

The Politics of Activism & Malay Subjectivity in Malaysia (Post-2008)

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Place of fieldwork: Malaysia

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Key Words: Activism, Social protest, Politics, Malay, Subjectivity

- **Research background**

Malaysian politics and social activism has experienced significant changes since the “political tsunami” of 2008, when the ruling party, United Malays National Organization (UMNO), under the Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition, maintained power despite losing five state governments and its customary two-thirds majority in parliament. This erosion of support continued in the elections of 2013, when the BN lost the national popular vote for the very first time, although it won a majority of seats. These electoral trends cannot be understood without a corresponding analysis of the upsurge in social protests among Malaysian citizens, particularly the Bersih movement (Coalition for Free and Fair Elections), which drew tens of thousands (some even estimate hundreds of thousands) to the streets, in 2011 and 2012. The Bersih movement managed to draw widespread support from various ethnic and generational demographic in Malaysia, where a new generation of Malay activists has emerged, with different practices, forms, and language of dissent.

- **Research purpose and aim**

My research focuses on certain key Malay figures in political activism and traces their social backgrounds, and life paths; I also analyze their respective cultural/artistic works and writings in order to examine emerging modern Malay subjectivity. This concept is regulated and cultivated by the state, where Islam and traditionalism provide crucial ideological support in determining Malay subjectivity. Through the presentation of case studies, I will examine how particular Malay activists resist this process of subjectivation by the state and explore the forms of their dissent, within the context of the post-2008 political situation.

- **Results and achievements by fieldwork**

During my fieldwork, I conducted interviews with more than 20 activists/artists/writers in my target demographic and spent many hours gathering the required data for the purpose of a narrative and discourse analysis. I learned about new developments among the activist circles in Kuala Lumpur, especially the current concerns and struggles among the younger generation. I also address the newer forms of collective organization among young Malays in Kuala Lumpur and Shah Alam, and the growing independent publishing scene that has gained prominence since 2011.

- **Implications and impact on future research**

Overall, my fieldwork experiences and data collection enables me to refine my research questions and begin the process of writing my dissertation. Based on my findings, I now have a much clearer idea of the methods I will use to interpret the data, as well as the best case studies to achieve my research goals.



Figure 1: Bersih 4 street protest in Kuala Lumpur, August 2015



Figure 2: Rumah Api, a punk collective and gig venue in Pekan Ampang, Kuala Lumpur.



Figure 3: A. Samad Said, Malaysian National Laureate and former co-chairperson of the Bersih Coalition, pictured here with the researcher, in Bangsar, Kuala Lumpur.