more moderate domestic constituency and to win political mileage over PAS. It is also possible
to view the ministry’s public performance of permissibility in the light of its international
desires. Just four months earlier, UNESCO had designated *mak yong* an Oral and Intangible
Heritage of Humanity. The prestigious award placed the state under greater international
scrutiny, particularly given its ambitions of assuming an international leadership role as a
moderate Muslim nation.

The fates of Amir Muhammad’s *Lelaki Korunas Terakhir* (2006) and Shuhaimi Baba’s *Tanda
Putera* (*Mark of Prince*, 2012) illustrate the delicate balance of power, public opinion, pragma-
tism and constituency maintenance that have played out in the field of arts and culture in
recent years. *Lelaki Komunis Terakhir* is a documentary which deals, in an oblique way, with
exiled communist leader Chin Peng.6 The Film Censorship Board approved the film for
screening without any cuts in April 2006. Given the subject matter, the filmmaker was further
asked to screen the film for the Special Branch, which also approved its release, again without
any cuts.7

Before the film’s release, however, *Berita Harian*, a Malay-language daily owned by
UMNO, launched an attack on the documentary, criticising the authorities for not banning
it. In response, a special screening was arranged for members of parliament. Once again, the
general consensus was that the film was suitable for general viewing. Nevertheless, *Lelaki
Komunis Terakhir*’s permit was withdrawn on the grounds that ‘the public had protested’. In a
blog post recounting the event, Amir notes, ‘The decision to ban the documentary was based
on the series of articles in *Berita Harian*,’8 highlighting the power of state-aligned media to
instigate punitive actions against the arts.
Seven years later, another film, *Tanda Putera*, followed a similar path to that of Amir’s film, but with quite different results. Well-known director Shuhaimi Baba’s film *Tanda Putera* is a historical drama set against the backdrop of the riots of 1969. Made with a grant from the National Film Development Commission, the film was approved for screening in 2012. Following the release of the movie trailer and a provocatively captioned photo of opposition stalwart Lim Kit Siang posted on the film’s official Facebook page, however, *Tanda Putera* was accused of being a work of government propaganda, which cast ethnic Chinese as the sole perpetrators of the riots. The impending general election at the time further heightened tensions, leading academic Lim Teck Ghee (2012) to note that ‘it is only to be expected that pro-opposition supporters would see what they regard as “the May 13 film” to be part of a pre-election smear campaign against the DAP’. Public anger against the film, expressed in newspaper articles and on social media, proliferated. There was, conversely, strong support for the film from Malay-rights groups such as Perkasa (Pertubuhan Pribumi Perkasa Malaysia, Malaysian Indigenous Empowerment Organisation). In November 2012, the Ministry of Information, Communications and Culture announced the postponement of the film’s release, ‘for the benefit of the people . . . as it contains scenes that may cause conflicts’ (Zulaikha 2012). With its eye on the upcoming general election, the state was aware that it could not further alienate the Chinese community, which was an important voting bloc for the Barisan Nasional coalition.

The election, held in May 2013, was won by Barisan Nasional despite an overwhelming loss of urban votes. Three months after the general election, *Tanda Putera* was released. Shuhaimi announced that she had made cuts to certain scenes and rescinded her earlier claim that the film was based on historical fact, now asserting that it was a work of fiction. Nevertheless, a fresh round of public debate surfaced, with some ugly threats made against Shuhaimi by netizens. The chief minister of Penang, a member of the opposition Democratic Action Party (DAP) and the son of Lim Kit Siang, attempted, unsuccessfully, to proscribe the film in his state. *Tanda Putera* premiered in August 2013, but performed dismally at the box office. In the face of the film’s commercial failure, several ministers called for the use of public institutions of education and broadcasting to ensure its longevity in the public sphere (*Sinchew* 2013). This was in contrast to the state’s pre-election willingness to delay the film’s release in response to public dissatisfaction.

Both *Lelaki Komunis Terakhir* and *Tanda Putera* deal with historical figures and incidents that are still sites of active contestation: the communist insurgency and the riots of 1969. In both cases, the state’s initial stance was permissive; however, upon pressure from what it terms ‘the people’ or ‘the public’, the state altered its position to proscribe according to the desires of a specific public.

Rather than look at these censorious publics as weakening the state’s power, it is possible to read them as the result of complex manipulations enacted by the state to maintain its hold on power. Technologies of governance shape the individual’s or community’s sense of itself, prompting each unconsciously to construct themselves into subjects of power, acting in the interest of the state. Control and discipline become outsourced to the public. The state, therefore, is able to mask its disciplinary nature by enabling its public to act in its – the state’s – interest. As evidenced by the competing public that arose in protest against *Tanda Putera*, these practices are unstable and porous, rather than stable and totalising. Further, there is every potential for the state’s assigned gatekeepers to become more strident, pushing the state into a more repressive position than it might otherwise take.

