

**Contesting Power in Post-Mahathir Malaysia:**

**A Case Study of Malay Professional Satirists**

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For *Mak, Abah* and *Dewi*,

“I was dead, then alive. Weeping, then laughing.” – Rumi.

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## ABSTRACT

This study examines the political contestation among Malay Professional Satirists (MPS) through their selected political satire works between 2011-2018. Political satire challenges those in power and is often regarded as fake news and libel. Therefore, political satirists tend to be frequently subject to legal action and are accused of disrupting national harmony. However, there is another group within the social and cultural community, which I call Social and Cultural Professionals (SCP), who also use satire but are supported by the government. This group frequently received financial benefits from the state and are at lower risk of suffering legal consequences. These contrasting conditions raise several important questions: who are the Malaysian Professional Satirists? Who are the targets of MPS in their satirical work? Why do MPS satirise them? And why do the MPS still produce political satire despite the potential legal consequences? Therefore, this study attempts to identify the characters, themes, and issues the MPS highlight; it also considers the reasons and motivations that political satirists have for creating such allegedly controversial works. Malaysia's *Reformasi* movement and the booming use of the internet in 1998 mobilised multiple alternative social movements, mainly through art-related activities. Art workers, NGOs, as well as musical and cultural groups, protested creatively against the UMNO-BN ruling regime. Creative protests that employed satire and humour somehow succeeded in attracting a significant proportion of the public to follow political and current issues, especially youths in universities who had been depoliticised with the inception of the University and University College Act (AUKU 1979). This study establishes a point of view that political satire is a fun, loose, free form of resistance, contrasting with formal procedural democracy. The previous literature proposes that the study



of Malaysia's political system should focus on formal political procedures, especially election and representation. However, the study of political satire vis-à-vis democratisation is often neglected and thus such studies are scarce, which might have resulted from how satire is strictly discussed in terms of language and media. There has been a growing interest in how satirist and satirical works are regarded; hence, this study attempts to fill a gap in research on political satire in Malaysia. In contrast, democratisation is often discussed in terms of history, politics, anthropology, sociology, and economics. This qualitative study presents a comprehensive account of interviews with four (4) art workers identified as MPS, as based on appropriate criteria. Each informant had either partaken in alternative social movements or faced legal action from authorities or, indeed, both. In this study, the Theory of Contestation and Two-Social Reality serves as a primary framework to lead to an understanding of the contestation of power in Malaysia through political satire. This study further intends to broaden the knowledge of political satire and humour in the study of democratisation, adding to the existing literature, particularly outside formal political procedures.

## ABBREVIATIONS

<b>ABIM</b>	Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia (Malaysian Islamic Youth Movement)
<b>AMANAH</b>	Parti Amanah Negara (The National Trust Party)
<b>APA</b>	Artist Pro Activ
<b>ASN</b>	Anugerah Sasterawan Negara (National Laureate Award)
<b>AUKU</b>	Akta Universiti dan Kolej Universiti (University and University College Act)
<b>BN</b>	Barisan Nasional (National Front)
<b>CPM</b>	Communist Part of Malaya
<b>DAP</b>	Democratic Action Party
<b>DBP</b>	Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka (The Malaysian Institute of Language and Literature)
<b>DEB</b>	Dasar Ekonomi Baru (New Economic Policy or NEP)
<b>DKK</b>	Dasar Kebudayaan Kebangsaan (National Culture Policy or NCP)
<b>DPN</b>	Dasar Pembangunan Nasional (Nasional Development Policy or NDP)
<b>FMS</b>	Federated Malay States
<b>GE</b>	General Elections
<b>IKBN</b>	Institut Kemahiran Belia Negara (National Youth Skills Institute)
<b>ISA</b>	Internal Security Act
<b>JAKIM</b>	Jabatan Kemajuan Islam Malaysia (Department of Islamic Development Malaysia)
<b>KDN</b>	Kementerian Dalam Negeri (The Ministry of Home Affairs or MOHA)
<b>KISAS</b>	Kolej Islam Sultan Alam Shah (Sultan Alam Shah Islamic College)
<b>KUBU</b>	Kuliah Buku (Book Lecture)

<b>MCMC</b>	Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission
<b>MCA</b>	Malaysian Chinese Association
<b>MIA</b>	Malaysian Institute of Art
<b>MIC</b>	Malaysian Indian Congress
<b>MKI</b>	Majlis Kebangsaan Bagi Hal Ehwal Ugama Islam Malaysia (The National Council of Islamic Religious Affairs)
<b>MNP</b>	Malay Nationalist Party
<b>MPAJA</b>	Malayan People Anti-Japanese Army
<b>MPS</b>	Malay Professional Satirists
<b>NGO</b>	Non-Governmental Organisation
<b>PAS</b>	Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (The Malaysian Islamic Party)
<b>PDRM</b>	Polis Diraja Malaysia (Royal Malaysia Police or RMP)
<b>PH</b>	Pakatan Harapan (The Alliance of Hope)
<b>PKR</b>	Parti Keadilan Rakyat (The People's Justice Party)
<b>PPBM</b>	Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia (The Malaysian United Indigenous Party)
<b>SCP</b>	Social and Cultural Professionals
<b>SKOG</b>	strategischen und konfliktfähigen Gruppen (Strategic and Conflict-ability Groups)
<b>SOP</b>	Standard Operating Procedures
<b>SPM</b>	Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (Malaysian Certificate of Education)
<b>STPM</b>	Sijil Tinggi Persekolahan Malaysia (Malaysian Higher School Certificate)
<b>UBU</b>	Universiti Bangsar Utama
<b>UKM</b>	Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (National University of Malaysia)
<b>UMNO</b>	United Malays National Organisations

**USM**      Universiti Sains Malaysia (Science University Malaysia)

**UTAM**     Universiti Terbuka Anak Muda

**YDPA**     Yang di-Pertuan Agong

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# CHAPTER 1: POLITICAL SATIRE AND ITS CONTESTATION OF POWER IN POST-MAHATHIR MALAYSIA

## 1.0 General background

On 24<sup>th</sup> September 2010, just before the launch of his comic book, *Cartoon-O-Phobia*, a well-known Malaysian political cartoonist, Zunar, was arrested under the Sedition Act 1948 at his office over alleged seditious content (CPJ, 2010). Five years later, on 28<sup>th</sup> January 2015, while in London to speak at the University of Oxford and University of Cambridge, Zunar's office in Kuala Lumpur was once again raided by the police under the Printing Press and Publication and Sedition Acts. Due to his absence at the time, the police instead questioned his staff. They seized 149 copies of his *Conspiracy to Imprison Anwar* and *Pirates of the Carry-BN* comic books (The Malaysian Insider/The Edge Financial Daily, 2015). Finally, on 17<sup>th</sup> December 2016, during the annual Georgetown Literary Festival, Zunar was once again arrested for "activities detrimental to parliamentary democracy." (Deutsche Welle, 2016).

The same fate was shared by other satirists, such as political graphic designer Fahmi Reza. He was arrested and jailed on 6<sup>th</sup> June 2016 over the infamous Najib Razak's clown face image as part of his #WeAreAllSeditious campaign. On 24<sup>th</sup> April 2021, Fahmi was again arrested over an alleged insult to Queen Tunku Azizah by creating a Spotify playlist entitled, 'This Is Dengki Ke?' (*trans.* Are You Jealous?) (Deutsche Welle, 2021; Wunster, 2018). Most recently, on 14<sup>th</sup> April 2022, Fahmi was apprehended under Section 233 of the Communication and Multimedia Act over his satirical artwork depicting an ape in a monarch's clothing (Zahiid, 2022); Fahmi was also blacklisted by the Immigration Department of Malaysia and was not allowed to leave the country (Chan, 2022).

What struck me the most, despite all these charges and detentions, viewed as fakes and inaccurate forms of news representation, and that allegedly incited fury among specific segments of society and disturbed national harmony, these political satirists still chose to poke fun at specific people by continuously producing political satire and challenging sensitive topics; as Fahmi Reza said, “I will never be silenced” (Vice Asia, 2021). From satirists’ perspective, their works can be considered to be “telling the truth” (Highet, 1962, pp. 234–235). This contrasting claim, however, was often rejected by the state.<sup>1</sup> For example, on 14th April 2017, the former Deputy Prime Minister, Ahmad Zahid Hamidi, commented on satire, decrying it as ‘intellectual egoism’ that cannot be regarded as a part of Malaysian culture.<sup>2</sup> His comment is reported in the *New Straits Times* as follows: “Satirism is not a Malaysian culture,

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<sup>1</sup> For instance, the implementation of the Anti-Fake News Act in 2018. However, this Act was effectively repealed during *Pakatan Harapan*’s administration in 2019.

<sup>2</sup> The remark was made in the forum, ‘Public Policy Ministerial Forum’ at *Institut Tadbiran Awam Negara* (trans. National Institute of Public Administration, INTAN). The comment came about based on a caricature published in the *Nanyang Siang Pau* newspaper depicting *Dewan Rakyat*’s (trans. House of Representative) speaker, Pandikar Amin Mulia and PAS President Abdul Hadi Awang as two monkeys on a tree written as, ‘RUU355.’ As a result, the *Nanyang Siang Pau* apologised and acknowledged that the cartoon was inappropriate for public consumption following the statement. Rang Undang-Undang (RUU) 355 Mahkamah Syariah (Bidang Kuasa Jenayah) (Pindaan) 2021 (RUU 355) refers to the Amendments to the Shariah Courts (Criminal Jurisdiction) Act to enhance the power of Malaysia’s Islamic Judiciary. PAS’s President Abdul Hadi Awang tabled this bill and presented on 6<sup>th</sup> April 2017 in Parliament. Some parties name the bill as ‘hudud law.’ As a multi-ethnic country, the RUU 355 creates various social reactions regarding the implementation – particularly for non-Muslims.



and those who are knowledgeable should not use their intelligence to belittle others.” (Tasnim Lokman, 2017).

My interest in this topic comes with some simple questions: who are these political satirists, and why do they still produce their satirical works despite knowing the consequences? These questions later set the foundation from which to explore much broader topics, particularly civil society in a developing country, alternative political movements, creative protests, political performances, and media and political communications. For Malaysianists who study this topic seriously, such as Khin Wee Chen (2016) and Ann Elizabeth Lever (2019), political satire was studied in area studies as a form of dissent and civic discourse by comparing the practice of political satire in Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore. However, in her research, Lever (2019) left us with one particular remark:

“Within the literature of political dissent and resistance in Southeast Asian studies, it appears that satirical expression of dissent rarely figures as a political act of dissent compared with riots, public demonstration on the street and the like...” (p. 44).

Therefore, there is a tendency in political studies to focus on political dissent and protest culture in the context of direct political action and mass mobilisation, per se. Meanwhile, the political-sociology perspective of possibly recognising political satirists as a specific group has barely been studied. This lacuna could be sensed after I conducted my interviews with selected informants and in my struggle to categorise them.

Hence, there appear to be two appropriate frameworks with which to explore this topic herein. First, I propose that the ‘Two-Social Reality’ approach be used. According to Shamsul A.B. (1996), the ‘Two-Social Reality’ approach has shown two different paradigms between the ‘authority-defined’ and the ‘everyday-defined’. According to Shamsul, the ‘everyday-

defined' social reality is experienced, whilst the 'authority-defined' is only observed and interpreted.<sup>3</sup> The authority-defined was based on 'facts' created and endorsed by the state and its mechanisms; in contrast, the latter depended on the individual experiences of the general population, who produced, created, and disseminated the narrative.<sup>4</sup> In addition, the authority-defined is defined by people who are in the dominant power structure and is received as an official matter by being "weaved into policies" (Shamsul A.B., 1996a, p. 478, 2001, p. 365). In comparison, the varied everyday-defined was often neglected as it is considered 'unscientific' since they are based on personal experiences, and which are "consistently rejected as a valid source of information" and also subjected to political suppression from mainstream consideration and concern.<sup>5</sup>

The second framework is contestation. According to Antje Wiener, the position of norms in a community is derived from (i) our understanding as "a given identity" and (ii) a process of (re)enacting (2014, p. 20). In her view, there are three kinds of norms, which are (i) Formal Validity, (ii) Social Recognition, and (iii) Cultural Validation. Formal validity refers to an official document based on the law or that is lawlike in nature; social recognition refers to a social group based on unwritten and lawlike elements; while cultural validation refers to individual experience based on sociocultural conditions and is more informal.<sup>6</sup> At the social recognition level, contestation occurs when "different social groups do not agree about the

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid. p. 478.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. p. 479.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

appropriate behaviour in a given situation.”<sup>7</sup> In contrast, the norm is contestable at the cultural validation level when “individuals bring their respective background experience to bear.”<sup>8</sup>

In Malaysia’s case, particularly during the Mahathir era, formal power was apparent in the practice of its top-down bureaucracy and patron-client politics by national executives within the nation-state framework (Mccourt, 2012, p. 2331; Scott, 1972, p. 105; Selvarajah & Meyer, 2008, p. 707; M. L. Weiss, 2007, p. 33, 2020, p. 102). For example, an official from the ministry ‘seldomly’ sought advice from civil societies such as NGOs when they “lacked technical data” (Mccourt, 2012, p. 2335). As Cohn argued, these ‘officialising procedures’ have made power visible “... by defining and classifying space, making separations between public and private spheres.” (1996, p. 3). Therefore, national institutions at the federal level, such as ministries, agencies, and departments, have the power to determine ‘the formal’ official matters even in terms of moralities and good behaviour, which are later transmitted to the citizen.

