

The Involvement of Malay Students in Campus Politics in Malaysian Public Institutions of Higher Education

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Abstract: The purpose of this article is to highlight the history of Malay student involvement in campus politics of public institutions of higher education beginning from the 1960s known as ‘the golden age of students’ and their involvement after the Universities and University Colleges Act (UUCA) was introduced in the year 1971 as well as student involvement in this new millennium. The research methodology adopted in this article is qualitative, namely through a literature review of books, theses, journals, newspapers and local magazines related to the topic. The researchers find that there are significant differences between former students and present students, especially on issues raised and championed. Indeed, student involvement in campus politics has continued since the beginning to the present time despite UUCA 1971 being in force. This Act has also undergone changes because of current developments in campus politics in this country.

Key words: Involvement • Malay students • Campus politics • Malaysia • University • UUCA

INTRODUCTION

Malaysia hopes to achieve developed country status by the year 2020. In line with this objective, the government calls on the Malaysian people to combine their energy and efforts to achieve Vision 2020 and students are identified as the main asset for this mission [1]. According to R.M. Sail and S.S. Pandak Osman, students are regarded as society’s agents of change. They are able to make a new difference in inviting the society to think. This is consistent with Tun Mahathir Mohamad’s call to students to prepare themselves towards achieving Vision 2020, by eluding the influence of elements within the Western culture and values which are incompatible with true progress [2].

Student political activity frequently attracts the attention and criticism of various parties. However, their active political participation is not surprising because the institution of higher learning itself is a political world comprising of administrators, lecturers and students [3].

When discussing politics of Malay students, it is certain that there are among students in institutions of higher learning who have adopted the Malay struggle as Malays descended from warriors [4]. The desire for independence and liberty have brought the theme of the Bumiputera struggle to oppose any form of domination and injustice. This theme was upheld by previous generations and its effect overflows into the minds of Malay students and the new generation in campus.

The writers use the qualitative method in referring to several sources which may be categorised as primary and secondary sources. Primary sources comprise of local newspapers and magazines on this topic. Secondary sources are books, reports, journals and websites which refer to existing materials. In the search for literature related to this topic, a major part of the work was physical or manual such as looking for books and articles in certain journals in Tun Seri Lanang Library of Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia. Part of the literature survey conducted by the writer is not more than a report on what

has been done and said by previous writers. The survey is only a descriptive list of the materials already published or a short compilation of past studies. In conducting the literature survey, the writers find that there are some materials which do not basically use certain theories and perspectives. Thus, the diversity in views and research outcomes has led the writers to analyse in order to produce a cohesive finding compatible with the topic of this article without using a specific theory.

History of Students in the 1960s: The official establishment of the pioneer university in Malaysia on 1st of January 1962 marked the beginning in Malaysia of what previous researchers describe as 'the golden age of student movement' between the years 1965 and 1974, as cited by M. Abu Bakar, H. Karim and B. Ali Masrom. This golden age started from student participation, particularly Malay students, in Malay cultural, language and arts societies. However, their movement and pattern of thinking changed from being an internal university affair to programs jointly organised with outside society such as lectures, forums and discussions. Malay students were first involved with the problems suffered by rubber tappers, farmers and fishermen, the majority of whom were Malays. This was the outcome of the 'divide and rule' policy of the colonial British in making the Malay thought, consciousness and economy backward. This matter was very worrisome and perilous to the survival of the Malay race such that consciousness emerged among the students to be the pulse of society and to lead the Malays from backwardness and poverty towards prosperity, justice and happiness [5].

The student movement voiced one unanimous opinion in opposition to something, or assembled and demonstrated with the formation of a Speaker's Corner on the 27th May 1966. There the students held dialogues and debates on various issues and problems touching on students, university, society, national and international issues without any constraint or hindrance.

Student involvement in campus politics did not begin without an issue or matter which caught serious attention from students. The students themselves held various demonstrations on international issues such as in protest to the bombing of Hanoi-Haiphong by America, opposing Soviet Union's occupation of Czechoslovakia, condemning Philippines' claim over Sabah and issues related to the apartheid policy of South Africa, Southern Thailand and Palestine. The struggle to make the National Language as the medium of instruction in Universiti Malaya also became the main focus of students and began

with an exhibition, forum and symposium as well as a demonstration which insisted on the issue of the national language to be called 'Signage Demonstration' [6].

The issue of poverty was also championed by students to find a solution to the problem of rural society such as farmers, fishermen and labourers who were poor and marginalised. Students were active in the May 1969 General Election campaign by holding public rallies and in line with the May 13 tragedy, students held anti-Tunku campaigns to call for the resignation of Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman [7].

