

THE STATE AND NGO MOVEMENT IN MALAYSIA: TRANSFORMATION AND FRAGMENTATION OF CHINESE NGOs UNDER THE MAHATHIR ADMINISTRATION

国家与马来西亚的非政府组织运动
——华人非政府组织在马哈迪时期的转变和分化

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Abstract

This paper aims to study the relationship between Chinese NGOs and the state under the Mahathir administration (1981-2003). Malaysia is governed by an UMNO-dominated National Front (BN) and the state is generally termed as an ethnic-hegemonic state. It implements various policies that emphasize the Malay agendas but often resulting in encroachments on Chinese rights and interests. Meanwhile the failure of Chinese political parties to function as the guardian of Chinese interests under Malay hegemony has given rise to the ascendancy of Chinese NGOs as civic groups which articulate their interests through political means. This political involvement has mobilized the Chinese electorate to make their feelings known to the BN, especially in the general election of 1986 and 1990. The state leaders

* Paper presented at 5th International Malaysian Studies Conference, held at Universiti Putra Malaysia, 8-10 August 2006

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have perceived this type of interest articulation as a challenge to their political position and hence caused them to take various actions to undermine this NGO involvement. The state actions are analysed using the theory of state corporatism and this can be seen through the application of various political means such as incorporation and co-optation, coercion, and marginalization tactics to counter the challenge of various Chinese NGOs by BN leaders. This paper argues that by means of state corporatism, the ruling regime has successfully changed the nature of the Chinese NGO movement and led to its fragmentation.

摘要

这篇论文将探讨在马哈迪时期（1981-2003）华人非政府组织和国家的关系。马来西亚由国阵所管理，国阵成员党当中又以巫统为最主要的掌控力量，因此，这可以说是以种族为支配的国家。在各项政策上，国家着重马来议程，因此往往牺牲了华人的权利和利益。于此同时，华基政党无法保障在马来霸权下的华人权益，因此，华人非政府组织透过政府的手段来维护他们的权益。这种政治式的参与使华人选民在大选中向国阵政府反映出他们的心声，尤其是在1986及1990的大选中。国家领导人认为这种维护权益的方式威胁到他们的政治地位，因而采取各种动作以破坏非政府组织的参与。政府采取国家社团主义的理论，以政治的方式渗透各个组织，国阵领袖以高压方式挑战及边缘化华人非政府组织。这篇论文将讨论国家社团主义，其支配式的政治介入运作成功地改变了华人非政府组织的属性，并导致其分化。

Introduction

The recent joint manifesto by more than 2,000 Chinese Malaysian associations (Suqiu) calling for far-reaching national reforms is a sign that Malaysian civil society has arrived and that civil groups are no more cowed by the state and its apparatus of dominance.

(Saravanamuttu 1999: 13)

Chinese Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) have a long history of existence in Malaysia. Generally known as Chinese guilds and associations, they have existed since the formation of a Chinese immigrant society in Malaya to serve as social and welfare organizations. They are known as *shetuan* (social organizations) but the term *Huatuan* (Chinese organizations) is adopted in contemporary usage by the community. Voluntary in nature, they fulfill roles such as providing assistance and welfare services to their members. The Chinese were living under British rule in the various Malay States and had to depend on their

leaders and community to strive for a living. It was the need for protection and the sense of belonging that prompted them to organize themselves into associational groupings.

Chinese NGOs comprise a variety of voluntary associations based on different affiliations. In 2000, the Registrar of Society has a register of 8,775 such organizations in the country. This large numbers is a clear reflection of the heterogeneous and diverse nature of the local Chinese community. It also indicates that associational activities are still relevant in the contemporary era.

Chinese NGOs in Malaysia have undergone changes in their role since independence. Their principal functions as social and welfare organizations of the community have gradually evolved to act as the political guardian of Chinese socio-political interests. They played an instrumental role in the interest articulation of citizenship, education, and language rights of the community before the independence of Malaya.¹ This new role of the Chinese NGOs has remained since and, following the post-independence ascendance of communal politics in a Malay-dominated polity, has deepened in engagement and scope.

With this new role of interest articulation, Chinese NGOs have been involved in a series of demands and appeals to the government.² In order to realize these demands, the involvement of these NGOs in Malaysian politics is almost inevitable. In the process, the leadership of these NGOs have learned through experience that political means are effective tools by which to realize their demands and appeals. In the process the leadership has contributed to the politicization of some Chinese NGOs (Ho 1992: 9). This notwithstanding, their role in Malaysian electoral politics is not at all conspicuous. The study of the political dimension of Chinese NGOs has hitherto been limited and neglected.³

However, the launching of the Malaysian Chinese Organizations Election Appeals (诉求 / Suqiu)⁴ on 16 August 1999 catapulted the Chinese NGOs to the political limelight. This was then followed by a controversy which erupted following the celebration of the first anniversary of Suqiu. The emergence of these NGOs as a political and lobbyist group gained unprecedented attention not only from political analysts but also the government itself. Since then Suqiu has entered the lexicon of Malaysian politics. The appeals and demands of Suqiu have become a landmark in Malaysian NGOs activism at the end of twentieth century.