Based on contrasting values, more interesting questions arise. First, how do political satirists react to the given formal validity vis-à-vis their social recognition? Second, how could the national institutions themselves effectively referee a work of political satire in terms of being ‘insulting’, ‘slandorous’, or ‘acceptable’? Finally, what is the satirists’ attitude subsequent to the post-Mahathir era?

Nevertheless, despite satire being deemed defamatory, insulting, libellous, and disrupting, political satirists continue to make fun of others. They are also often accused of being non-patriotic, disloyal to the country, and rude towards leaders. However, several past

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid. p. 30.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

and present scholarly works of literature, essays, and popular writings have described satire as “indirect interference on democratic discourse” (Ödmark & Harvard, 2021, p. 291), “the tool of democratic pedagogy” (Fay, 2006, p. 18), and “vital to the dissemination of norms and values.” (Bouvier & Rosenbaum, 2020, p. 317).

These juxtaposed premises give rise to a fundamental query, as most informants interviewed in this study insisted, they were doing it for the betterment of the nation, rather than for more negative reasons. This also raises an interesting aspect of everyday nationalism among political satirists. More importantly, this study attempts to explain the role of political satire and dedicated satirists from the perspective of Malay satirists, or what I term the Malay Professional Satirists (MPS).

### **1.0.1 Satirical works in a glimpse: From pre- to post-independence**

In pre-independent Malaya, critical humour was seen as much blunter and more direct (Mulyadi Mahamood, 2004, pp. 236–237). Earlier satirical editorial cartoons in the 1930s were published by major Malay newspapers such as *Warta Jenaka*, *Utusan Zaman*, and *Majlis* (Mulyadi Mahamood, 2004, p. 14). Many of these pre-independence cartoons hinged on themes of “colonisation, Malay identity, Malay economic and political rights, as well as the decentralisation policy of Malaya relating to immigrants” (Razan Rosman & Sarena Abdullah, 2018, p. 22). Cartoonists at that time, such as S.B. Ally, Abd Manan, Muhammad Salleh Sulaiman, and Abdullah Abas, amongst others, depicted individuals negatively as monkeys,

snakes, or chickens.<sup>9</sup> These satirical editorial cartoons were used as “instruments of criticism, satire and propaganda to enhance nationalistic spirit among the Malays” (Mulyadi Mahamood, 2004, p. 1). One clear example of famous satirical caricature is the alter ego of *Utusan Zaman*’s Editor, Rahim Kajai, through his personification *Wak Ketok*, drawn by S.B. Ally. This fictional character is an ingrained part of the *Utusan Zaman* newspaper and criticises current issues of Malaya’s pre-independence era. Kajai was even named the ‘Father of Malaysian Journalism’ because of his outstanding contributions to journalism, despite his strong views regarding immigrants (Razan Rosman & Sarena Abdullah, 2018, p. 24).

Political satire was not limited to the hand of cartoonists, per se. It was also used by literary writers such as the nationalist Ishak Haji Muhammad, Pak Sako in his novel *Putera Gunung Tahan*, and Abdul Kadir Adabi Ahmad in his *Acuman Mahkota* and *Sebelas Rajab* (S. Othman Kelantan, 1997, pp. 124–125). Both writers were highly satirical of the British, Malay royalty, *ulama*, and religious persons.<sup>10</sup>

However, after Malayan independence in 1957, editorial cartoons (and writers) adopted different attitudes by helping to promote the government’s policies (Mulyadi Mahamood, 2004, p. 108). The newspaper and the press were influenced by the state to be more patriotic and moved by the desire for more vital national unity, particularly with certain historical events such as The Malaysia Agreement of 1963, the Malaysia-Indonesia confrontation of 1963-1966,

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<sup>9</sup> For example, in newspaper such as *Warta Jenaka*. For further satirical bestial image akin to human in Malay’s pre-Independence newspaper, **SEE**: Zakiah Hanum (1989) *Senda, Sindir, Sengat (Karikatur Zaman Silam)*. Petaling Jaya: Penerbitan Lajmeidakh Sdn. Bhd.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

and the ethnic riots of 13<sup>th</sup> May 1969.<sup>11</sup> The 1969 riot later witnessed a significant change in the Printing Press Act 1971 (and later in 1974), which provided power to the government in terms of requiring publications to preserve racial harmony.

Nevertheless, social commentary and political satire were still lively around the 1980s, but in a moderated manner. According to Provencher and Omar (1988, 88–89), from around 1979 until 1986, there were six (6) Malay humour magazines: *Gila-Gila*, *Gelihati*, *Humor*, *Komedi*, *Batu Api* and *Toyol*. The earliest humorous Malay magazine was *Gila-Gila*, inspired by the American satirical *Mad*, that often-featured elements of political satire.<sup>12</sup>

According to Mulyadi, post-independence cartoons saw the emergence of new themes, subjects, and styles (2004, p. 106). In this sense, satirical editorial cartoons become more ‘indirect’, simultaneously promoting social and political stability, resulting in professional cartoonists attached to national newspapers and magazines playing by the rules by imposing self-censorship (Mulyadi Mahamood, 2004, p. 106; Provencher, 1999, p. 18). For example, the promotion of cultural values amongst cartoonists and their audiences, light entertainment based on the familiar subjects such as family life, moderate depictions, or light exaggerations of specific features of the individuals and the use of local dialects as means of promoting the national unity agenda (Mulyadi Mahamood, 2004, pp. 106 & 285–285).

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p.10.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 97.

## 1.0.2 Political satirists in new social movements in post-Mahathir Malaysia

After the 1969 racial riots,<sup>13</sup> particularly during the Mahathir era, it is well known that media and press freedoms were tightened, often to preserve political stability and national harmony (Leong, 2013, p. 81; D. K. Mauzy & Milne, 2002, p. 113; Wain, 2009, p. 68). As a final means of clamping down on dissenting voices, Mahathir often resorted to coercion (D. K. Mauzy & Milne, 2002, p. 87), witnessing the police assaulting street protesters, taking disciplinary action against dissenting students, state government's blacklisting of 'dissident businesses', harassment of the alternative media, and also jail (Boo Teik, 2003, p. 126; Respini & Sahrasad, 2016, p. 44).

However, after Mahathir resigned from office in 2003, the labels 'soft-authoritarian' (Gordon, 1996), 'semi-democracy' (W. F. Case, 2016; Mohamad Saleh et al., 2018; Welsh, 1996), 'pseudo-democracy' (W. F. Case, 2001), and 'authoritarian' (Rueban Balasubramaniam, 2012; S. Tan, 1990) were said to be a thing in the past. Instead, these new political conditions were described as 'deliberative', particularly when Mahathir's successor, Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, guaranteed the right to speak and made clear his readiness to "discuss all issues even if they involved sensitive topics" (Mohd Azizuddin Mohd Sani, 2009, p. 100). As recounted by Beng & Ahmad (2015):

"Apparently, Malaysians are now allowed more space as more freedom has been given to the media, politicians and Malaysians in general, while freedom of speech and expression had supposedly become permissible. It was during the rule of Abdullah

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<sup>13</sup> For a brief background on 13<sup>th</sup> May 1969 incident, see Chapter 2.

Ahmad Badawi and Najib Razak that large scaled as well as minor street protests organised by non-governmental organisations (NGO)...” (p. 297).

Together with the development of and access to the internet, Malaysia’s post-Mahathir era saw the emergence of new media and the creation of a new social movement. In discussing this particular segment, Haris Zuan discovered a new political culture outside of the formal setting in the form of a cultural community. According to him, this non-formal cultural community opted for advocacy that utilises popular culture, particularly the new social media. This method was able to avoid certain government controls, simultaneously giving voice to the contestation of state authority (Zuan, 2021, pp. 260–263). In a similar vein, Pauline Pooi Yin Leong’s study points out the strategic use of satirical graphics and cartoons in new media during the 14<sup>th</sup> General Elections to trigger public discussion about political and socioeconomic issues (2019, p. 122). In her study, political satirists were able to “transform complex socio-economic and political issues into simple artistic messages and bridge the political knowledge gap for average Malaysian could comprehend” and “to change the mindset that eventually convinced Malaysians to vote for a change of government.”<sup>14</sup>

One stark example might be suited to the initiative of one of the informants in this study, Fahmi Reza, who conducted the ‘democracy class’ on TikTok and around university campuses prior to the GE15 (FMT, 2023; Sufian, 2022). Months before the GE15 was held on 19<sup>th</sup> November 2022, Fahmi Reza took the initiative to teach political education to youngsters on TikTok livestream and physical roadshows at higher education institutions around Malaysia. His target audiences were mostly first-time voters, as Malaysia had recently lowered its voting

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 124.



age to 18. On TikTok, Fahmi succeeded in attracting thousands of TikTok users to follow his public lectures. I also voluntarily joined his livestream lecture for a few sessions. By using his Do-It-Yourself (DIY) diagram and placards as teaching tools, Fahmi taught basic knowledge about democracy, the electoral system, and Malaysian history. He also often discussed his satirical works, performed online voting for certain current issues, and also encouraged feedback from his audiences.

Another perfect example is the political satire of Malaysian artist Ernest Ng, famously known for his webcomic *If Malaysia Was Anime: Covidball Z*. The COVID-19 virus hit the world in early 2020 and was declared a pandemic on 11<sup>th</sup> March 2020, effectively forcing the world into lockdown. However, amidst the implementation of strict Movement Control Orders (MCO) to combat its spread, Malaysia saw an unexpected change of government when Muhyiddin Yassin was sworn in as Malaysia's eighth prime minister on 1<sup>st</sup> March 2020 after Mahathir resigned from the post (Al-Jazeera, 2020). Ernest Ng then used these complex situations to portray a power struggle among politicians (i.e., the government and opposition) and the government vis-à-vis the COVID-19 pandemic, who were often described as the forgotten, real enemy (Kudus & Lee, 2022, p. 258). Politicians and public personalities become the subject matter, and whom are often depicted with cool and muscular features.<sup>15</sup> A study by Susan Philip (2021) concludes that *Covidball Z* allowed Ernest Ng and his readers to share their dissatisfaction and create a community of dissent by allowing a space for sharing and communication (2021, p. 719).

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 256.

## 1.2 Satire and humour research in Malaysia

Studies on satire and humour in Malaysia are generally quite limited in both volume and perspective. Generally, the study of satire and humour is focused mainly on literature, communication, and linguistics. They has been scant investigation from the point of view of political satire and from the theoretical point of view I am currently attempting to consider.

However, in terms of volume, studies on contemporary satire in Malaysia are clearly of significant interest among researchers, along with the development of the ‘*meme*’, a picture with a caption to present relatable situations, as well as the ‘*internet troll*’ phenomenon on the internet.<sup>16</sup> At present, through an online search on the *MyJurnal* portal, eight (8) studies used the keyword ‘*satira*’; the earliest detected being from Hasuria Che Omar (2012). In comparison, six (6) studies were found using the keyword ‘*sindiran*’.<sup>17</sup> There is also a study on satire in films in Malaysia by Hassan and Idris (2020), and an undergraduate thesis by Rahim Haron (2007).