With *Lelaki Komunis Terakhir*, the result was a ban that remains in effect, seven years on. *Tanda Putera*’s short-term proscription, followed by subsequent screening and active
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promotion, point to a state that is able to make pragmatic shifts to accommodate conflicting interests, as easily as it is able to reassert its ideological dominance to discipline these same interests.

A recent controversy offers a prism through which to refract the moral panic and public mobilisation that have arisen out of the so-called Allah issue (see Puyok, this volume). Erykah Badu, an American neo-soul singer, was scheduled to perform in Kuala Lumpur in February 2012. Two days before the concert, *The Star*, Malaysia’s highest-circulation English-language newspaper, published a feature on Badu’s concert, with a photo of the singer, bare-shouldered, and with what appeared to be tattoos on her body and face (de Vries 2012). The image used was similar to the ones on posters and promotional material around the city, except for one crucial difference. In the newspaper, the word ‘Allah’, in Arabic, is clearly visible on Badu’s shoulders. Badu’s promotional posters around the city, through the magic of Photoshop and with Badu’s permission, had taken God off Badu’s shoulders for the local market. *The Star* had used the original, unedited photo, possibly downloaded from Badu’s homepage, instead of the version supplied by the local concert promoter.

Condemnation came quickly and was widespread. The next day saw intense coverage in the mainstream media and on social media sites, with the now familiar enactment of outrage by several non-governmental groups and individuals. A large number of people also argued in support of Badu. The following day, the Minister of Information, Communications and Culture announced the withdrawal of the permit to hold the concert. The minister, via his Tumblr account, explained that the ‘tattoos’ had ‘raised objections from the community which can threaten national security and have a negative impact on the government’s image’ (*New Straits Times* 2012). *The Star* issued three formal apologies, indefinitely suspended two editors and was threatened with the withdrawal of its publishing licence. Although a government-owned paper, *The Star* is associated with the Chinese/non-Muslim community. Its publishing the unexpurgated image of Badu served as a kind of call to action to those who have internalised the discourse of purported Christian disrespect for Islam and evangelism towards Muslims. A public arose in response – a public that came into being as protectors of Allah by the state’s manufacturing of a controversy where previously there had been none. There were, in fact, two camps, two publics: those who were for and those who were against banning her concert. The state chose to ‘obey’ the public that best served its interest – the public that it had constructed to begin with.

**Artists’ response**

Despite the considerable energies spent by the state – both ideological and coercive – towards maintaining dominance, its hegemonic project remains unaccomplished. Members of the arts community are amongst a diverse set of stakeholders who have provided counterpoints to the state’s agenda. Even with limited resources, arts practitioners have fashioned a diverse, robust and resilient arts landscape.

Artists working in different genres and across different sites of language have openly explored alternative imaginings of nationhood through their use of intracultural strategies and themes. These include theatre practitioners who have engaged with historical narratives, such as Mark Teh, in his *1955 Baling Talks* (2011). Instant Café Theatre’s *Air Con* (2008; written by Shanon Shah) and *Parah* (2011, 2012 and 2013; by Singaporean writer, Alfian Sa’at), under the direction of Jo Kukathas, examine the impact of the state’s increasingly disciplinary stance upon disenfranchised youth. In the visual arts, Sarena Abdullah (2013) notes that since the 1990s Malay artists have employed the idiom of post-modernism to present
nuanced reflections on fractures and conflicts assailing the emerging Malay middle class, in addition to broader explorations of social and political currents sweeping the nation.

There has also been more direct engagement with the body politic, with practitioners directing their creativity towards activism. Visual artists, musicians and performers were actively and visibly involved in Coalition for Clean and Fair Elections (Bersih) rallies in 2007, 2011 and 2012 (see Govindasamy, this volume). The strategies employed can be described as playful, innovative and subversive. At Bersih 2.0, in 2007, Wong Tay Sy, Liew Kung Yu, Gan Siong King and Yee I-Lann conceptualised *Bola Bersih* (Clean Ball). The work involved the release of a series of giant yellow and green inflatable balls amongst the thousands of demonstrators. The crowd spontaneously responded by keeping each ball bouncing overhead. While framed as a game to keep the masses of people gathered entertained, the work instigated those present in an act of collectivism, an essential aspect of the Bersih movement. The glee with which the crowd engaged with the ball, captured and posted on YouTube, was a canny way to disprove the state’s demonising of Bersih participants as rabble-rousers and rioters. At Bersih 3.0, held in 2012, a group of local indie musicians, calling themselves ‘Ayam & the Vanilla Boys (Girls too)’, formed a percussion band with the express purpose of entertaining ‘Bersih 3.0 attendee around Dataran Merdeka on that particular historical event’.