Indeed, by virtue of its social proximity to the Chinese populace, these NGOs exercise a profound though not deterministic influence on the character of Malaysian Chinese politics. They normally perform this task by throwing their support to the ruling coalition or opposition parties during general elections.

Understandably, not all Chinese NGOs adopt a political-oriented stance in their normal existence. The majority play their role as moral and welfare bodies. However, all may be easily mobilized to stand behind the leading Chinese NGOs when urgent issues encroach upon community interests. The top-rung NGOs enjoy high esteem among their affiliates and other smaller associations. Their influence and authority in the community strengthened their legitimacy in furthering the legitimate demands of the Chinese. This was the background that led to the collective submission of the petition for rights and demands by 2,905 Chinese NGOs before the 1999 general election. This act, as well as the petition document, is now generally referred to as "Suqiu".

Managing the Challenges of NGOs: A Statist Corporatism Approach

It has been suggested that the proliferation of NGOs in a society is the prerequisite for the formation of civil society. This is because the multiplication of NGOs will promote the emergence of a civil society by advocating and supporting various reforms of the state, by mobilizing disempowered social groups, and by supplementing the role of traditional institutions of democracy such as political parties, trade unions and the media (Clarke 1998: 9). The activities of interest advocacy and articulation of the NGOs in the realm of the third sector in society have created an autonomous public sphere which is primarily concerned with public welfare goals. Activists of the public sphere thrive for the opportunities for exchanges, debates and criticisms on the formulation and implementation of public policies of the state. Their main concern is that state policies and actions do not encroach upon basic human rights, civil rights, democratic rights and civil liberties of citizens.

NGOs function as possible agents for social and political change through civic engagement. One of these functions is to voice their stand on policies that concern the interests and preferences of citizens (Yamamoto 1995: 7). Inevitably, NGOs and the government may differ in their views on specific issues affecting public interests. In this respect, developing and authoritarian states are inclined to regard NGOs and their activities as sources of social and political instability and may constitute a threat to them. Consequently, these states frequently exert pressure on NGOs by claiming that individual or minority interests should be subsumed under state interests in the name of the common good (Saliha 2002: 204). This claim to custody

of the common good is taken as the basis of legitimacy by many developing states to use various repressive actions to undermine the NGOs movement.

In responding to the challenges posed by the NGO movement, a developing state tends to resort to mechanisms by which to control and undermine the civic engagements of its citizens in order to ensure its own regime stability. One such mechanism is "corporatism", which is taken generally to refer to the construction by the state of institutional and ideological frameworks within which potentially disruptive societal groups can be managed. In the discussion of this corporatist framework, we adhere to the seminal formulation and most commonly-quoted definition by Schmitter (1974), namely, that corporatism is:

a system of interest representation in which the constituent units are organized into a limited number of singular compulsory, noncompetitive, hierarchically ordered and functionally differentiated categories, recognized or licensed (if not created) by the state and granted a deliberate representational monopoly within their respective categories in exchange for observing certain controls on their selection of leaders and articulation of demands and supports.

In this institutional arrangement for state-societal relationships, the state plays the central role in creating and regulating the ground rules for the operation of associational groups in society and their interaction with the state (Schmitter 1974: 89; O'Donnell 1977: 47; Chalmers 1985: 57). In its ideal form, corporatism constitutes an effective mechanism by which the state asserts recognition, licensing, and rules of membership of designated NGOs to control and regulate their number and operation. Corporatism is seen as a counterforce to the spontaneous and autonomous expansion of legitimate interests as is the case in a pluralist political system (Porter 2002: 9).

Corporatism as a mechanism of institutional arrangement manifests itself in varying degrees of state intervention in state-societal relationships. Depending on the degree of state intervention, two main forms of corporatism are identified and these are associated with state domination and group domination (Chalmers 1985: 60). Schmitter (1974) distinguishes them as state corporatism and societal corporatism. Williamson (1985: 16) categorizes them as "consensual-licensed" and "authoritarian-licensed", whereas O'Donnell (1977: 48) calls them "privatizing" and "statising" corporatism.

In societal corporatism, the impetus for interest representation comes largely from society, as legitimate associational groups manage their activities within a

broad framework of principles and rules stipulated by the state. If state intervention is minimal, these groups enjoy a large degree of freedom in their activities. This tendency allows the interests of societal groups to penetrate the state. This form of corporatism therefore corresponds to strategies of co-optation and inclusion of interests as state and society "seek each other out" to establish a mutually beneficial socio-economic environment (Porter 2002: 11). Societal corporatism is embedded in political systems with relatively autonomous, multi-layered territorial units which permit competitive electoral processes, party systems and a relatively independent civil society to operate in society (Schmitter 1974).