On the same portal, the most recent search until the present study was conducted found thirteen (13) studies with the keyword ‘*jenaka*’ (*trans.* jokes), and among the earliest studies documented is that by Rahman Shaari (2004). In comparison, a recent study with the same keyword was written by Hazrul Mazran Rusli and Abdul Aziz Zali @ Zalay (2020). Studies with the keyword ‘*humour*’ in Malaysia are relatively large in number at about thirty-four (34).

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<sup>16</sup> For further literature on this subject, **SEE:** Anuar et. Al. (2017, 2018); Azira & Yusof (2021); Ramli & Roslan (2019) and Zulkifli et al. (2018).

<sup>17</sup> *Satira* and *sindiran* are Malay translation for ‘satire’.

Studies using this keyword have also been published in various disciplines that include language, education, media, linguistics, management studies, medicine and health sciences.

In Indonesia, through a search on the *Garuda: Garba Rujukan Digital*, between 2010-2022, sixty-six (66) studies used the keyword ‘satire’, whilst twelve (12) used the keyword ‘satir’, and thirteen (13) used ‘jenaka’. On the same portal, thirty-four (34) studies used the keyword ‘sindiran’ (trans. innuendos). However, a stupendous five hundred and seventy-seven (577) studies with the keyword ‘humour’ can be found for this time period. This vast difference in number shows that research on humour and satir/a/e is more prevalent among researchers in Indonesia.

In Malaysia, one undergraduate and two master’s theses written specifically on satire and politics were produced in 2016 and 2020. At the undergraduate level, a dissertation by Siti Khadijah Ahmed (2016) entitled ‘Politics of Satire and Resistance Culture in Malaysia’ and at the degree level Masters by Fairuzzaman Shaharuddin (2016) entitled ‘Political Criticism through Political Satire Post-1998 Reformation’, both from the Research Centre for History, Politics and International Affairs, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM). These two studies attempt to explain satire as a form of political expression.

In addition, a master’s thesis by Ahmad Zahiruddin Mohd Zabidi (2020) presented an Islamic perspective, contributing to the studies’ satirical thinking in preaching (*da’wah*) writing in Malaysia. His study was later published as a monograph by Universiti Malaysia Kelantan Publishers (UMK Publishers). Even so, studies of satire and humour from other disciplines cannot be excluded; instead, these studies form the basis of current studies in various fields in terms of being a consolidation of a body of knowledge pertaining to political satire. Therefore, the following highlights studies of satire and humour in the literature.

Fatimah Busu conducted a pioneering study of satire in novels through the ‘Ciri-ciri Satira Dalam Novel Melayu dan Afrika Moden: Kajian Perbandingan’ (*trans.* Characteristics of Satire in Malay and South African Novels) (1992). In this comparative study, Fatimah Busu presents satirical themes written in Malay and South African novels during the colonial period. This comparison is based on the historical factors of British colonialism in each of these countries and continents. The satirical novels produced are political weapons and social satire whose intention is to fight colonial rule (Fatimah Busu, 1992, p. ix). Among the early satirical novels in Malaysia mentioned by Fatimah are *The Voyage of Abdullah, Prince of Gunung Tahan*, *The son of mad Mat Lela*, and *Blessed Mouse*.<sup>18</sup>

Fatimah Busu (1992) made the following observation from her comparison of satirical novels from Malaysia and other Southeast Asian countries such as Indonesia and the Philippines:

“...almost has no direct difference in terms of history, natural science, politics and literature as if the two were united all three.”<sup>19</sup> Even a comparison between literary novels from Japan and China cannot be made because these countries “have reached the level of world literature.”<sup>20</sup>

Fatimah Busu’s study was continued by Syed Othman Syed Omar, known as S. Othman Kelantan, through his doctoral dissertation entitled *Satirical Thought in Malay Novels* (1997). Syed Othman sees the influence of satirical thoughts in the novel on significant events in

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., pp. 27-37.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. vii.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

Malaysia, which are divided into three epochs, namely: (i) before the Second World War (1876-1941); (ii) after the Second World War (1945-1959); and (iii) post-Independence (1945-1959). Syed Othman Kelantan's study is quite interesting in that he argues that elements of satirical thought already existed in the Malay worldview, especially in their philosophy of life. These two early studies can be considered pioneering in their study of satire and humour in prose, particularly the novel.

Oral satire and humour in Malay culture are discussed by Shaiful Bahri Md Radzi, (2000) in his dissertation entitled *Malay Humorous Tales: Performance, Corpus of Oral Texts and Its Study*. His research explores humorous Malay tales told by ordinary people through storytelling. His thematic study shows that the storytellers deliver humorous and satirical stories to the audience based on a number of factors, namely age, marital status, gender, and educational background.

Shaiful Bahri Md. Radzi (2002) then further discusses the classification of Malay jokes based on the study of R. O Winstedt in *Cherita Jenaka* (trans. Joke stories). According to Shaiful, Winstedt's classification is too simplistic in nature. The classification barely delves into the nature each of the characters from Malay humour exhibits, such as *Pak Pandir*, *Pak Kadok*, *Si Luncai*, and *Lebai Malang*. Thus, Shaiful's studies raise several significant problems in responding to Malay folk jokes: (i) there is a difference in narration between oral sources and the written tradition; and (ii) sources of humorous stories tend to be based on documented extracts from the colonialists, especially Winstedt and Wilkinson. This matter was previously noted by Amin Sweeney (1980, 1987), who studied oralities in traditional Malay literary tradition.

The study of humour and jokes also received the attention of scholars from the perspective of Islam. Franz Rosenthal's (1956) pioneering work examines the use of humour in the Arab tradition in the early days of Islam through the legendary character Ash'ab. Rosenthal's study found that the development of humour in Arab society began by seeing humour as performance art. According to Rosenthal, the development of Ash'ab's humour is divided into three themes, namely (i) political, (ii) religious, and (iii) middle-class (1956, pp. 34–35). His research found that humour and satire about religion have gradually lost their identity and social interest.

These findings align with the development of the Islamic faith and interpretations of the propriety of humour and satire according to Islamic teachings.<sup>21</sup> The significant loss of interest involves not only matters of morality but also matters of representation in images, especially the depiction of the image of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ (Bakker, 2006, p. 89).

However, Gruber (2018) proves that Muslim painters – especially in Persia – have historically produced images and allegories depicting the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ in person. Even humour and satire are practised in *Sufi*s orders, primarily through the character of Naṣruddin in *Sufi*'s literature. Studies from Baldock (2004) and Idries Shah (1966, 1969, 1994), among others, show that the use of humour and satire through the character of Naṣruddin has been used in *Sufi* orders as a teaching method and learning, especially concerning the transcendental and mystical dimension of Islam. Although the use of humour and jokes exist in the practice of the Islamic community, its use has limitations. Imam Ibn al-Jawzi (2018) asserts that this practice of laughing is allowed but limited. This limitation is proposed in the

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 35.

*hadith* teachings that forbid Muslims from conveying false news to cause laughter among listeners. Apart from this, al-Jawzi emphasised that laughing to humiliate others or excessively is prohibited in Islamic practice (2018, p. 2).

In any event, the use of allegory is one of the essential elements of satire (Burns, 1979; Idema, 1995; E. Leyburn, 1956; E. D. Leyburn, 1948). An allegory is often based on real life, or real character, place, or event to convey a message. Therefore, the use of allegory in satire is important in terms of the ability to criticise reality. Among the allegories in satire that can be detected in addition to the use of writing or novels are the associated images or caricatures. In Malaysia, along with the advancement of printing and newspaper technology in the colonial era, satire has also been detected in visual form.

Among the early studies on satire and humour in the form of caricatures in Malaysia is *Senda, Sindir, Sengat* (1989) by Zakiah Hanum. Her research found that satirical political caricatures in Malay newspapers contributed to political awareness among Malays during pre-Independence. Apart from attempting to entertain readers, these caricatures draw the readers' attention to issues involving Malays in terms of current affairs (Hanum, 1989, p. 1).

Newspapers before the Second World War from the *Warta Malaya* group, such as *Warta Ahad* and *Warta Jenaka* and *Majlis*, actively published articles and caricatures highlighting the plight of backward Malays in terms of economic position. Much of the satire directed towards Malays was regarding laziness, the conflict between religious laws, debt, and the influence of the Western way of life in diluting the Malay identity. In addition, some

caricatures satirised Chinese and Indian immigrants, fearing that Malay property and land would fall into the hands of foreigners.<sup>22</sup>

Muliyadi Mahamood (2004) also shows the use of editorial caricatures in Malay newspapers from their earliest publication until the 1990s. In this study, he divided editorial caricatures into two eras: (i) editorial caricature from the 1930s until 1957; and (ii) post-war Malay caricature from 1957 until 1993. According to Muliyadi (2004):

“Critical humour in pre-independence cartoons was used to improve Malay attitudes, create progress in the economy and politics, and attack colonial injustice and the immigrant’s encroachment upon Malay’s rights. With such a multi-racial target of criticism and unconstrained by any form of censorship, the critical humour of Malay pre-independence cartoons tended to be more blunt, direct, and multicultural.” (p. 237).

His study also analyses the character of *Wak Ketok*, published in the newspaper *Utusan Zaman*. This character was drawn by Ali Sanat and is based on the alter ego of Rahim Kajai, the editor of *Utusan Zaman*. It is generally known that Kajai was also very critical of the plight of the Malays at that time. Kajai’s satire through the character of *Wak Ketok* satirises the Arab and Indian Peranakans, which he termed Arab Descendant Blood (Darah Keturunan Arab, DKA) and Keling Descendant Blood (Darah Keturunan Keling, DKK).<sup>23</sup> In particular, it can

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 39.

<sup>23</sup> DKK, or Jawi Peranakan, is referred to as the Malay sub-ethnic of Indian Muslim descendants. This sub-ethnic emerged from a mix-marriage between Indian Muslim merchant men from the region of Coromandel and Malabar, India, with the Malaya women from Pulau Pinang (Penang). The Malay community of Penang were said to be the offspring of Malay voyagers from Pagar Ruyung, Indonesia, during the 13<sup>th</sup> Century. In comparison, the DKA



be seen that the satire by *Wak Ketok* satirises the clash of Malay identity. This satire was born through Kajai's observation that the DKA and DKKs often misuse their Malay identity when committing crimes.

A recent discussion by Ahmad Murad Merican (2020) and Razan Rosman and Sarena Abdullah (2018) on identity using *Wak Ketok* caricatures is enlightening. Ahmad Murad Merican's study shows that Kajai's *Wak Ketok* caricature highlights the question of the identity of 'We' and 'The Others' by referring to the cultural and identity differences between Malays and Arab and Indian Peranakans and Europeans (2020, pp. 323–333). As Kajai wrote, "Islam is not a *bangsa* but a religion", therefore, he saw that the identity of the Malays was not merely narrowed down to Muslim, per se. In fact, it was far more cosmopolitan before the arrival of the British. This cosmopolitan image can be seen in the character of *Wak Ketok*, who is described as a Javanese man to represent friendly Malay sub-ethnic communities such as Java,

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referred to the Malay sub-ethnic of Hadhrami Arab descendants. The nomadic lifestyle of Hadhramis finally landed them in Malaya after the opening of Singapore in 1819 by the British as their base in Southeast Asia. The region opened as a free port and created opportunities for foreign traders. Like their Indian Muslim counterparts, the Hadhramis also assimilated with the Malays by adapting to their way of life, language, food, customs and mix-marriage. Having to claim as a descendant of Prophet Muhammad ﷺ and so the Hadhramis were respected by the Malays and classified as 'Malays' in the 1911 census in Kedah and Perlis. Due to their high status in society and good relationships with the rulers and the Sultan, the Jawi and Arab Peranakan received a lot of benefits, including owning land and businesses. For further discussion on this subject, **SEE:** Latifah Abdul Latiff. (2014). The Hadhrami Arabs in Malaya Before The Second World War. *SEJARAH: Journal of the Department of History*, 23(1), 1–29 and Badrul Redzuan Abu Hassan. (2017). Filmografi 'Anak Mami' dan Wacana Keetnikan: Sebuah Perspektif Kritis. *Jurnal Komunikasi: Malaysian Journal of Communication*, 33(1), 383–394.