On occasion, the state has attempted to reassert itself and stem these creative challenges to its authority. *Malaysian Spring*, for instance, was a crowd-sourced art installation and visual campaign around Kuala Lumpur leading up to the general election in May 2013. As conceptualised by well-known architect Ng Sek San, hundreds of fabric flowers and flags were ‘planted’ along streets and embankments around the city. Members of the public were encouraged to set up their own installations, which quickly caught on. In the highly divisive atmosphere of the election campaign, the flags were at once whimsical and subversive. The title’s echo of the Arab Spring, coupled with the strong anti-establishment sentiment in the urban areas where these flags appeared, instigated police action. The deputy inspector general of police claimed to have intelligence that the flags were a code for violence and chaos during the upcoming elections (Farik and Camoens 2013), casting a menacing quality on a creative mass moment. The accusations had little traction and the case was eventually dropped.

Two other examples concern a questionable recent death in custody. In 2007, Teoh Beng Hock, an opposition aide, was found dead at premises of the Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission, having been detained overnight for questioning. A Royal Commission of Inquiry found that Teoh had committed suicide, a verdict that did little to convince the public that Teoh was not in fact murdered. *Sudden Death: Participatory Performance in Memory of Teoh Beng Hock* (2009) was created by Mark Teh of Five Arts Centre. The work places members of the audience on the ground, each assuming the same pose in which Teoh’s body was found, as a candle burns for a timed four minutes. The audience, who in attending the performance, are automatically transformed from spectators to actors, are instructed to refrain from over-emoting or speaking. The image of Teoh’s body has been replicated in mainstream and social media to the point of becoming iconic, and his death had, to some extent, become a rallying point amongst opposition politicians to denounce the government. Teh’s work makes deft interventions, against both the possible culpability of the state and the apparent opportunism of the opposition. On the sixth anniversary of Teoh’s death, another theatre director, Ayam Fared of Rumah Anak Teater, staged *Selak:Serak*, a devised theatre work. The work highlights both Teoh’s death and the deaths of scores of others in police custody. As the nation moves from the latest scandal or crisis to another, *Selak:Serak* presents an insistence to remember. Both these creative responses to a deeply tragic incident are examples of how
artists are using their creativity to reach into the crevices of that dark place that is the collective Malaysian psyche. These works show the potential for artists to rise above the increasing sectarianism, and in so doing, go deeper.

**Conclusion**

The field of artistic practice and cultural production in Malaysia is one that is particularly unstable. While the cultural policy framework has played an enduring role, a range of stakeholders, some of whom act in accordance with the desires of the state, and others whose contours are formed in resistance to it, are increasingly influential. Further, while competing domestic dimensions impact on the way that Malaysian arts and cultural practices have configured themselves, they are not immune to external forces of globalisation and international relations. The agency displayed by arts practitioners and different publics to pursue their own agendas and visions of cultural identity reveal that the potential for counter-hegemonic practices remains present. As the state comes under increasing pressure, however, it may well reassert itself, narrowing the parameters of what is acceptable.

**Notes**

1. This essay was conceptualised in discussion with Sharaad Kuttan.
2. It was the Minister of Home Affairs, and not the Minister of Culture, who announced that the lion dance, a vital part of Chinese New Year celebrations, was incompatible with the NCP (New Straits Times 1979).
3. The NAG was established in 1958 but only moved into its own premises in 2000. The National Theatre (Istana Budaya) was first mooted in 1964.
4. The site, created by Vernon Adrian Emuang, has been inactive since 2000 but continues to provide support to artists and events on an ad hoc basis.
5. Jenny Daneels and I were the co-founders and managing editors of the website until 2010, when it was taken over by Low Ngai Yuen.
6. Chin Peng was then still barred from Malaysia for his role in the violent campaign launched by the Malayan Communist Party to overthrow the British colonialists after World War II – the ban extended even to his ashes, upon his death in 2013. The threat of communism has long since ended, however, and Chin Peng’s autobiography, My Side of History, was a best-seller, widely available in bookstores in the country at the time.
9. The photo implied that Lim had urinated on a flagpole at a Malay politician’s home during the riots, a claim that was debunked by various sources.
10. The material in this section is drawn largely from the author’s unpublished paper, ‘From bums on seats to censor’, presented at the Substation Conference: Target Audiences and the Publics of Art, Singapore, 7 April 2012.

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