On the other hand, state corporatism is imposed from above by a highly interventionist state. It seeks to deeply penetrate and control society and thereby to subordinate it to itself. This corporatist framework that is employed in state-societal relationship is therefore "unilateral" and dominated by the state. This will result in the capturing and incorporation of active and vocal societal groups by the state apparatus. The state aims to demobilize or reintegrate them into a subservient or neutral group within a reconstructed socio-economic and political order (Porter 2002: 11).

Meanwhile, Stepan (1978: 74) draws upon the study of political systems in Latin America by O'Donnell, identified two subtypes of state corporatism. One is inclusionary and the other exclusionary and both exist within authoritarian political systems. The inclusionary form of corporatism is deployed by populist regimes to garner support through the politics of inclusion. Exclusionary corporatism is a political tool to manage bureaucratic-authoritarian regimes based on the politics of exclusion. These subtypes of state corporatism are the result of responses of political elites towards the activism and mobilization of societal groups or NGOs. One way to counter the challenges of these groups is to employ the state apparatus to integrate or to undermine societal activism and thereby to create a new balance between state and society that will not endanger the regime (Stepan 1978: 78-79).

The application of inclusionary and exclusionary corporatism by the state in managing the NGOs movement will normally give rise to two types of implications. The inclusionary corporatist strategy will enable the state to use "soft power" to win over and co-opt various societal groups into socio-economic structures sanctioned by the state. Consequently, these groups will become the auxiliary part of the state apparatus and hence assist the state to further penetrate and capture civil society. The exclusionary corporatist framework tends to alienate broad classes and categories of people. As a result, these classes have no strong attachments or commitment to the established institutional arrangements or official ideologies of

the state. Therefore, they will eventually operate outside the formal political system and mobilize independently to articulate their own interests. One consequence of state policies of exclusion, in fact, is the creation of relatively autonomous associational groups that operate independent of the state (Porter 2002: 15).

Ethnic Hegemonic State and Personalized Hegemony (under the Mahathir Administration)

Malaysia achieved its independence through the efforts of the political elites of Malays, Chinese and Indians and this also entrenched the communal nature of Malaysian politics. The intense bargain between different ethnic groups prior to independence helped pave the way for the emergence of coalition politics which has lasted until today. Before 1970, although the ruling elites from different ethnic groups practised what is termed consociational politics through the Alliance of the major ethnic political parties, yet the sharing of power was unequal. As Mauzy (1983: 24) observes:

for years the dominance of UMNO was masked, though at times not convincingly, under the facade of equal partnership. UMNO's supremacy was understood by its partners, but the MCA and the UMNO top elites did not want any obvious public demonstration of this fact.

The racial riot of 1969 marked a watershed in Malaysian politics. The consequence was that the political configuration of the country underwent palpable changes in favour of the Malay political elites. In the new political order, UMNO's elites gained full command of the state and its apparatus. On this new political order, Vasil (1980: 222) concludes, "the politics of accommodation was given up once and for all", while Mauzy (1993: 111) depicts the new power sharing as "accommodation on essentially Malay terms". The supremacy of UMNO elites over the Malaysian polity is such that it is best described as a form of political "hegemony".

The elites in UMNO have taken full advantage of their political clout to implement various state policies that cater to Malay interests. This has been made possible by the shift in political and economic resources to the state and the Bumiputera elites. This situation clearly reflects the Bumiputera basis of the Malaysian state.⁵ In describing the "Malayness" of this political system, one may adhere to the notion of the "ethnic hegemonic state" suggested by Myron Weiner

(1987). Under this notion of the state, ethnic hegemony has been exercised in a variety of ways, from the subordination of ethnic and religious minorities to the more benign use of state power to give preferences in education and employment to the dominant ethnic group (Weiner 1987: 36).

In Malaysia, the manifestation of ethnic hegemony in essence was embodied in the New Economic Policy (NEP). This policy may be seen as the pervasive intervention of the state to restructure the Malaysian society in favour of Malay interests. This and other ethnically-biased policies have not entirely avoided encroachment on the rights and interests of less privileged groups. As to the Chinese community, the NEP period was an age of dilemma.

When Dr. Mahathir Mohamad (now Tun) assumed the premiership in 1981, the implementation of NEP became a matter of utmost urgency in the nation's development programme. As a Malay nationalist, he had always strived hard to change and transform the fate of the Malays. In championing this cause, he felt the necessity to enact laws to give effect to various economic policies in addressing economic imbalances among ethnic groups. Those who impeded the elevation of the economic status of the Malays were not to be tolerated (Mahathir 1982: 60).

The ascendancy of Mahathir as the national leader caused much apprehension among non-Malay communities, largely because of his image as an ultra politician in the 1960s. In his first decade (1981-90) as Prime Minister, the non-Malays' apprehension was justified. Entrusted with the mission to alleviate the various problems and dilemmas of the Malays, his government saw the endorsement of many affirmative and preferential measures as state policies.