M. Abu Bakar gives some guidelines on how to measure student political actions or activities such as seminars and discussions with politicians and lecturers on political, economic and social issues. Political resolutions were presented and issued for public and government viewing. Student views and expressions of political aspirations were also published in newspapers, magazines and articles. Further, students also held demonstrations to convey views and ideas for their cause while some of them took part by holding positions in political parties such as, for example, in Parti Rakyat [8].

Student History After 1974: The end of the golden age of student movement was gradual and in stages, during which one significant happening was the mass arrest of students and their leaders in the 1974 Baling Incident. This caused a part of the student movement to be almost paralysed for a while. Apart from this, another cause was the amendment to some provisions in the UUCA 1971 passed by Parliament on the 8th April 1975. This 1975 amendment referred to several matters, the first concerned student freedom, whereby they were prohibited to support parties outside of campus. This included the prohibition to make press statements. Second, students were prohibited from holding membership in any organisation outside of campus. Prior to the 1975 amendment, students were only prohibited from holding positions in political parties and trade unions. Third, student societies were prohibited from merging with any organisation outside campus.

According to B. Ali Masrom, the 1975 amendment of UUCA 1971 marked the 'Subdued Age of Students'. This view is shared by many activists and supporters of student movement, whether among students of pre or post UUCA 1971 and Amendment 1975. The amendment indirectly changed the student movement from being radical and vocal to being more moderate or subdued. The Speaker's Corner died off and demonstrations were no longer bandied about. Students were no longer as free

to politick as before. Some hold the opinion that on the whole, the UUCA 1971 and 1975 Amendment had instilled a culture of fear among students of active involvement in student movement [9].

In discussing UUCA, there are generally three main views. First, is total acceptance of UUCA (Amendment) 1971. Second is total rejection. Both views at times reflect the political stance adhered to by those who held them. At times, the first view has authority for its arguments but is difficult to present to the public. And at other times, the second view is derived from a lack of study on the UUCA itself. In this matter, there is a third view which is moderate. This view accepts as appropriate the need for the UUCA 1971, but requests that some sections in it or the 1975 Amendment to be revised so that student liberty is restored.

S. Abdullah states that there are several other factors which influence the decline of student movement in comparison to pre-UCCA times. These are as follows:

- The emergence of more universities, beginning with Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM) in the year 1975. This was followed by the simultaneous establishment of private universities (IPTS). The increased number of students made the title of tertiary students no longer exclusive or special. Thus, less attention was drawn from society.
- The introduction of the Semester and CGPA System caused the students to work harder in preparation for each semester examination. Thus, the leisure for activity enjoyed under the former Term System was no longer available. Previously, students from the liberal arts stream were usually more active than science students, but currently all streams carry almost the same academic burden.
- There were some student weaknesses and deficiencies such as declining academic performance, especially among Malay students, declining morals and the phenomenon of unemployed graduates, issues not that significant before the year 1974, which inhibited followers of student movements and caused their parents to be more cautious about getting involved in student movement.
- There are more university and government officials, society and corporate leaders from among graduates and former student activists and supporters. Unless the current student movement is successful in staging something more creative and meaningful than what former students had previously undergone and followed during their student days, the current student movement is unlikely to have any

desired impact.

- Non-governmental organisations are increasingly specialised and professional. A number of them are led by former activists and followers of student movement. These organisations begin to compete with and, in certain conditions, even outdo current student movement which cannot match their specialisation and professionalism.
- The increasing number of political parties who were former student activists and followers of student movement has caused the student movement to lose influence over political parties, instead political parties now influence the student movement.
- National development policies and strategies have been properly planned and are better implemented. At the same time, poverty which was the main issue championed by the student movement is no more an issue. Except for small or isolated issues, there does not seem to be any major default by the government or major dissatisfaction on the part of the society.
- The student movement has not been able to solve the problem of racial polarisation among students, which has existed since the peak time of the student movement. This undermines the solidarity and cohesion of the student movement.
- Disunity among the Malay students on the basis of who is more Islamic, something which did not occur during the peak days of the student movement, has a weakening effect on the student movement.
- There is this view that present students do not express their opinions compared to students of the old days and this is considered as not helpful in strengthening the current student movement [10].

In reality, the post 1974 student movement is not dead, but neither is it as vocal as during the peak days because political participation of the student movement is clearly lacking for two reasons. First, politics is clearly the key indicator used to measure a student movement. It is used by students involved in student movement, by observers of student movement and also by the government which uses the UUCA to restrict student movement. This is not surprising because politics is one of the operative methods of advocacy, a characteristic which determines whether a student organisation or activity is a student movement. Second, it is clear that the year 1974 is the end year of the peak in student movement. In certain situations, however, for example during the political and economic crisis of the 1990s, the student movement was seen to bounce back.