Sumatra, Borneo, and many more in the Archipelago (Razan Rosman & Sarena Abdullah, 2018, p. 26).

This is based on the Malay definition expressed by Kajai and the Singapore Malay Union, which sees the definition of *Jati Malays* as more exclusive while simultaneously rejecting ‘foreign nations’ (Maier, 2010, p. 92). As mentioned by Emmanuel, there was a tremendous acceleration in newspaper publishing between 1930 and 1941, despite the Great Depression (2010, p. 1). However, during World War 2 (WW2), Malaya was occupied by the Japanese after the British left its colony. The Japanese then took control of the press to their own advantage.

Saiful Akram Che Kob (2018) discussed satire as a tool of Japanese propaganda in Malaya during 1942-1945. In Che Kob’s study, it was reported that visual satire was used by the Japanese in newspapers, magazines, books, and general publications. Newspapers such as *The Malay Mail-New Order*, *The Syonan Times*, *The Syonan Sinbun*, and *Malai Sinpo* featured satirical cartoons and illustrations of more global issues such as the Axis against the Allied Powers and the general plights of World War II.

For example, satire created by the Japanese propaganda unit mocked and humiliated the British and the US, primarily with regard to Japan’s success in expelling the British from Malaya and the bombing of Pearl Harbour. At the same time, the visual illustrations also depict Japan’s greatness and ability to lead the people of Asia – especially the Malays and Indians – toward liberation.

In addition, a study of political satire from a legal perspective was discussed by Baksh, Kwan, and Liddle (2010) regarding one satirical article published in the newspaper *Harakah* on 29<sup>th</sup> March 1999. In this case, the newspaper published one article entitled ‘Malaysia Sweeps

10 Oscars'. This article mocks several people, including the alleged witness of Anwar Ibrahim's sodomy case, Ummi Hafilda Ali; Ex-Inspector General of Police, Abdul Rahim Noor; businessman Halim Saad, and several others who allegedly won several categories in a film that did not exist. Ummi Hafilda Ali later sued the publication, and the court's decision ultimately favoured the plaintiff by distinctively asseverating satire as an act of defamation and apprehension.

According to them, political satire tends to be exposed to legal action due to the practice of political satire as a means to attack individuals (2010, pp. 38–40). In the legal context, political satire is rarely seen to be able to distinguish between individuals as public figures and individuals as human beings. As the researchers emphasised, political satire is a direct criticism and ridicule based on current context and specific individuals. Political satire differs from satire as a genre in literature that attacks a subject in general. Therefore, from a legal point of view, even though political satire is fiction, when used to attack specific individuals it is often interpreted as defamation and character assassination.

One particular study on political cartoonists and resistance was completed by Chuan Yean (2011). In the article, he studies the symbolic images in several of Zunar's drawings. However, as previously explained, studies on satire and humour in Southeast Asia, especially in Malaysia, have yet to focus on an expression of political resistance. Therefore, in her study, Ann Elizabeth Lever (2019) discusses the use of satire as a dissenting action via three modes of transmission: (i) theatre; (ii) television; and (iii) social media. Through her analysis of the Indonesian television show *Setengah Reformasi* (*trans.* Half Reformation), she found that the satire was based on unbalanced democratic practices subsequent to Suharto's rule. Meanwhile,

satire in Malaysia is based on an agenda of ‘Malay-Islamic supremacy’.<sup>24</sup> This suggests a close relationship between satire and political practice.

A master’s thesis from Fairuzzaman Shaharuddin (2016) debates political satire as a form of protest against and criticism of political decisions made by the state. Since satire is a creative protest, its expression can be channelled through many forms, including novels, political caricatures, comedy shows, and theatre. However, in Fairuzzaman’s debate, the state instead attempts to dominate this creative space. Therefore, there is a contestation of this space between satirists and the state (2016, pp. 72–73).

It is generally known that the institutionalisation of creative art has directly given control to the state, especially with regard to certain aspects of access, legal regulation, and content. However, along with the development of the internet and information technology, the factors mentioned earlier are becoming more fluid and relatively independent. With this in mind, Khin-Wee Chen’s (2016) study offers a new case study of satire on Facebook in Malaysia and Singapore. His analysis uses the concept of ‘citizen satire’, advocated by Rebecca Higgie (2015), based on the progress of the democratisation of media and journalism in the digital age. In his conclusion, he stated that internet users use satire on Facebook to express their opposition to the current political situation in Malaysia and Singapore, following the limitation of freedom of expression in traditional media and public spaces (2016, pp. 308–309).

Nevertheless, after 2018, studies on satire have, once again, begun to stir significant interest among researchers. A study by Harveena Kaur and Arnold Puyok (2021) shows that political satire can influence the political perception of young people in Malaysia. Their

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 302-303.

analysis of fifty (50) respondents proves that various forms of political satire can improve political literacy (2021, p. 25). Their study also categorised political satire into seven (7) forms: political graphics, political cartoons, political anime, memes, satirical newspaper pages, satirical posts on Twitter, and parody videos. An interesting finding from this study suggests that political satire in graphic form is more prevalent among young people than news sites.<sup>25</sup> This indicates that using images in political satire represents a more attractive way for young people to understand and follow the latest political issues. Recently, Zunar's political cartoons were once again studied by Abdul Latif and Elgarrai (2021) as a visual rhetoric. In this study, mutual understanding of local political issues between cartoonists and the audience is a focus as a crucial factor in influencing the intended persons or general masses in terms of impact and getting the message across.

Saad, Mohd Adnan and Mohd Radzi (2021) studied the formalistic style of Zunar's political cartoons. In their study, they found that there was an equilibrium in each of Zunar's caricatures that made it easier for audiences to understand his political messages while maintaining its artistic values.

As a supplement to these past studies, it is essential to add three conclusions by Lever in her study: first, the etymology of humour and satire, which runs from Ancient Greece to Mark Twain, is very complex to use as a universal concept. In addition, she asserted that the study of humour mainly focuses on the 'Anglosphere'. Second, the study of humour and satire is understudied in the context of Southeast Asian Studies due to the focus on 'organised dissent' in the form of demonstrations and protests. Third, the study of political satire mainly focused

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

on individual and technical aspects. With regard to the individual aspect, researchers tend to study political satirists according to their profession, such as cartoonists or graphic designers. Regarding the technical aspect, previous works of literature focus on their style, symbolism, and images. However, there is little attempt to study Malaysian political satirists collectively, whether as a group or a movement. Therefore, this research attempts to fill the gaps in the study of political satire, specifically from an ontological point of view.

### **1.3 Significance of the study**

Previous studies on political satire in Southeast Asia have been undertaken by Fairuzzaman Shaharuddin (2016), Khin Wee Chen (2016), and Ann Elizabeth Lever (2019). These three studies focus on political satire and democratisation, especially in Malaysia, Indonesia, and Singapore. In Lever's study, political satire in theatre, television shows, and on social media is seen as organised dissent akin to physical demonstrations and protests. One of the most compelling approaches to this issue was proposed by Lever (2019), who then added some interesting views, mainly through satire as everyday resistance based on the concept of 'hidden transcripts' and 'public transcripts' by James C Scott.

Similarly, Chen (2016) sees that the emergence of social media, such as Facebook, has given rise to an alternative platform for the community in Singapore to criticise administrative and political practices in the country. On the contrary, Shaharuddin (2016) argues that the method of criticising power through political satire in Malaysia is limited due to the government's dominance of the public space. Although these studies have extensively discussed political satire in general and in a contemporary sense, there remains a gap regarding the existence of post-Independence political satire and subsequent changes in themes and forms.

The concept of ‘hidden transcripts’ and ‘public transcripts’ introduced by James C. Scott explains the different reactions and languages of the dominant and the submissive parties when facing each other. Despite the framework offered by Scott, this approach only explains the tête-à-tête situation between the oppressors and the oppressed. This framework contemplates a problem where there is no direct contact between the parties, as the satirists’ mode of delivery is through arts and new media. On a larger scale, the dominant parties could control the oppressed or submissive with norm formation, laws, and regulations.

Thus, to explain descriptively, this study employs the ‘Theory of Contestation’ and ‘Two-Social Reality’ as research frameworks. Through this combination, this study assumes that political satire and the emergence of contemporary political satirists in Malaysia directly results from the power transitions in the post-Mahathir era. In this sense, political satirists challenge the formal norm while offering their definition and imagination of a just society – and one that might contradict the state’s version of nation-of-intents. Thus, such clashing values result in political satirists and their satirical works being rejected by the state’s official narrative. Due to authority-defined being more dominant and officially accepted, these MPS and their works are marked as political dissenters and slanderous.

#### **1.4 Research objectives**

To answer the main problems stated previously, this study is guided by four main objectives:

- (i) To describe the characteristic of MPS;
- (ii) To recognise the targets of MPS in their satirical works;
- (iii) To identify the theme and issues raised by MPS; and
- (iv) To understand the intention of MPS in producing political satire, despite knowing its ‘adverse’ impact.

## 1.5 Research procedures

This basic research aims to deepen and increase the knowledge about political satire in Malaysia. Based on the statement by Goddard and Melville, this study seeks to “answer or build questions that have not been asked before” (2007, p. 1), hence fulfilling the gap in the subject of contestation of power through political satire in Malaysia.

To meet the objectives, I first interviewed selected informants to gain clear insight into their lives and experiences. I studied their distinctive patterns from their interview transcripts based on their characters, similarities, and differences. Second, I thematically categorised the themes and issues highlighted by MPS according to their selected works. Finally, I analysed the themes and issues in these selected works and related them to the particular subjects’ political satirists attempt to satirise.

With this goal, this study has fully used qualitative methods based on online interviews through Zoom.<sup>26</sup> Interviews are conducted with four (4) key individuals actively producing works of political satire. The informants come from various backgrounds, such as writers, cartoonists, and graphic designers. To get a much clearer picture of the issues in arts vis-à-vis politics in Malaysia, this study also interviewed six (6) other informants who are considered authoritative or directly or indirectly involved in the arts and the political scene, namely:

1. Hasmi Hashim (writer, activist, poet, painter and lyricist);

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<sup>26</sup> Zoom Application is a software program that offers virtual-based conferences and meetings services online. This software became worldwide used during the Covid-19 pandemic since it provides free and paid services.



2. Dr. Mahathir Mohammad (former Prime Minister of Malaysia)
3. Jo Kukathas (theatre actress, founder of The Instant Café Theatre Company)
4. Dr. Alina Abdullah (translator, former Director of Shah Alam Gallery)
5. Nur Hanim Khairuddin (art curator and General Manager of People of Remarkable Talent, PORT Ipoh); and
6. Daniyal Kadir (writer, film critic, and director).

In addition to the online interview, the data collection process includes a literature review as part of the library research. Even so, this method is quite limited due to the temporary closure and strict Standard Operating Procedures (SOP) on library access during the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>27</sup> However, in the autumn of 2020, access to the library at the Universitätsbibliothek J.C Senckenberg began to open again with the set SOPs for COVID-19 prevention, allowing access to physical reading materials. Literature from past research journals was also obtained online. Journal articles on satire, humour, and jokes in Malaysia and Indonesia were also obtained through the *Garba Garuda*, *MyCite*, and *MyJurnal* portals.

Before the online interview, I contacted the informants via phone, email, WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger, Twitter, and Instagram. After establishing a rapport and gaining consent, informants were given a list of questions. However, some questions were slightly changed, as befitting the informant's particular background. The informants were informed in advance about the necessity to record for this study. They were also informed that this study would be

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<sup>27</sup> The novel pneumonia disease known as Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) was first identified in Wuhan (a province in China) and later was confirmed by the World Health Organization on January 12, 2020, before the disease becoming an outbreak in all countries and declared a pandemic.

published. In addition, due to the relatively sensitive topics and a number of ongoing court cases, informants were also allowed to utilise a pseudonym or audio recording to safeguard their privacy. Nonetheless, all informants agreed to have their conversations recorded via audio and visual means.

Two methods of analysis are used in this research, namely thematic and descriptive analyses. First, thematic analysis categorises each theme and issue highlighted by the informants based on their selected works. Second, I also performed additional in-depth interviews with four key informants to supplement input pertaining to the research topic, as previously mentioned; therefore, to analyse the data, descriptive analysis was performed for the interview transcription.