The factional crisis in UMNO which erupted in 1987, besides causing some political repercussions in the country, actually gave him a chance to consolidate his grip on UMNO. When he emerged as the winner in this political tussle, he also won the full control of the new loyalist UMNO. This tussle between Mahathir and Tengku Razaleigh also led to the escalating of ethnic tension in the country.⁶ In October of the same year, the government launched *Operasi Lalang* (Weed-grass Operation) resulting in the mass arrest of politicians and various NGOs leaders under the draconian Internal Security Act (ISA) to silence political opposition. This operation had the effect of curbing mounting ethnic tensions while at the same time it exhibiting the authoritarian nature of the Mahathir administration. When the coalition government under Barisan Nasional (BN) secured a two-third majority in the hard-fought general election of 1990, Mahathir's position as national leader was further entrenched. Hence his hold on power in UMNO and BN was unprecedented. Some scholars termed this as Mahathir hegemony (see Hwang 2003; Gomez 2004).

Politics of Exclusion and Mobilization of Chinese NGOs

The manifestations of ethnic hegemony which started to surface as soon as Tun Abdul Razak took over the reign of the government in 1970. In his swearing-in statement as Prime Minister, he made it beyond doubt that "this government is based on UMNO... the government must follow the wishes and desires of UMNO and it must implement policies which are determined by UMNO" (Funston 1980: 224). In promulgating the NEP as the main national policy to tackle the problem of ethnic imbalances that were blamed as the cause of the riots of 1969, Tun Razak was seemingly responding correctly to grievances and demands of the Malays. It was the economic nationalism of the Malay political elites and intellectuals that was behind these demands. In this regard, Tun Razak adopted the strategy of an interventionist state which sought to alleviate the economic backwardness of the Malay by means of state-sanctioned public policies.

Under the impetus of Malay economic nationalism and the interventionist policies of the state, the Chinese community suffered a steady erosion of its economy interests. Two important cabinet posts, namely, Finance and Trade and Industry, held by MCA ministers since independence, were assumed by UMNO members after the racial riots. When the parliamentary system was restored in 1971, the Ministry of Trade and Industry, which under the NEP had assumed even greater significance than before, came under the portfolio of an UMNO leader. In 1974 the portfolio of Minister of Finance, the last bastion of Chinese strength in the cabinet, was similarly lost. Without these important posts, MCA was no longer seen by the Chinese business sector as the protector of their interests. Increasingly, the Chinese corporate sector began to turn to UMNO political elites and seek their patronage.

The formation of BN and with the incorporation of the Gerakan Party, the political bargaining power of the Chinese in the ruling coalition was ostensibly strengthened. In actual fact, it has not turned out to be so. As both parties compete to gain approval and popularity from the leaders of UMNO, they render themselves less effective in safeguarding Chinese interests. Moreover, under pressure of Malay political hegemony, Gerakan too faces the same predicament as the MCA. In general, both parties are ineffective in devising a plausible strategy for arresting the decline in the Chinese political position and its related lack of influence over major state policies which affect the economic, cultural and educational aspirations of the community. However, as they are component parties of the ruling coalition, the Chinese populace expects them to remedy those policies which encroach upon Chinese interests. Hence they have in fact landed in a very difficult situation and

their dilemma is most aptly described as "the agony of coalition" (Khoo 1995).

In the cultural arena, Chinese culture was also sidelined. A National Cultural Policy was conceived in 1971 at the National Culture Congress in which participation was dominated by politicians and academics from the Malay community. The handful of non-Malay academics could hardly represent non-Malay participation. Consequently, the National Cultural Policy that was formulated was based primarily on Malay and Islamic cultures and values. The implementation of this policy reflected the ruling regime's effort to promote the model of a mono-cultural state in nation-building after 1969.

As the National Cultural Policy is exclusivist in ethnic terms, it affords a means by which the bureaucratic elites may use three guiding principles in moulding national culture to exclude non-Malay cultures.⁷ Chinese culture was perceived as an alien culture and consequently not accepted as part of the national culture. The official exclusivist stand would absolve the state of responsibility in developing Chinese culture. But what had caused apprehension in the Chinese community was the adoption of various measures that would impede Chinese cultural practices. Instances of cultural hindrances in the 1970s and 1980s include the performance of lion dance and the usage of Chinese characters in cheques and commercial signboards.

Under the Mahathir administration, it was a strategic imperative that the interventionist state uplifts the economic status of the Malay community. His Malay nationalist credential prompted Mahathir to carry out various pro-Malay policies laid down by Tun Razak. Hence, new policies relating to the economy, culture and education were given the utmost priority in his first decade of tenure as Prime Minister. The outcome of these policies was that Malaysia was heading along an assimilationist path towards the formation of a Malay nation.⁸

The political and cultural hegemony of UMNO and the increasing peripheral position of Chinese political parties in the ruling coalition undermined their effectiveness as the guardian of Chinese interests. The result was the growing ascendancy of Chinese NGOs as a political factor in the Malaysian polity. Chinese NGOs have worked for Chinese rights during the era of independence. In order to play its role of interest articulations effectively, they sometimes function as vocal pressure groups pressing for various demands on the state. This tendency has impaired the image of Chinese NGOs among Malay political elites. For instance, Mahathir once labelled the Chinese chambers of commerce in the 1970s as racist organizations which were promoting and sustaining extreme racial exclusiveness in business (Mahathir 1982: 54).