Students of the New Millenium: Beginning with the 21st

Century, many writers such as S.H. al-Attas state that students of public institutions of higher education are focused on the most important main issue, namely, the right to political, to voice out as well as to campaign for transparency and justice in the campus election system. This can be seen in student action and insistence when the season for campus general elections draws near, at times leading to undesirable occurrences. The writers relate an example in the year 2011 whereby some mainstream newspapers in Malaysia reported that some Malay students were engaged in violent activities. The mass media stated that the activities were aggressive in university election campaigns including serious post-election disturbances which occurred in institutions of higher education in the year 2011. As reported in *Utusan Malaysia* on the 24th February 2011, there occurred a case of break-in at Universiti Putra Malaysia. In a demonstration on the 23rd February 2011, *Pro Mahasiswa* students rammed the campus security unit and broke an office glass door [11].

A newspaper clipping of *The Star*, 18th February 2011 also published news of pro-opposition students, of *Pro Mahasiswa* acting wildly by breaking the office-door of the Deputy Vice-Chancellor of Student Affairs at Universiti Malaya when four nominees were rejected to be candidates for campus general elections [12]. These incidents indicate a need for immediate attention and action so as not to let the situation get out of control and spread among university students. If allowed to spread, it may not only interfere with the learning process of students themselves but also disturb the teaching and administration of the university and may even retard the national vision of higher education.

1975 Amendment of UUCA 1971: The provisions of the 1975 Amendment of UUCA clearly trammel and regulate student movements to lethargy. Among the restraints and control measures areas follows:

- Prohibits students or student organisations from calling, gathering or organising an assembly of more than fifty people without prior written permission of the Vice-Chancellor or his representative.
- Students may not participate in any assembly except with the permission of the Vice-Chancellor or his authorised representative.
- Students, student organisations, bodies or groups may not possess or use loudspeakers and the like.
- Prohibits students from using flags, banners, stickers, posters and the like.
- Prohibits students or student organisations from

carrying out any out of campus activity except with the written permission of the Vice-Chancellor.

- Prohibits students from taking part in any business, occupation or other activity whether full-time or part-time which the Vice-Chancellor deems undesirable.
- Prohibit students and student organisations from becoming members or associates of any society, political party, workers' union and so on except as provided in the University Constitution or with prior written approval of the Vice-Chancellor.
- Prohibits students and student organisations from stating any support, sympathy or opposition towards any political party, workers' union and other bodies.
- Prohibits students or student organisations from collecting monies.
- The office-bearer or person who manages the student group is deemed as committing an offence if such offence is done in the name or on behalf of the society or student group except if it is proven that the offence was done without his/their knowledge and he/ they had attempted to prevent the offence. He/They may be charged for the offence even if he/they did not take part in the offence.
- Prohibits students from organising, inciting or participating in a boycott of any examination, lecture, tutorial, class or other legal activity conducted by or under the directive of or with the permission of the university.
- Prohibits students or student bodies from making appeals or other communication with the press or public in relation to the university whether orally, in written form or by any other method whatsoever.
- Prohibits the publication and distribution of documents within or outside the campus except by the permission of the Vice-Chancellor.
- If a student fails to comply with or violates any instruction or legal requirement given or made by any university officer or employee authorised to do so in campus, the student is deemed liable or guilty of a disciplinary offence [13].

The amendment to the provisions of the UUCA which took effect on 13th May 1975 has some negative impact. According to B. Ali Masrom, UUCA 1975 marked the Subdued Age of Students; retarded the role of students as a 'pressure group'; changed the trend of student activity from 'radical and vocal' to more 'moderate'; the Speaker's Corner disappeared; demonstrations were no longer bandied about; and students were no longer free to political as before. This view is shared by many activists and supporters

of student movement, whether among students of pre or post UUCA and 1975 Amendment. Some are of the view that as a whole, the amended UUCA has created a culture of fear among students to be actively engaged in student movement. Although some have adopted a bold attitude, feelings of apprehension still haunt them.

B. Ali Masrom who analysed the development of Muslim student movements for the period 1975-1985 made an interesting observation, that the Muslims Students Association of Universiti Malaya (PMIUM) attempted to restore the atmosphere of Muslim student movement paralysed by the UUCA 1971 as amended in 1975. PMIUM had changed its aggressive method of struggle to an enhancement of personal qualities in line with Islamic teachings and the trend of worldwide Islamic revival of that time. An Islamic preaching orientation which took place in student leadership breathed new life into the student movement [14].