### **1.5.1 Methodology**

It has been certified that qualitative research methods are constructive in terms of discovering the process involving meaning, life experience, cultural rituals, and oppressive practices (Atkinson, 2017, p. 65). A person's drive and motivation derive from various factors, and where the latter can influence someone's actions and behaviour (West & Uhlenberg, 1970, p. 47). Therefore, semi-structured in-depth interviews have been used to study the meanings, life experiences, cultural rituals and conditions, and to observe the challenges experienced by these satirists. This study also aims to explain the role of satirists in Malaysia as well as the factors that motivate them to create satirical works.

The qualitative methods adopted in this study are also appropriate to explore "socially constructed dynamic reality through a framework which is value-laden, flexible, descriptive, holistic, and context-sensitive." (Yilmaz, 2013, p. 312). Subsequently, I started by investigating

the nature of the informants' handiwork and publications, performances, involvement, and whether they were subject to any legal action to explore the suitability of the questions.

Following the framework already defined, the transcription of the interviews between the researcher and informants was recorded. The questions asked were designed to be open-ended based on the initial assessments during the interview. This method allows informants to answer the questions freely. In addition, open-ended inquiries helped me grasp the circumstances they experienced without making any predetermined assumptions (Geer, 1988, p. 365; Yilmaz, 2013, p. 313).

#### **1.4.2 Data accumulation**

Archiving qualitative data in a coordinated manner and thematic scheme is highly practical in terms of allowing researchers to store, access, and download information, besides being effective in exhibiting trends (Elman et al., 2010, p. 23). Qualitative data materials are divided into various forms. According to Elman, Kapiszewski, and Vinuela (2010), these materials: "...include, for example, interview tapes, text files (transcripts from interviews, focus groups, and oral histories; case notes; meeting minutes; research diaries), scans of newspaper articles, images of official documents, and photographic, audio, and video materials."<sup>28</sup>

Each informant was initially contacted through various mediums, including social media, email, and phone calls. They were also provided with a set of semi-structured questions as an initial guide to the interview session that was subsequently arranged. However, this set of semi-structured questions does not represent a fixed schematic; rather, it can broaden the

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

study's perspective by exploring new dimensions (J. Elliott, 2008, pp. 419–420). Thus, the semi-structured questions were used purely as a starting point for the topics discussed in the interview session.

The questions are set according to this research's Research Objectives (ROs). The data, which comprise the answers gain from the informants, were then transcribed and thematically analysed. The informants also answered some follow-up questions via email as supplementary material and for any clarification that might have been necessary. The informants' basic questions were about their backgrounds and the legal actions imposed on them for their involvement in political satire. These questions were asked to determine their motivations for being involved in political satire activities.

### **1.5.2 Selecting materials**

This research has employed a purposive sampling method. According to Patton, “the logic and power of purposeful sampling lie in selecting information-rich cases for study in-depth” (Patton, 1990, p. 169). In addition, this strategy also allowed me to learn and understand the needs, interests, and incentives of a small number of carefully selected samples. Even if purposive sampling is credible, various practical questions regarding respondents' backgrounds have arisen. The respondents' native tongue, competency in the national language, Malay culture and subtleties, and acquaintance with the religion of the majority of Malays are also essential factors in this research that must be considered.

Nonetheless, it is possible to employ purposive sampling coupled with specific ‘criterion sampling’, as suggested by Patton, to improve the efficiency of data collection. According to Patton (1990), criterion sampling is “to review and study all cases that meet some

predetermined criterion of importance.”<sup>29</sup> Therefore, after considering the predetermined criteria, I carefully selected the informants based on four (4) primary criteria, namely that they:

- i. are someone of Malay and Malaysian descent;
- ii. are actively producing political satire;
- iii. have stirred some form of controversy and interest among society; and
- iv. have been involved in social and political movements.

Since I intended to have informants who fit all the above categories, only a few selected individuals matched the descriptions. Initially, eleven (11) individuals were contacted to serve as the primary informants for this study. However, five (5) of them refused or did not give any response. In the end, only six (6) informants agreed and were successfully interviewed online. However, two (2) informants were later excluded as they did not fit some of the abovementioned criteria.

## **1.6 Scope and limitation**

This study focuses on the political artworks in Peninsular Malaysia created by four (4) individuals through their five (5) selected satirical writing and visual works between 2011-2018. These individuals and their political works were chosen based on their involvement with social movements, experience with the authorities and enforcement, and the gravity of the controversies they caused as a result of those selected works.

One of the biggest challenges in this study was scheduling and conducting online interviews. This challenge arose because few informants were sufficiently skilled in using the

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 176-177.

Zoom application, and in addition to poor internet connections, the experience could be considered taxing. Secondly, due to the physical boundaries and online meetings, I also faced some difficulty building rapport and gaining trust among informants to share their information and experience. Some informants employed a ‘guarded stance’ when answering the questions due to matters that could be regarded as being sensitive, in addition to any ongoing legal cases.

Third, within the timeframe of this research, some of the informants still had pending legal proceedings and were called by the authorities to assist in the associated investigations. The authorities confiscated their phones and electronic devices. Simultaneously, their online conversations were also scrutinised. These concerns also affected the majority of the interview process as the informants were aware that their words could be used against them in a court of justice and were hence hesitant and cautious when giving their answers.

Most of the study on satire begins with satire in literary studies. However, finding informants who write political satire consistently and have several books published on this subject is challenging. Some writers produced satirical political novels have long passed away, such as Shahnnon Ahmad, Azizi Hj Abdullah, and Hassan Ibrahim. Hence, for literary writing, I interviewed a controversial writer and academic, Faisal Tehrani. Regarding caricature, I managed to interview two political cartoonists: Zunar, and Amin Landak. Regarding graphic design, I interviewed a well-known political graphic designer, Fahmi Reza.

Finally, in term of definitions, for the purpose of this study, I employ here the terms ‘satire/a’ and ‘humour’ according to Fatimah Busu (1992) and S. Othman Kelantan (1997) as this study deals specifically with recent Malay and Malaysian context.

## 1.7 Structure of the study

This study is divided into six (6) main chapters. The first chapter gives a background that explains the basis to this research in detail. This section consists of the Introduction, Statement of the Problem, Significance of the Study, Research Objectives, Research Methodology, Scope and Limitation of Studies, Thesis Outline, and Summary. The Introduction section also serves as a guideline for this study based on the problem statement and the main objectives.

Chapter 2 begins with a brief historical background on Malaysian socio-political conditions. The historical background is essential for readers to understand events in Malaysia, and the country's nature and social fabric. Next, this chapter also highlights previous related studies undertaken by various scholars. In addition, the highlights of this section identify the parts that still need to be explored and the questions that still need to be raised in the study of the use of political satire in Malaysia. To conceptualise the emergence of particular Strategic and Conflict-ability Groups during the democratic transformation in Malaysia, this study adopted the *strategischen und konfliktfähigen Gruppen* (SKOG) approach. This chapter also provides theoretical frameworks to guide the study. Firstly, I highlighted the Theory of Contestation by Antje Wiener, which explains bottom-up contestation through three levels of norm formation. This is relevant as the context of Malaysia represents a diverse background centred around religion, race, language, and culture; hence, the norm formations had to be clear-cut. The theoretical framework is also guided by the 'Two-Social Reality' approach. The 'Two-Social Reality', introduced by A.B. Shamsul, explains the existence of certain paradigms viewed by both the satirists and the government via the 'everyday-defined' and 'authority-defined' concepts.

Chapter 3 is an extension of previous discussion on MPS. This chapter discusses the characterisation of MPS and their exclusionary factors from their mainstream community counterparts. In this chapter, I point out several distinct characteristics of MPS, which are different from the citizen satire's point of view. This chapter also explains the exclusionary factors of MPS from other mainstream scenes, resulting in their alienation and vulnerability to legal action.

Chapters 4 and 5 form the central part of the analyses that explain this study's four main objectives. In this chapter, analyses were performed to explain the themes and issues highlighted in the selected works and the subjects' motivations for doing political artwork. Descriptive analysis was performed for each informant based on their background and life experiences. The analysis used the data transcription from in-depth interview sessions with all informants. Each of their selected works was classified and categorised into two particular themes, which was achieved via thematic analysis. Subsequently, answers to the research questions and objectives posed at the beginning of Chapter 1 are also addressed.

The final chapter, Chapter 6 of this study, offers a series of concluding remarks and recommendations for future studies. This chapter also highlights issues and suggestions that might be valuable to other researchers. Through this section, I conclude the findings based on the analyses conducted in the previous two chapters.

## **1.8 Summary**

In this chapter, I emphasise, to some extent, the background to this study, which focuses on MPS, particularly between 2011-2018. From the general background, at least three phenomena are apparent. Firstly, during the pre-Independence era, political satire in visual form was used by Malay nationalists to disseminate nationalism among the Malay people. Secondly, political



satire during the post-Independence era was used in the entertainment industry, such as in comic magazines. However, post-Independence satire – or political satire – was bound under various rules and regulations in the name of national unity and harmony concerning multi-ethnic relations. Finally, MPS challenges the top-down approach by producing satirical political artworks, creating problems for such. Therefore, to briefly understand the historical aspect, the following chapter discusses Malaysia's socio-political background.

## **CHAPTER 2: AN OVERVIEW OF MALAYSIA'S SOCIO-POLITICAL LANDSCAPE**

### **2.0 Introduction**

In the Malay language and psyche, the term and the concept of 'nation' (*bangsa*) carries various meanings. In addition, due to a complex history and diverse communities, establishing the nature of a singular, 'compromise' nation is challenging. Furthermore, modern Malaysia still has certain roots in 'colonial knowledge' and the British administration system, which has now been accepted as fact and continuously used by the state and administration. To understand these dilemmas, this chapter began with a discussion on the Malaysia's socio-political background and its efforts with regard to nation-state formation. From this background, this chapter highlights the existence of various strategic and conflict-ability groups in Malaysia's democratic transformation. Finally, to position this study both systematically and scientifically, this chapter also highlights the theoretical and conceptual framework of the study as a tool to explain the contestation between political satirists vis-à-vis power.

### **2.1 Socio-political background**

British colonialism left a most impactful legacy on Malaya's economic and modern administrative structure (Haque, 2007, p. 1299; Jomo, 1990, pp. 4–5). To aid British economic activities on the Malay Peninsula, the East India Company (EIC) brought in Chinese and Indian migrant workers to meet their labour needs (Kaur, 2012, p. 226). The breakdown of these labour workers can be made according to the ethnic division of labour; where the Malays were concentrated in rural areas and engaged in subsistence farming activities, most Indians lived and worked in the plantation sector (Andaya & Andaya, 1982, p. 179; Kaur, 2012, pp. 230–231). In contrast, the Chinese concentrated in urban cities, where working in the large-scale tin mining industry and being involved in commercial activities simultaneously gave them a

certain economic leverage (Dening, 1999, p. 107). As a result, the economic gap between the various ethnicities widened, with the Malays and Indians lagging behind the Chinese (Chakraborti, 1996, p. 193; Parkinson, 1967, p. 31; Spaan et al., 2002, p. 161).

However, the British were forced to leave Malaya and Singapore after the Imperial Japanese army gradually overran and occupied its colonies between 1941-1942 (Stockwell, 1984, p. 68; Wey, 2018, p. 61). The Japanese policies later brought forth significant changes, especially regarding the treatment of these three ethnic groups. For example, to gain the support of the Malay community, the Japanese gave them preferential treatment by providing job opportunities and the cooperation of the Japanese administration (Soh, 1998, p. 96). The Indians were also treated favourably, as the Japanese helped to establish the Indian Independence League and the Indian National Army in Malaya (Rajagopal & Fernando, 2013, pp. 106–107).