In response to the dilemmas encountered by the Chinese community in the 1980s, the leaders of Chinese NGOs have turned to political means as a strategy to overcome the predicament of the Chinese. It was this dominant strand of thought among the leadership of Huatuan that paved the way for the mobilization of Chinese NGOs in political participation. They have lost their confidence in the Chinese parties of BN that is progressively subjected to the hegemony of UMNO. Chinese NGOs would have to take part in electoral politics in Malaysia in order to ease the Chinese political dilemma.

The direct participation of the Chinese NGOs in state elections in the 1980s was unprecedented in Malaysian politics. The impetus that led them to pursue such a drastic action was the urge to engage in and to articulate their civil rights. The special position of the Malays in the constitution since independence has entrenched the practice of favoured treatment by the state. Since then the Chinese community has sought to achieve equality in the rights that all citizens should enjoy. In the process a civil rights movement has since gathered momentum and has had an impact on Malaysian politics.⁹

The first wave of political participation of the Chinese NGOs took place in 1982 and the main actor was Dongjiaozong.¹⁰ This Chinese educationist organization took the lead in mobilization because Chinese education in the early 1980s faced a series of restrictions imposed by the educational policy of the state. The government's rejection of the application by the community to establish Merdeka University was also viewed with deep disapproval.¹¹ In 1980, the Education Ministry announced the implementation of the 3R system in all primary school.¹² The new ruling caused much anxiety in the community, as the Chinese educationists looked upon this as an attempt to alter the character of Chinese primary schools.

The leaders of Dongjiaozong felt that the encroachment on Chinese rights, especially on education, was due to the lack of Huatuan's representatives in Parliament to speak up on the enactment of policies that might erode the community's interests. It was decided that Gerakan, a Chinese component party of the BN, was an appropriate vehicle by which to gain access to political influence. A selected number of well-educated representatives joined Gerakan on the eve of the 1982 general election under the slogan of "Enter BN, Rectify BN". They adopted the strategy of *Sanjiche* (Three Incorporations) involving Chinese NGOs, Chinese-based BN parties, and the Chinese opposition party (Democratic Action Party or DAP) to work together to break the Chinese political dilemma. This attempt was later acknowledged by Dongjiaozong as a failure because the hegemonic

position of UMNO in BN would not be altered by the election of its own candidate to the Malaysian Parliament.¹³ In actual fact, instead of "rectifying" the BN, Dongjiaozong representatives in Gerakan found themselves operating within the BN rules of government and parliamentary practice.

The launching of the Joint Declaration by the Chinese Guilds and Associations of Malaysia (Joint Declaration) in 1985 marked the second wave of mobilization of the Chinese NGOs. Prior to this declaration, the Chinese NGOs have held an inaugural Chinese Cultural Congress in Penang in 1983 and acted unanimously to endorse a significant document entitled *Memorandum on National Culture*. An assemblage of leading and national organizations comprising the thirteen state Chinese Assembly Halls, Dongzong and Jiaozong, popularly known as the Fifteen Huatuan (Fifteen Major Chinese Organizations), was established after that congress. Collectively, the Fifteen Huatuan established the Malaysian Chinese Resource and Research Centre (now known as Centre for Malaysian Chinese Studies), as a think-tank of the Chinese community, and Civil Rights Committee (CRC) in 1985. It was the CRC that was entrusted to draft the Joint Declaration.

The Joint Declaration ushered in a new phase in the Chinese NGOs movement. This document veered away from making demands along communal lines but instead emphasized the civil rights of citizens. The Joint Declaration turned out to be an ambitious agenda for political and social reform (Ho 2003: 251). It enumerated government policies and measures that had eroded the fundamental rights of citizens and petitioned the government for a series of rights in the form of a charter on civil rights for all Malaysians (Kua 2005: 4).

It was obvious that the Joint Declaration was highly critical of the UMNO-dominated government and its policies. In order to render a healthier check on the BN government, CRC then floated the idea of an opposition front so as to give the electorate a simple choice between two fronts and the formation of a stronger opposition (Kua 1990: 266-267). With this strand of thinking, CRC held talks with political parties, especially those in the opposition, in order to form an opposition front in the general election of 1986. However, the idea failed to materialize in the general election. Despite this foray into political activism, it was not until 1990 that Chinese NGOs, through the CRC, embarked on a direct involvement in party politics again.

The mass arrest under *Operasi Lalang* in October 1987 had provided the impetus for Chinese NGOs to take part in party politics. Four of its leaders, namely, Lim Fong Seng (林晃昇), Sim Mow Yu (沈慕羽), Kua Kia Soong (柯嘉逊) and Tuang Pik King (庄迪君) were detained under ISA. This detention convinced the

civil rights activists of Chinese NGOs that the monopoly of political power of the ruling BN for more than thirty years had to be countered. The idea of a "two-front system" or "two-coalition system" which was floated by the CRC in 1986 was seen as the perfect strategy to achieve the above objective. The existence of an alternative front would force the ruling coalition to be more responsive and liberal in their policies and administration. Consequently the aspirations and legitimate demands of the people would be more likely to be met. Furthermore, Chinese NGO leaders argued that a two-coalition system would facilitate the advancement of Chinese interests.