In the same tone, Z. Anwar states that a consequence of the UUCA restrictions was to cause the political activities of student societies to focus more on promoting preaching among students. With restrictions on political participation, Islam became a safe platform from which students could express their dissatisfaction, channel their energy, fulfill desires to serve society and find peace of mind from the stress of living in campus and city. Z. Anwar further states that added restrictions by the 1975 amendment only served to increase the Islamic struggle. At that time the *Dakwah* preaching movement was not very well known or obvious. The government which was haunted by student agitation over socio-economic issues did not see Islam as a threat to its control over student activity or as a challenge to its authority [15].

If politics is used as an indicator to view the year 1974 as the end year of the golden age of student movement, then apparently UUCA as far as it was enforced on 30th April 1971 failed to extinguish the flame of student movement. This is evident when on 14th June 1971, students demonstrated in protest over an official visit to Malaysia by Thailand's Prime Minister, Thanum Kittikachorn, for his suppression of Muslims in Southern Thailand. Likewise, it could not prevent the Baling demonstration in December 1974 (over the issue of poverty). The main amendments of 1975 such as Sections 15, 15A, 15B, 15C, 15D, 16, 16B, 16C and others clearly refer to political activities of the student movement.

2009 Amendment of UUCA 1971: Once again, in the history of universities in Malaysia, the UUCA 1971 as amended in 1975 was re-amended. Beginning with the early efforts by Datuk Mustapa Mohamad as Minister of Higher Education before this, on Thursday, 17th July 2008, the present Minister of Higher Education, Datuk Seri Mohd Khaled Nordin presented an amendment proposal of UUCA in the House of Representatives for the first reading. It was later passed and gazetted in February 2009. However, there was at least one provision which had not been amended, namely, regarding student liberty to be a member of a political party.

According to S. Abdullah, out of 109 provisions in UUCA 1971 as amended in 1975, 61 provisions were amended, repealed or inserted. The main aim of the amendments which directly deal with student society movement is to give students wider rights and liberty to participate, associate, express and to be involved in the university structure and certain decision-making process [16]. Among these are:

- Students are given right of representation in certain committees in the university, such as the Committee for Student Welfare and Senate.
- Students, whether individually or in groups, are allowed to communicate and merge with any society, organisation or group outside the campus, without prior approval of the University, except those political parties and those which are illegal.
- Students are allowed to interact with politicians and political parties.
- Students are allowed to make statements on politics in any function, seminar or symposium on condition that the statements are not made on the advice or suggestion of any political party.

2012 Amendment of UUCA 1971: On the 19th April 2012, the newspaper *Berita Harian* reported that the House of Representatives passed the amendments, Universities and University Colleges Act (Amendment) Bill 2012, Private Higher Educational Institutions (Amendment) Bill 2012 and the Educational Institutions (Discipline) Bill 2012 presented by the Minister of Higher Education, Datuk Seri Mohamed Khaled Nordin. These amendments allow students of public and private institutes of higher education to participate and hold positions in political parties. However, these amendments prohibit them to stand for any campus elections or hold any position in any organisation or group of students within the campus if they hold positions in any political party [17].

Further, students are prohibited from engaging in any activity of a political party within the campus as well as from holding membership in any society, organization, body or group of people contravening any law whether within or outside the country. But students are allowed to make any statement or committing any act which may be interpreted as expressing support or sympathy or opposition towards any political party. These amendment Bills also urge the establishment of a Student Complaints Committee comprising of the Vice-Chancellor as Chairman, two members respectively representing the Student Representative Council and Graduate Association or University Alumni as well as two university officers appointed by the Board to secure justice and student rights. With these amendments, students now have the freedom to exercise their rights in political issues as in the 1960's but they may not bring any partisan or political party affiliation or ideology within the campus [18-19].

CONCLUSION

Through literature highlighted in this research, student involvement in campus politics of institutions of higher education always occurs whether or not tightly controlled. Over the years, students have continued to state their stance and struggled for issues relevant to their time, for example, the issue of poverty from the year 1960 to 1980, the economic issue from the years 1990 to 2000 and the issue of student liberty to political in this new millennium. The UUCA 1971 which is said to burden and inhibit students has not been able to completely curb students from rising up and being vocal. This can be seen when UUCA 1971 itself has been amended a number of times until in this year 2012, the government now permits tertiary students of public and private institutions to participate and hold membership of any political party. Even though the amendment prohibits students from standing for general elections or holding any position in any student organisation or group in campus if they hold a position in any political party, the writer still believes that the UUCA 1971 will continue to be appropriately amended to suit political development of the time.

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