By contrast, the Japanese adopted a different attitude towards the Chinese, primarily those who were anti-Japanese, including Tan Kah Kee's followers, Kuomintang members, Hainanese, or even a tattooed Chinese individual who were suspected of being Triad members (Boon Kheng, 2012, p. 25; Ling, 2009, p. 111; Soh, 1998, p. 27). One of the most horrendous events suffered by the Chinese was during Operation 'Sook Ching' on 17<sup>th</sup> February 1942, which started in Singapore and expanded to the Federated Malay States (FMS) in early March of the same year (Ling, 2009, pp. 111–112). The operation witnessed the mass killing of the Chinese, and left an estimated 5000 people detained in prison. The Chinese then were labelled according to four (4) categories, namely (i) Japanese opponents; (ii) communists; (iii) Chinese-

educated people; and (iv) criminals.<sup>30</sup> During World War II, the Communist Party of Malaya (CPM or Parti Komunis Malaya, PKM) collaborated with the British to oppose the Japanese invasion in Malaya (Boon Kheng, 2009, p. 133). The result of this collaboration also enabled the establishment of the guerrilla army known as Malayan People's Anti-Japanese Army (MPAJA) or *Bintang Tiga* (Kheng, 1977, p. 49; Ling, 2015, p. 67; Unknown, 1948, p. 25).

The Japanese policies had an atrocious effect on ethnic relations in Malaya, especially with regard to the conflict between the mutual trust, scepticism, suspicion, and prejudices between the Chinese and the Malays (Boon Kheng, 2012, p. 55). After Japan surrendered and retreated from Malaya, the CPM and MPAJA re-emerged “under the pretext of punishing people who committed crimes against the population and who conspired with Japan.” (Ling, 2015, p. 67). The tension escalated following the brutality and revenge carried out by the CPM and MPAJA on Malays who had “collaborated or [were] rumoured to have collaborated with the Japanese” (Vadivella Belle, 2014, pp. 225–226). The Malays then retaliated against the Chinese in a number of rural areas such as Perak, Negeri Sembilan, Johor, Pahang, Kedah, Kelantan, and Melaka (Haniffa et al., 2018; Haniffa & Mohamad, 2017; Ling, 2015).

The racial conflict between the Chinese and the Malays subsequently eased, primarily through negotiations in a Selangor People's Committee Meeting on 16<sup>th</sup> November 1945 (Haniffa et al., 2018, p. 64). This meeting was attended by Malay, Chinese, and Indian representatives at the Chinese Assembly Hall in Kuala Lumpur and whose aim was to discuss the problems between the Malays and the Chinese.<sup>31</sup> The newspaper *Seruan Ra'ayat*, on 17<sup>th</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., pp. 110-111.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

November 1945, also reported on this meeting, which ended with a call for harmony and forgetting the differences that had been exacerbated during the Japanese occupation.<sup>32</sup> The conflict between these ethnicities was successfully calmed in the following years after a series of discussions and when the majority reached a compromise. A positive result was obtained when these three major ethnicities reached an agreement to establish a Federation of Malaya.<sup>33</sup> In general, the Malays, Chinese, and Indians accepted and agreed upon the associated ‘social contract’ as the primary condition set by the British to gain independence.<sup>34</sup>

Thus, to date, the government has always considered ‘social contracts’ to justifiably be a sensitive issue. This consideration was proven valid when multiple political parties in the third GE incited racial issues to attract votes, causing a rift in the fragile racial unity of the time (Enh & Samak, 2020, pp. 1–2). The political parties’ tactics were apparent when the dissatisfaction felt by other ethnics towards the issue of the special rights of the Malays, the

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> The intended social contract is based on a memorandum agreed upon between the United Malays National Organization (UMNO), the Malayan (now Malaysian) Chinese Association (MCA) and the Malayan (now Malaysian) Indian Congress (MIC) in the Reid Commission. This agreement includes (i) citizenship based on the jus soli (birth right citizenship) principle, (ii) maintaining the special position of the Malays and (iii) the official position of the Malay language, culture and Islamic religion. For further discussion, **SEE** Mohamad A.N.A. et al. 2019 in Malaysian tolerance in harmonizing cultural diversity in Malaysia. *Jurnal Melayu*. 18(2): 193–206.

<sup>34</sup> According to Shad Saleem Faruqi, the ‘social contracts’ involved a certain degree of quid pro quo. The Malaysian Federal Constitution, “provide the indigenous features of the Malay Archipelago such as Malay Sultans, Malay language, Malay privileges, Malay reserve land, Malay custom, Islam and weightage for Malay dominated rural constituencies at election time. At the same time, the social contracts gave to non-Malays equal citizenship rights, religious, cultural, educational and economic freedom” (2012, p. 51).

national language, and citizenship was questioned in 1969's GE, simultaneously leading to bloody civil unrest.<sup>35</sup> Furthermore, the Malays were upset that their economic and political dominance and the special rights they then enjoyed were threatened following the big victory of the Chinese-dominated party, namely GERAKAN and the Democratic Action Party (DAP) in this election (Reid, 1969, p. 260; E. K. B. Tan, 2001, p. 965; Vethamani, 2020, p. 21).

Due to the conflict escalating, parliamentary government was suspended to allow the National Security Council (Majlis Gerakan Negara, MAGERAN) to resolve the increasing tension between the Chinese and Malays (Esa & Ationg, 2020, p. 171; Wong, 2018, p. 760). Later, in the Second Malaysia Plan, 1971-1975, the government, under the administration of the second prime minister, Tun Razak, in 1970 subsequently introduced the New Economic Policy (NEP) with two main objectives, namely (i) eradicating poverty irrespective of ethnicity; and (ii) restructuring and reorganising society and eliminating the ethnicity-based economic division of labour (Khai Leong, 1992, p. 206; Koon, 1997, p. 264; H. Lee, 2023, p. 100). In addition, the Sedition Act was also amended to prohibit sensitive issues from being discussed and questioned in public (Lent, 1984, p. 452; Mohd Azizuddin Mohd Sani, 2008, p. 78).

On the 13<sup>th</sup> May 1969, tragedy struck, marking a significant turning point in the change of Malaysia's political and economic trajectory (Deraman & Abdul Razak, 2018, p. 89; Ravallion, 2020, p. 2). Among the strategies targeted by the NEP was the ownership of 30% equity among the *Bumiputera*.<sup>36</sup> However, this ownership opportunity resulted in the effective

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> *Bumiputera* or *Bumiputra* (*trans.* Sons of the Soil) was exclusively used during the administration of Tun Abdul Razak, the second Malaysian Prime Minister. It refers to the identity of indigenous communities such as the

formation of a special elite group among UMNO members who were given proprietorship and encouraged by the government to participate in business with non-*Bumiputera* (Singh, 1995, p. 195, 1998, p. 247). As a result, UMNO further strengthened their financial position, effectively monopolising the economic and administrative sectors (Torii, 1997, p. 211).

The 13<sup>th</sup> May 1969 tragedy also changed the pattern of Malaysian democratic governance, with multiple associated changes taking place over the years. It was feared that the fragile democratic equilibrium in Malaysia would be shattered by racial crises that could result in yet another affliction. Accordingly, the democratisation process was further narrowed due to the imposition of several restriction on communication, put in place to prevent the previous bloodbath from reoccurring and to maintain peace amongst the Malaysian populace. This was described by Welsh (1996) in her book *The Politics of Human Rights in East Asia* as follows:

“Democracy in Malaysia is narrow because it limits the practice of civil and political liberties through restrictions on communication, assembly, the strategic use of detention orders and other legal and emergency powers...[D]espite the brief suspension of democracy after the 1969 racial riots and important differences in the limits on rights and political participation at different periods, this “semi-democratic” label has characterised the regime since 1957.” (p. 884).

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Malays, the Orang Asli (aborigines) and the indigenous people of Sabah and Sarawak. However, the term is not used in the Federal Constitution; instead, a number of Articles use a specific categorisation such as ‘the Malays and the aborigines’ (Article 153 and Article 160 (2)), ‘the natives of Sarawak’ (Article 161A (6)(a)) and ‘natives of Sabah’ (Article 161A (6)).

According to Welsh, the discussion about the appropriate limits to democracy in Malaysia was observed with 1969's racial riot as the time point reference. To reiterate, “[b]efore 1969, the regime was considerably more democratic; after 1982, under the leadership of the current prime minister, it has been seen as more undemocratic.”<sup>37</sup> In this context, the intended administration fell under the jurisdiction of fourth prime minister, Mahathir Mohamad. The democratic space during Mahathir's 22-year administration from 1981-2003 was seen as narrow and controlling from many perspectives (Slater, 2003, p. 83). During the 1970s, the narrative of Malay Supremacy (*Ketuanan Melayu*) was instituted to gain support from the Malays (J. Chin, 2018, p. 183, 2020, p. 295). This narrative continued throughout Mahathir's premiership, which led to Chinese-based BN parties becoming irrelevant as UMNO and the Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition became the two most stable political organisations in Malaysia (J. Chin, 2018, p. 183; Slater, 2012, p. 28).

The UMNO-BN hegemony could also be noted through the enforcement of various Draconian laws such as the Official Secrets Act (1972), the Internal Security Act (1960), the Printing and Publishing Act (1984), and the Sedition Act (1970). These enforced laws cemented the political continuity of UMNO with a two-thirds majority in Parliament, governing Malaysia for many years (W. Case, 1996b, p. 118).<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> However, UMNO is not the only party dominated by Malays. Another opposition party, the *Parti Islam, Se-Malaysia* (PAS), is also an Islamic-based party that is largely made up of the Malay ethnic.



However, following the strong current of modernisation and globalisation in the 1980s, significant changes in the Islamic world have also affected Malaysia. This wave involved the modernisation of society, the establishment of a modern state, capitalist economic organisation, technological and scientific development, and sweeping cultural and social changes, especially with regard to religious movements in Islam, Christianity, Judaism, and Hinduism, populists, nativists, and nationalists (Lapidus, 1997, p. 444). Therefore, to retain the Malays' support in the burgeoning Islamic movement, the UMNO started to include Islamic elements in its narrative. As explained by James Chin (2018):

“...the parties' increasingly hegemonic approach and the rise of political Islam in UMNO in the 1980s caused the party to pull back from its Chinese partners in the Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition, and over time, from the Chinese community in general.” (p. 172).

In Malaysia, this wave of Islamic reformism was initially led by two groups: religious educated groups (Arabic and religious-educated groups), such as *Jamaat Tabligh* (Lecture Group) and *Darul Arqam* (the House of Arqam); and a group of Malay and English-educated youth (Mohamad Abu Bakar, 1981, pp. 1040–1041; Sundaram & Ahmad Shabery Cheek, 1988, pp. 844–845). Upon deepening their knowledge, particularly in Islamist ideologues and political thought, the works and ideas of renowned Islamic scholars were studied. According to Nasr (1995):

“Outside Pakistan, the mark of Mawdudi's ideas and worldview is evident in the sundry revivalist formulations from Morocco to Malaysia. The Jama'at's literature is available in twenty-six languages ranging from Arabic, Malay, and Persian to Spanish, Swahili, Japanese and Malayalam. Through them, Mawdudi's ideas have impressed Egyptian

revivalist thinkers, especially Sayyid Qutb and the Muslim Brotherhood of Egypt; Hassan Turabi and the Muslim Brotherhood of Sudan; Iranian revolutionary leaders; revivalist activists in Afghanistan, Algeria, Jordan, Lebanon, Malaysia, Syria, Tunisia, and Turkey...” (p. 265).