On August 1990, 27 Chinese leaders and activists led by Lim Fong Seng, then Chairman of Dongzong, joined the DAP in their efforts to realize the two-coalition system. Three of these leaders then took part in the 1990 general election.¹⁴ The election aroused great interest among the Chinese community and a significant section of the electorate was in favour of the idea of a two-coalition system. Nevertheless, this direct involvement in electoral politics of the Chinese NGOs failed to produce the desired results as the ruling BN successfully defended its two-third majority in Parliament.

The 1980s marked an important period in the history of Chinese NGOs in Malaysia. The activism of this group in presenting their interest articulation in a political form was a response to the politics of exclusion that was practised by the state. The UMNO-dominated state responded to the challenge of Chinese NGOs by employing various means within the statist corporatism framework to marginalize or subordinate these NGOs in specific roles. The 1987 arrest of the Chinese leaders and activists, the labeling of Dongjiaozong and Selangor Chinese Assembly Hall as extremist pressure groups by the state were clear manifestations of statist repression. In consonance with the politics of exclusion, no efforts were made to embrace Chinese NGOs into the state structure.

Politics of Inclusion and the Fragmentation of the Chinese NGO Movement

The promulgation of Vision 2020 by Mahathir in February 1991 signified a change in his administration towards "cultural liberalization". In particular, the Mahathir-led UMNO began to demonstrate more flexibility towards the non-Malay communities, especially the Chinese, in respect of their language, education, religion, and cultural heritage. One explanation of the government's growing

willingness to accommodate the Chinese is that it wished to recoup a loss in Chinese votes at the 1990 general election (Milne and Mauzy 1999: 96).

Under the cultural liberalization conception, there was less politicization of sensitive issues such as national culture and national language by UMNO leaders. The heated debates on National Cultural Policy between the Chinese and Malay elites which occurred in the previous decade are now part of history. The increased flexibility towards Chinese cultural activities in 1990s was a noticeable sign of greater communal tolerance than was the case in the 1970s and 1980s. The decade-long restriction on Chinese lion dance was not only lifted but was often witnessed by Mahathir and other UMNO leaders.¹⁵ Francis Loh (2002: 28) saw this new policy as a shift from a more exclusive to a more inclusive notion of nationhood.

Among those various policies leading to cultural liberalization, Mahathir's Vision 2020 seemed to be most appealing to the Chinese community. He introduced the notion of *Bangsa Malaysia* (Malaysian race) and envisaged its formation in Vision 2020. This notion was based on a conception of nation-building of a multi-ethnic character. Chinese politicians and leaders of the Chinese NGOs have over the years pursued a role in nation-building.¹⁶ Many therefore received this liberal and progressive concept with favour and gave unprecedented support to the Mahathir administration. Hence the concept of Vision 2020 produced a pervasive impact on the Chinese community.

In the relationship with Chinese NGOs, Mahathir too adopted a distinctly different approach in dealing with them. Instead of excluding them, he applied the strategy of co-optation so as to achieve the aim of incorporating the Chinese NGOs. The first step taken by Mahathir administration was to approve the registration of the Federation of Chinese Assembly Halls in Malaysia (now known as Federation of Chinese Associations of Malaysia or FCAM), an umbrella organization that brought together the Chinese assembly halls of the thirteen states on 17 October 1991. The Chinese community applauded this move as the application for registration was submitted in 1983.

The Chinese perception of Mahathir and his administration had since improved considerably. This tendency was particularly noticeable among Chinese NGO leaders with a business background. The prevailing strand of thought that emerged was that the usual way of Chinese interest articulation as pressure groups was no longer appropriate in the changing political environment. Instead they adopted a strategy of quiet compromise in favour of high-profile action in forwarding petitions.

Prior to the shift in strategy of the Mahathir administration, the ruling coalition

has started a concerted attempt to neutralize the action of Chinese NGOs after the general election of 1990. The active involvement of the major Chinese groups in electoral politics had worked in favour of the opposition. Since then, the BN government, particularly through the MCA, has encouraged its members and supporters to participate in and gradually to assume the leadership of several major Chinese associations. Through this action, the ruling coalition could influence the nature and course of the civil rights movement which was gathering increasing momentum as a strategy of Chinese NGOs in the 1980s.

