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### Bersih and democracy in Malaysia

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# Bersih and democracy in Malaysia

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*The social movement's eight demands might not all be met but its role goes beyond the articulated list*

In the first Bersih rally in 2007, Malaysian authorities reportedly arrested 245 protesters although some sources claimed the actual figures were much lower than that. In the Bersih 2.0 rally four years later, police confirmed 1,667 arrests.

While it would be intuitive to explain the jump in arrests as a knee jerk reaction of an authoritarian regime reacting to a challenge to its power, the 2012 Bersih 3.0 rally saw only 512 arrests – about one-third that of Bersih 2.0.

“From what I have examined, the government was aware of the calculation of the risks and benefits in the level of state repression on the protests,” observes **Dr. Khoo Ying Hooi**, Head and Senior Lecturer at the Department of International and Strategic Studies, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at the University of Malaya. “While the cost of participation is high, i.e., arrests, the protesters weigh them in relation to the benefits.

“The logic is that when you arrest a huge amount of people, the cost of participation can be lowered because it isn't just a few who face legal trouble. So state repression sparked off movements that delivered more harm than benefit for the incumbent regime at that time.”

## BERSIH: THE PAST AND PRESENT

Dr. Khoo made those remarks at the recent SMU Social Sciences and Humanities Seminar, “*The Bersih Movement and Democratisation in Malaysia*”, which is also the title of her book examining the Bersih movement. She argues that state repression during the period, while still high, took into consideration the possibility of arrests sparking bigger protests. The number of arrests at Bersih rallies have decreased after 2012, she points out.

The book also looked “the impact of the Bersih movement that later turned into a social movement organisation that emerged as a group identity that aggregated the collective grievances of Malaysians”. Lost in the news headlines that played up the political aspects of the movement, Dr. Khoo explains, were the origins of Bersih's creation.

As [stated on its website](#): Bersih started out as the Joint Action Committee for Electoral Reform...and the coalition's objective was to push for a thorough reform of the electoral process in Malaysia.

“There were irregularities in the electoral process which brought opposition parties and civil society onto the same platforms of ‘How can we change the electoral process?’” she elaborates. Added to that was former Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi's failure to deliver on his “Work with me, not for me” promise of a more “gentle” government, even though he did open up enough space which were then used to “channel grievances which brought about Bersih”, Dr. Khoo argues.

While pointing to “a centralised system which controls financial means, the bureaucracy, judiciary and media channels that allow the ruling coalition to continue to suppress civil liberties,” Dr. Khoo articulates other behaviour by the then-ruling Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition such as gerrymandering that sparked calls for electoral reform.

“There’s also the strategy of communalism in using race and religion which is prominent in Malaysia,” she laments. “Such an approach of racialisation stabilised the BN hegemony back then, and rejuvenated UMNO’s hegemony and sustained it against opposition challenges.”

Dr. Khoo also noted how the first rally in 2007 had caught many by surprise, that “so many people came together to form a powerful representation with cohesive interests and articulated demands”.

Those demands expanded from four in 2007 to eight in 2011, and are now familiar to many in Malaysia:

1. Clean the electoral roll
2. Reform postal voting
3. Use of indelible ink
4. A minimum campaign period of 21 days
5. Free and fair access to mainstream media
6. Strengthen public institutions
7. Stop corruption
8. Stop dirty politics

“If you look at the five mass protests, sometimes they alter their demands as well,” Dr. Khoo elaborates, referring to the 2016 rally which called for then-Prime Minister Najib Razak to step down. “If you look at the eight demands, some of them are not entirely specific. ‘Stop dirty politics’ is a very broad demand.

“I do not think they must have all eight demands met to say they have successfully achieved all the things they’ve called for. I see it as a process where these are similar demands made by NGOs.

“If you look at Bersih 2.0 you can see NGOs endorsing the movement. Those eight demands are still ongoing except the indelible ink demand. What they’re really calling for is a bigger space and independence of institutions and so forth.”

## **SOCIAL MOVEMENT ≠ ANTI-GOVERNMENT MOVEMENT**

Because of the political nature of the Bersih movement, it attracted opposition parties which might have objectives beyond electoral reform. But even after relaunching as BERSIH 2.0 in April 2010, “a coalition of like-minded civil society organisations unaffiliated to any political party”, it is often thought of primarily as an anti-government movement above all else.

“Social movements are very often portrayed as anti-government in nature. As a result, there are restrictive legislation and policies that have been put in place to block access to the political system,” Dr. Khoo notes while mentioning counter movements such as Perkasa and the Red Shirts that are also social movements but are supportive of the government.

She adds: “I called this a spillover effect. When we link social movements with democratisation, there are movements that further the democratisation process in Malaysia but there are also movements that become a hindrance to that process. It would not be fair to dismiss their role. There is this tension and it is still relevant to politics in Malaysia today, particularly if you look at the direction post-GE14 on social movements.

“The crucial role of the Bersih movement lies not only in triggering the democratic transitions but also in paving the way for continued political change.”

*Dr. Khoo Ying Hooi was the speaker at the SMU School of Social Sciences and Humanities webinar "The Bersih Movement and Democratisation in Malaysia" held on 29 January 2021.*

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