This excerpt shows that the *Jama'at* ideology carried through al-Mawdudi's writings dramatically impacted the Islamic revival movement worldwide. While the first group initially operated through Islamic organisations and was missionary centred, the second group operated through various Islamic societies, was religious-educated centred and had two fronts, within Malaysia and abroad (Mohamad Abu Bakar, 1981, p. 1041). The Malaysia front was active through Islamic associations in universities, which regularly held activities such as *usrah* (Islamic-based group discussion) conducted by their *ustaz* (learned Islamic teachers).<sup>39</sup> In 1971, several graduates from the University of Malaya and other higher education institutions formed the *Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia* (*trans.* Muslim Youth Organisation, ABIM) as a platform for students throughout higher education to continue their *da'wah* activities.<sup>40</sup>

These three Islamic revivalist organisations, ABIM, *Darul Arqam*, and *Jamaat Tabligh*, had the political objective to resurrect classical Islam in Malaysia.<sup>41</sup> ABIM's president at the time, Anwar Ibrahim, received international attention and was even invited to Pakistan and Iran to meet President Zia-ul-Haq and Ayatollah Khomeini. According to Mohamad Abu Bakar, the Malaysian government's stance is ambivalent towards increasing the Islamisation agenda in

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., p. 1046.

this country.<sup>42</sup> Contrary to the equivocal view, the government was seen to encourage *da'wah* activities, especially with the launch of *Da'wah Month*, which was organised by the third prime minister, Hussein Onn. Islamic programmes in the media flourished, with initiations such as the call to prayer on radio and television channels and *da'wah* activities, including Islamic forums. In addition, Islamic teachings content and the establishment of state institutions, such as *Yayasan Islam* (Islamic foundations), also increased in number.<sup>43</sup>

From another perspective, this Islamisation agenda also received adverse reactions, especially from the liberal-secular and nationalist groups who saw its incompatibility with the multi-ethnic Malaysian society.<sup>44</sup> This concern was also voiced by the then Minister of Commerce and Industry, Mahathir Mohamad, who pointed to “difficulties in attracting investment from other nations due to opposition from some religious groups.”<sup>45</sup> From the political parties’ dimension, two parties, UMNO and PAS, also experienced a significant impact on the wave of Islamic revivalism. Even so, these two parties managed the influence in different ways. UMNO, established with a nationalist and consensus policy, was wary of Islamic perspectives and influences in the country’s policies; PAS, by contrast, fought to implement Islamic practices regardless of the races and religions of the citizens.

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., p. 1050.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., pp. 1050-1051.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

This clash in opinion is apparent as Mahathir believed that Malaysian society comprises various ethnicities and religions, and hence should not fully implement Islamic practices.<sup>46</sup> Nevertheless, as the Malay-Muslim population was the essential basis for the support and the key to the survival of UMNO as a political party, the notion could not entirely be discarded, as Mahathir (1981) validated:

“Since the Malay population is too important to UMNO for it to remain indifferent, the party has to refer to Islam occasionally or otherwise risk losing votes among the Islamic-conscious members of that society. In other words, UMNO, which opposes Islamic fundamentalism, still finds Islam a useful stick to beat its enemy...”<sup>47</sup>

In 1981, with a winning hand, Mahathir was appointed the fourth prime minister of Malaysia and president of UMNO. Following the development and support of the Islamisation agenda and *ABIM* throughout Malaysia – particularly among students and youngsters – Mahathir recruited Anwar Ibrahim to UMNO. With this move, Anwar’s appearance significantly boosted UMNO’s image, especially with regard to the Islamisation agenda, and gained the general approval of the Malay-Muslim population. Hitherto, the ideology of Islamic Supremacy had been combined with Malay Supremacy in national policy and public administration, as well as strengthening the political position of UMNO and Mahathir (Ting, 2009, p. 39).

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., pp. 1056.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

Subsequently, Anwar's role in UMNO and the government greatly influenced the state's policies vis-à-vis Islamic values, including the modernisation of education, where many changes had already occurred. According to political scientist, James Chin (2018):

“Mahathir had recruited Anwar Ibrahim, a student leader, into UMNO in 1982 and Anwar was rapidly promoted. Mahathir and Anwar began to ‘infuse’ Islamic principles into the civil service, and a host of Islamic institutions were established; Bank Islam, International Islamic University, Islamic Pilgrims Board (Lembaga Tabung Haji Malaysia, LTH), *Jabatan Kemajuan Islam Malaysia* (JAKIM or the Department of Islamic Advancement of Malaysia), amongst others.” (p. 187).

Chin added the inculcation of Islamic values in government policies could be a ‘political race’ between UMNO and PAS as “Mahathir and UMNO calculated that it had to be ‘more Islamic’ than PAS to win over the Malay vote.”<sup>48</sup>

However, on 2<sup>nd</sup> September 1998, Anwar Ibrahim was sacked by Mahathir from UMNO, stripped of all government positions and sentenced to prison on charges of corruption and sodomy (CNN, 1999; The Guardian, 2000). This event raised anger of his supporters and triggered the reformation movement, which later became a large coalition of Islamist groups, social activists, and socialists (Gomez, 2004a, p. 10). This movement also saw the birth of a multi-ethnic *Parti Keadilan Nasional* (Keadilan or Malaysian National Justice Party), joined by other political parties such as PAS and DAP to form a Barisan Alternatif (BA) (*trans.* Alternative Front). According to Gomez (2004a):

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

“These post-1998 developments led to public discourses on the nature of democracy and form of economic development that had been accompanied by rampant corruption and nepotism. These discourses transformed the middle class in an unanticipated way, for a while gelled rural Malays, the urban middle class and youths.”<sup>49</sup>

Following the rapid development of information technology and access to the internet in urban areas at that time, Anwar Ibrahim’s dismissal became the focus of political blog writers and his supporters to spread information (Shahnon Mohamed Salleh, 2013, p. 2). Hundreds of anti-government blogs have appeared, such as *Laman Reformasi*, *Mahazalim*, *Mahafiraun*, *Laman Marhaen*, *FreeAnwar.net* and *Malaysiakini*.<sup>50</sup> These websites contain “all sorts of critical information – dodged or ignored by the mainstream media – ranging from event announcements and eyewitness accounts of reformation events to satire and denunciation of ruling elites.” (Holmes & Grieco, 2001, p. 67; Yangyue, 2014, p. 808).

However, after the 10<sup>th</sup> GE in 1999, the government again tightened the use of the media and arrested many opposition leaders, NGOs, and activists involved in the Reformation. This was due to alleged misuse of the internet, primarily through political blogs that channelled hatred and fake news against the government and ruling cabinet ministers (Nawang, 2013, p. 174; Tsukasa, 2012, p. 138). Nevertheless, the emergence of new media and bloggers was seen as the ‘prime mover’ in the reformation agenda and Malaysia’s political landscape which later spawned many individuals, NGO groups, and think-tanks that were critical of contemporary political practices (Jun-E-Tan & Ibrahim, 2008; Mohd Azizi Jaeh & Muhamad Takiyuddin

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

Ismail, 2020, p. 169; Muhammad Hakimi Tew Abdullah et al., 2016, p. 427; M. L. Weiss, 2012, p. 9; Zain et al., 2015, p. 56).

### **2.1.1 Searching for national identities, values, and norms setting**

Subsequent to the 13<sup>th</sup> May 1969's bloodbath, the state's policy trajectory on the economy and the point of view regarding national unity changed. Both scholars, A.B. Shamsul and Rustam Sani, debated the search for a 'national identity' as a meeting point for all communities to give birth to the ideal of a 'Nation-of-Intents'. From Shamsul's point of view, he asserted that the political parties were vying for the nation-of-intents that they wanted to be introduced to the citizens. In 2019, at a *Naratif Malaysia* lecture in Penang, Shamsul identified several forms of nation-of-intents that have been, and are still being, proposed by the ever-capricious government, as shown in Table 2. 1.

**Table 2. 1:** The variety of ‘Nation-of-Intentions’ proposals

PERIOD	NATION-OF-INTENTS	STRATEGIC GROUPS
<b>Before Independence</b>	Greater Malay	Organised by the Malay left strategic group.
	Islamic State	Organised by an Islamic-oriented strategic group.
	Malay-led plural society	Chosen by the colonial government through the Communities Liaison Committee 1949 (CLC 1949).
<b>After Independence</b>	Malaysian Malaysia	Organised by strategic groups from Singapore (the early 1960s) and Malaysia (late 1990s).
	Malay-led plural society	<i>Bangsa Idaman</i> has been held by the Barisan Nasional (BN) government from 1957-2018.
<b>After the New Economic Policy (NEP)</b>	The <i>Bangsa</i> Malaysia	Vision 2020 was promoted by Mahathir and promoted on a large scale.
	1Malaysia	Organised by Najib Razak and promoted on a large scale.
	Sabah for Sabahan	Organised by the strategic group of internet hubs abroad.
	Sarawak for Sarawakian	Organised by several strategic groups of natives.
<b>New Malaysia</b>		The era of New Malaysia after the fall of BN.
	The <i>Bangsa</i> Malaysia	Mahathir maintains the concept of a Malay-led plural society.
	Malaysian Malaysia	The presence of DAP as a strategic component of the government and an attempt to realise it again.
	Malaysian Family	Organised by Ismail Sabri and promoted on a large scale.
	Malaysia Madani	Introduced recently by Anwar Ibrahim on 19 January 2023.

Notes. Revised and adapted from Shamsul A.B. (2019). *The Concept of “Ideal Nation”: An Overview of the Pioneering Efforts of New Malaysia*. Penang: Malaysia.



Table 2.1 shows the vying for nation-of-intent proposals from various strategic groups. Some of the proposals are still being carried out today. Particular nation-of-intents, such as *Malaysian Malaysia*, proposed the idea of ethnic assimilation and equality, while others, such as the *Bangsa Malaysia*, espouse the idea of integration and a Malay-led plural society (Shamsul A.B., 1996b, p. 330). This latter concept is favoured due to perseverance of the traditional elements such as the Malay language, Malay rulers, the special position of the *Bumiputera*, and the Islamic religion being guaranteed in the Federal Constitution.

### **2.1.2 Mahathir's vision of 'Bangsa Malaysia'**

In a famous BBC Hardtalk interview in 2008, as a guest, Mahathir was faced with the question, "Do you believe in democracy?", to which he articulately replied, "It is not a system that can fit everybody; you must have a certain understanding of the limitations of democracy in order to make it work." Mahathir presented the argument because Malaysia is a multi-ethnic country. He then added, "If we are not careful, there will be a racial flare-up." 17 years previously, at the First Conference of the Malaysian Trade Council on 28<sup>th</sup> February 1991, Mahathir, in his speech, announced his Vision 2020. Vision 2020 is a concept designed to prepare Malaysia to become a developed country by 2020. Mahathir outlined nine (9) challenges that must be overcome by the government, starting from building the Malaysian Nation (*Bangsa Malaysia*) "with political loyalty and dedication to the nation." (Mohamad, 1991).<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> It is important to mention, compare to English, the meaning of 'Bangsa' and 'Kebangsaan' in Malay language is always a challenge to describe. 'Bangsa' can be understood as, 'Nation.' However, 'Bangsa' can also be translated to 'Race' (i.e., *Bangsa Melayu* or Malay race). Therefore, to avoid confusion in this study, I used the term 'Ethnic' and 'Sub-ethnic' referring to main ethnic i.e., the Malays, Chinese and Indian etc. and the latter is

However, as pointed out by Shamsul, the creation of a *Bangsa Malaysia* or a united Malaysian nation poses “greater challenge and critical compared to the economic challenge.” (Shamsul A.B., 1995, p. 65).

According to Mustafa Ishak (2006, p. 50) two main challenges exist in realising the *Bangsa Malaysia* concept. The first is the cohesiveness of Malaysia’s multi-ethnic society and the history of isolation of its ethnicities them through its clear-cut division of labour; and second, Malaysia’s political structure is based on consociationalism or power sharing. According to Rustam Sani (1991, in Shamsul A.B., 1995, p. 60), the concept of *Bangsa Malaysia* introduced differs from that of *Malaysian Malaysia* articulated by Lee Kuan Yew. The *Bangsa Malaysia* concept advocated by Mahathir still considers the Malays’ unique position, as provided for in the Federal Constitution. In contrast, *Malaysian Malaysia* requires total constitutional reform, which inherently ignores the Malay’s special position in the Federal Constitution of Malaysia (Shamsul A.B., 1995, p. 60).

The two organised concepts are very different both from epistemological and ontological paradigms. On the one hand, the concept of *Malaysian Malaysia* supports assimilation and the principle of equality for all races, whilst *Bangsa Malaysia* demands that the people be united via integration. Thus, after 1963, there were two major forms of ‘nation-

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more specific subset of community, i.e., Malay-Mandailing, Chinese-Hakka or Indian-Malayalam. In the other hand, I use ‘Bangsa’ (nation) to refer a collective society in Malaysia in general. Citing the explanation from Judith Nagata (1981, p. 98), “The term *bangsa* conveys the double ideas of a people sharing both a common origin and a common culture.”

of-intents' in Malaysia, one advocated by Lee Kuan Yew and the other supported by Mahathir (Shamsul A.B., 2012, p. 2).