An early sign of change emerged when the leadership of Selangor Chinese Assembly Hall (SCAH), often regarded as a major bastion of Chinese NGOs, elected Lim Geok Chan (林玉静) as president in 1990. Lim was a business tycoon with pro-BN leanings. He subsequently also became the inaugural president of FCAM in 1991 by defeating Sim Mow Yu, the doyen of the Malaysian Chinese education movement. Membership of CRC, which had played a pivotal role in the civil rights movement, was reorganized to sideline the more vocal members. The reorganized CRC subsequently ceased to function as the champion of civil rights of the Chinese community. FCAM too operated separately from Dongzong and Jiaozong, the two Chinese educationist organization that had been an inseparable part of the Fifteen Huatuan.¹⁷

The strategy of incorporation and co-optation by the ruling coalition succeeded to some extent to weaken the once united Chinese NGO movement. There was a division among major Chinese organizations into the compromise and pressure groups. Most of the leading associations such as the SCAH, FCAM, and Associated Chinese Chambers of Commerce and Industry of Malaysia (ACCCIM) are generally supportive of official policies and exercise greater restraint in their demands for the community. On the other hand, Dongjiaozong serves as a leading pressure group. This division has understandably given rise to occasional conflicts and contentions between these two groups. For example, in drafting the "Cultural Guidelines for all Chinese Guilds and Associations" by FCAM in 1996, Dongjiaozong was left out in the process. Dongjiaozong reacted by criticizing the new document as an attempt to eclipse the 1983 National Culture Memorandum and 1985 Joint Declaration prepared by the Fifteen Huatuan.

The action of the state on Chinese NGOs also achieved its aim to depoliticize Chinese NGOs. The previous role of some to mobilize the Chinese community to take part in electoral politics and as critics of government policies had caused much problems to the ruling coalition. The leadership of the more dominant compromise groups obviously felt the need to refrain from electoral mobilization and making

demands through more appropriate channels. One of the means by which the interests of the Chinese were negotiated was through informal channels between the business-cum-Huatuan leaders and the UMNO elites. In keeping with the position of the compromise group, many Chinese associations voiced their support of the government's cultural liberalization policy, as indicated by their pro-BN stand during the general election of 1995.

By defusing the tension arising from the civil rights movement, the ruling coalition also weakened the cohesion of Chinese NGOs. Chinese associations and the community in general are divided as to whether to adhere to the model of compromise and negotiation or the politics of pressure. This tendency is reflected in the episode of Suqiu. The launching of Suqiu did not receive the overwhelming support of the Chinese community as in the case of the Joint Declaration of 1985 that was endorsed by about 5,000 guilds and associations. In the case of Suqiu, only 2,095 groups came forward with their support but without the endorsement of ACCCIM and FCAM.

The strategy of incorporation and co-optation brought much benefit to the Mahathir administration. Other than gaining political support from the pro-BN Chinese NGOs in the general elections, Mahathir gained unprecedented respect of their leadership. On 29 August 2001, some 2,000 persons from a cross-section of 100 Chinese associations held a much publicized reception for Mahathir at Putrajaya (Kua 2005: 108).

Apart from the strategy of incorporation and co-optation, Mahathir was seen to encourage the formation of new pro-BN Chinese organizations. The most publicized episode was the formation of the breakaway Kuala Lumpur Chinese Assembly Hall by Liew Poon Siak (刘磐石), a staunch MCA member, and his supporters. Despite the opposition of the Chinese community in general, the new organization was approved and registered on 30 October 2003 (one day before Mahathir retires), in a record time of 28 days. It was generally difficult for state- or national-level Chinese associations to obtain registration so speedily. SCAH from which the new body had spun off, submitted written objections to the Registrar of Society (ROS) but to no avail.

Prior to this, the Selangor Chinese Guilds Association under the leadership of Liew had organized a "Thanksgiving Night" to Mahathir on 9 October 2002, in which many pro-BN Chinese Huatuan leaders voiced their support for teaching of Mathematics and Science in English. This was an education policy that was implemented by Mahathir and was a subject of intense concern to the Chinese community and educationists. In the same function, Mahathir handed to Liew the

letter of approval from ROS to upgrade the Selangor Chinese Guilds Association to a national organization, known as The Federation of Malaysia Chinese Guilds Association (*Sin Chew Daily*, 10 October 2002). Another pro-BN Chinese major organization that was established at about the same period was the Seven Major Clans Associations of Malaysia as the umbrella body of the Federations of Hokkien, Hakka, Kwangtung, Teochew, Hainan, Guangxi and Sanjiang Associations in Malaysia.

Conclusion

The Malay political hegemony has brought about the marginalization of the Chinese in Malaysian politics. Under the shadow of diminishing political clout, Chinese political parties have struggled to function as the effective guardian of Chinese rights and interests. This development has induced the ascendancy of Chinese NGOs as civic groups in the attempt to better articulate the rights of the community, which in turn have shown greater interest and support for the work of these NGOs. The overwhelming support for the Joint Declaration of 1985 and Suqiu was a clear indication of the enthusiasm of the community. Being non-governmental, self-reliant and autonomous, the major Chinese NGOs are often able to mobilize smaller organizations and the community to their cause. The direct involvement of Chinese NGOs in electoral politics had consequently posed a challenge to the government.

The relationship of Chinese NGOs with the state is very much determined by the state policies towards them. Malaysia is a Malay-dominated state which is entrusted with the task of alleviating the various problems of the Malays. The state tends to perceive the interest articulations of Chinese NGOs for equal rights as a challenge to its entrenched position. In responding to the civil rights movement of the Chinese community, the Mahathir administration in the 1980s had resorted to policies of exclusion. The result was that this strategy aroused much resentment in the Chinese community and forced the political mobilization of Chinese NGOs. This had in turn intensified the politics of protest in the Chinese community and the swing towards support for the opposition.

Mahathir switched to a radically different strategy towards the Chinese NGOs in the 1990s. By practising the politics of inclusion, he was able to incorporate and co-opt Chinese NGOs into the fold of the state and thus effectively countered the politics of confrontation. This strategy had brought much benefit to the ruling

coalition as it successfully undermined the Chinese civil rights movement and drove a wedge between Chinese NGOs. The division that surfaced has persisted until today and has hamstrung many Chinese NGOs in their reliance on the politics of protest in furthering the civil right movement.

Notes

- 1 For instance, the leaders of the United Chinese School Teachers' Association of Malaysia (Jiaozong) had a historic meeting with UMNO and MCA leaders to discuss the issue of Chinese education at the house of Tan Cheng Lock in Melaka in 1955. For details of this meeting, see Tan (1997: 155-160). For the involvement of Chinese NGOs in citizenship and language rights articulation, see Heng (1987: 237-246).
- 2 This includes the application to set up Merdeka University in 1967, and the release of Joint Memorandum on National Culture and Joint Declaration by the Chinese Guilds and Associations of Malaysia respectively in 1983 and 1985.
- 3 There are few studies on this subject. Examples include Ho (1992) and Thock (2005).
- 4 In Chinese, "*su*" (诉) means to inform someone or let something be known and "*qiu*" (求) is to implore and to request in a serious and polite way. Hence "*suqiu*" (诉求) means "seeking to make a situation known in order to seek a request". In English, it is a "petition", a traditional form of appeal to the state to act on behalf of the petitioner. Hence the method itself was not novel except in Suqiu's political undertones. It has to be emphasized that "*suqiu*" is a common phrase in everyday language of the Malaysian Chinese community and is devoid of any political meaning.
- 5 Some scholars therefore refer to the Malaysian state as a Bumiputera state, for instance, see Ho (1997).
- 6 Some politicians and political analysts believe that the Mahathir government was behind this crisis, for instance, the view of Tunku Abdul Rahman was:

UMNO was facing a break-up. The Prime Minister, Dr Mahathir Mohamad's hold on the party appeared critical when election rigging was alleged to have given him a very narrow victory against Tengku Razaleigh ... So he had to find a way out of his predicament. A national crisis had to be created to bring UMNO together as a united force to fight a common enemy - and the imaginary enemy in this case was the Chinese community.

(Das and Suaram 1989: 10)
- 7 The three principles are:
 - a. The Malaysian national culture must be based on the indigenous culture of this region;
 - b. The suitable elements from other cultures can be accepted as part of the national culture; and
 - c. Islam is an important component in the moulding of national culture.
- 8 In an interview with Johan Jaafar in 1996, then Chief Editor of *Utusan Malaysia*, Mahathir admitted that the state policy in nation-building before 1990s was pursued along the

- "assimilationist" pathway, see *Utusan Malaysia*, 7 August 1996.
- 9 For a detailed study of this movement, see Kua (2005) and Thock (2005).
 - 10 Dongjiaozong is the collective name for two national bodies of Chinese school organizations, namely, The United Chinese School Committees' Associations of Malaysia, popularly known as Dongzong, and The United Chinese Schools Teachers Association of Malaysia, also known as Jiaozong.
 - 11 The controversy over the setting up of Merdeka University which was first mooted by Dongjiaozong in 1967 dragged into the 1970s and 1980s. Efforts to seek approval for this university came to a halt after the racial riots of 1969 but were revived when an appeal was sent to the Yang DiPertuan Agung (Paramount Ruler) in January 1978. The appeal was turned down in September 1978. Dongjiaozong then pursued this project through legal means but was rejected by the High Court on 8 November 1981. The final hope of the Chinese community to set up the Merdeka University was dashed when the Federal Court ruled against the appeal on 6 July 1982.
 - 12 The introduction of 3R system in Malaysian primary schools, which emphasized reading, writing, and arithmetic skills, was the result of the suggestion of an Cabinet Committee on Education headed by the then Education Minister, Dr. Mahathir Mohamad in 1979.
 - 13 This candidate was Koh Tsu Koon (许子根).
 - 14 They were Kua Kia Soong (Petaling Jaya), Lee Ban Chen (李万千) (Bakri) and Ng Wei Siong (吴维湘) (Kluang). Only Kua Kia Soong was successful in capturing a Parliamentary seat.
 - 15 Lion dance on poles was officially listed as a cultural heritage in 2007.
 - 16 See the just completed study on the Chinese and nation-building before and after independence undertaken by the Centre for Malaysian Chinese Studies, see Voon (2007).
 - 17 For an account of this episode in the Chinese NGO movement, see the work of Kua (2005).

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