At the same time, Abdul Rahman Embong (2001) asserted that *Bangsa Malaysia* could not be realised through the legal context alone. The construction of this concept needs to be seen through the continuity of the concept of nation in terms of history and contemporary politics (2001, p. 27). The formation of Malaysia was in line with the settlement of the Malay, Chinese, Indian, and other ethnic groups in Sabah and Sarawak. According to Abdul Rahman, this is an important issue to be considered and adjusted in a balanced way with regard to all ethnic groups in order to maintain harmony and unity.<sup>52</sup>

Thus, in discussing the idea of a singular concept of *Bangsa Malaysia* in various 'nation-of-intents', Shamsul proposed three possible conclusions: (i) the theme of 'multiculturalism and society' needs to be seen from a larger sociological perspective, which is the 'modernisation project'; (ii) the process of nation-state building through the concept of the Malay Nation (*Bangsa Melayu*) has differences in terms of political programmes that have been practised in Malaysia; and; (iii) there are different interpretations of 'everyday-nationalism' between the community and the state-sponsored 'official-nationalism' outlined by the government (1995, p. 65).

### **2.1.3 The Malay middle-class: The formation of civil society and democratisation**

Along with the NEP, progress could be observed where the new middle-class emerged. In Malaysia, the new middle-class Malay has typically been associated with salaried workers and

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid., p. 30.

civil servants.<sup>53</sup> The new middle class is also divided according to economic function as being ‘white collar’ (non-manual workers) and ‘blue collar’ (manual workers) (Pérez-Ahumada, 2017, pp. 291–292). This ethnographic division between these two classes, white and blue collar, is manifested according to the occupational spectrum between ‘higher and lower administrators’ and ‘upper and lower strata’ (Speier, 1995a, pp. 87–88).

According to Kahn (1996, p. 50), the emergence of a new middle-class in Malaysia is linked to three (3) factors, namely:

- i. import-export-oriented industry, particularly in the field of semiconductor manufacturing;
- ii. non-financial public enterprises and trusts; and
- iii. the emergence of a system known as ‘party capitalism’ or ‘money politics’.

In terms of import-export-oriented industry and non-financial public enterprises and trusts, Abdul Rahman Embong explains that the transformation of the new Malay middle class can be traced to the rapid progress of industry and the introduction of the New Economic Policy (NEP) between 1971 and 1990.

Previously, due to the economic identification policy based on the ethnic division of labour, many new middle-class jobs were dominated by Chinese, Indian, and Eurasian people (Abdul Rahman Embong, 2002, p. 36). Only a small number of elite Malays with an aristocratic background and who were educated at English medium school managed to gain and hold administrative positions through the Malay Administrative Service (MAS), created under the

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid., p. 57.

British administration.<sup>54</sup> Therefore, under Prime Minister Abdul Razak, the affirmative NEP was to cater all ethnics, with particular focus on the Malays. Following NEP, Mahathir introduced the National Development Policy (NDP) between 1991 and 2000 to continue the previous policy, and adding new objectives. Along with NDP, Mahathir's administration introduced a new Malaysian development strategy, mainly through national privatisation, deregulation, and Malaysia Incorporated.<sup>55</sup>

This new strategy changed from the previous 'state intervention' approach to a more neoliberal market-friendly economy (Rasiah & Shari, 2001, p. 58). This strategy also called for the transformation of culture, value systems, and work ethics, especially among the Malays (Abdul Rahman Embong, 2002, p. 169). As a result of NEP and the transformations that took place, the Malays began to gain the opportunity to obtain higher education and hold professional positions in both the public and private sectors.<sup>56</sup> However, in Kahn's observations, the emergence of the new Malay middle class was also related to the political dominance of the UMNO party.

This dominance was due to the focus given by the state to *Bumiputera* during NEP. It is generally known that the Malay-led UMNO party dominated political and administrative power post-Independence. Thus, Kahn sees these factors as directly helping the Malays,

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<sup>54</sup> The Malay Administrative Service (MAS) position was officially changed to The Malaysian Administrative and Diplomatic Service (ADS, or in Malay, Pegawai Tadbir dan Diplomati, PTD) in 1971 and has been used until now.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., p. 170.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., p. 66.

especially members of the UMNO party, to enter the field of entrepreneurship and take positions in public administration (1996, p. 54). In addition, state intervention in the economy, such as the Federal Land Development Authority (FELDA) and the Rural Industrial Development Authority (RIDA, now Majlis Amanah Rakyat, MARA), created many job opportunities for the Malays, giving them a chance to improve their economic status.

This new economic status can also be associated with the emergence of the new middle class. Generally, in Asia, the group dubbed the 'new rich' is interpreted as being "the new wealthy social groups that have emerged from the industrial change in Asia" (Robison & Goodman, 1996, p. 5). As mentioned, the emergence of this new wealthy class can also be linked to the industrial progress that swept through Asia in the 1960s. Apart from the measure of wealth accumulation, the new middle class is also classified according to their educational background. Despite that, the new middle class also has 'social prestige' that differs according to society:

"As regards social prestige acquired through education, the differing values placed on humanistic or natural science studies were sometimes reflected in distinctions of rank; beyond this, finer distinctions related to faculty and specialisation. Generally, the social ranks of the officer and the educated person are not the same in all societies." (Speier, 1995b, p. 145).

In Malaysia, the middle class, including civil servants, is also considered a prestigious and high-ranking social group (Alatas, 1968, p. 148). These impressions and values have been apparent since feudal times and continued through the introduction of the modern political and

administrative system by the British.<sup>57</sup> Alatas further explained that the value and prestige of the social class of the feudal, the middle class, and the lower class was classified and nuanced according to the types of jobs or titles they held.

In general, the new middle class is linked to their ability to replace the 'old middle class' in terms of certain social functions (Lederer & Marschak, 1995, p. 55). Hence, sociologically, the status of the new middle class in Malaysia among the Malays can be further divided into the so-called 'New Rich Men' (Orang Kaya Baru, OKB) and the New Malay (Melayu Baru).<sup>58</sup>

According to A.B. Shamsul (1999), the term *OKB* was in widespread use around the early 1950s, which can be explained by two theories (1999b, p. 90). The first is based on the concept of the Malay feudal system, whilst the second is taken from a post-colonial view. The first theory explains that the *OKB* community emerged among commoners who raised their economic status by awarding orders, decorations, and medals. This award carries certain feudal aristocratic or distinguishable titles such as *Dato'* or *Dato' Seri*.<sup>59</sup>

This status was bestowed upon the achievements of the non-feudal Malay community as administrators in the British public administration system. Individuals of elevated status are

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid., p. 155.

<sup>58</sup> In addition to *OKB* and *Melayu Baru*, the term is also known colloquially as *orang korporat* (corporate players) or *orang bergaya korporat* (corporate-style individuals) (Abdul Rahman 2002, 12). According to Abdul Rahman (2002, p. 211), *orang korporat* refers to managers and professionals in the corporate sector. Whereas the *orang bergaya korporat* refers to administrators in the state sector who try to run their organisations in accordance with corporate philosophy and work ethics.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

appointed either as Members of Parliament or the State Legislative Councils.<sup>60</sup> These *OKB* individuals are also linked to the practice of the ‘rentier capitalism’ system, which sees the Malays as becoming silent partners to Chinese businesses.<sup>61</sup> The second theory is based on the daily communication of ordinary people and how they perceive the *OKB*.

The title *OKB* can be defined either positively or negatively; “as a part of gossip or rumour-mongering.”<sup>62</sup> According to Shamsul, the definition of *OKB* is used “as a phrase of cliché to ‘make fun of others’, both to allude negatively (*perli, giat, kutuk* — an expression of ridicule) and mention someone positively (*puji, sokong, ampu, bodek* — an expression of praise or flattery).”<sup>63</sup> Sometimes, one could allude both, ridiculing and praising the *OKB* according to the speaker’s intention.

Additionally, the phrase *OKB* is also used to describe “people who have just recently become rich”; however, their behaviour is comparatively odd and awkward to a rich person as

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid., pp. 90-91.

<sup>61</sup> According to Shamsul A.B. (1999b, p. 101), the Malay *OKB* group aged between 45 and 50 mostly do not have a background in business. This generation comes from farmers, labourers, clerks, non-graduate schoolteachers, and small property owners (Abdul Rahman Embong 2002, pp. 63-64). These Malay *OKBs* get the opportunity to venture into business opportunities via affirmative plans from the New Economic Policy (NEP). Through this policy, many government contracts have been given to the Malays, especially those who are members of UMNO. However, due to lack or lack of experience in business, the Malay *OKBs* became silent partners to more experienced Chinese business tycoons. This economic system is commonly called ‘Ali Baba. Economy’, is also well-known in Indonesia.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., p. 91.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., p. 92.



the *OKB* “did not behave like the ‘real’ rich people.”<sup>64</sup> The term *OKB* is also often used in election campaigns, films, songs, and comedies, “where it is meant to criticise, to accuse, in an indirect manner, to diss people who become well off through corrupt means.”<sup>65</sup>

In 1991, in line with the introduction of NDP, a new term, the ‘New Malay’, was popularised by Mahathir. According to Shamsul, this New Malay is a group that has previously benefited from the NEP. Many of these ‘NEP graduates’ have rapidly obtained their higher education and degrees, fully funded by the government. The NEP graduate then proceeds to fill various vacancies in the fields of science, technology, and non-science (Shamsul A.B., 1999b, p. 101; Sulaiman, 1975, pp. 235–236). They also live in urban areas and hold important positions in the private sector, such as banking, insurance, real estate, and business management (Shamsul A.B., 1999b, p. 102). In the public sector, this group is involved in various programmes related to human resources.

This New Malay group also gained considerable influence from the Islamic preaching movement in the 1970s.<sup>66</sup> Shamsul added that the preaching group in the new Malay middle class is divided into two groups: the ‘modernist’ (moderate), and the ‘radical fundamentalist’. The ‘modernist’ moderate succeeded in “mainstreaming Islam in everyday life and embracing the ideas of multi-ethnicities,” while the radicals are “fragmented, peripheralised, and some have joined groups which the government openly disfavours.”<sup>67</sup> In contrast, the second group

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid., pp. 91-92.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., p. 102.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

is the ‘non-preaching’ (secular) with a moderate view of Islam and only wants to be known as ordinary Muslims.

These past studies show that the new middle-class groups are usually associated with their close ties to the ruling party, the UMNO. A previous study by Shamsul reminds us that “complex internal divisions are fractured by a host of economic, political, and cultural factors.”<sup>68</sup> Therefore, the agenda behind the formation of the ‘Malay nation’, as previously championed by Malay nationalists and endorsed by the government, has been challenged by another sect of the New Malay class:

“Thus, ‘Malayness’ and ‘Malay tradition’, as authoritatively defined social realities, are now being questioned, debated and refuted by some extremely influential, wealthy Malay corporate figures, and by others from within the equally well-off Malay new middle class. This critical stance reflects the way in which these ‘new rich’ experience everyday social reality, in particular the process of globalisation and the transformation of the individual actor’s personal context of social experiences.” (Shamsul A.B., 1999a, pp. 104–105).

The new Malay middle class also show strong participation in political and NGO organisations compared to the Chinese middle class and the working class (Abdul Rahman Embong, 2002, p. 152). Abdul Rahman Embong’s study also indicates a ‘concern attitude’ among the new Malay middle class towards the dominance of the Barisan Nasional (BN) government, especially on the Malaysia East Coast (Kota Bharu and Kuala Terengganu). Their concern is based on the domination of BN party components over two-thirds of the majority in Parliament, which might tend to ‘lead to the abuses of power’, particularly given the BN’s

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid., p. 103.

record on the use of draconian Internal Security Act (ISA), the separation of power, the ‘checks and balances’ between the executive, legislature, and the judiciary, and also the sacking of Lord President of the Federal Court, Salleh Abbas, in 1988.<sup>69</sup>

However, other new Malay middle classes in Klang Valley adopted different attitudes. Abdul Rahman’s research shows that the support of the new middle class for UMNO is higher in that region than in Kota Bahru and Kuala Terengganu.<sup>70</sup> Even so, they have a ‘paradoxical’ attitude towards democratisation.<sup>71</sup> In one sense, this new Malay middle class demands a broader political and democratic space, whilst also demanding social order and strong and effective government.<sup>72</sup> Abdul Rahman’s study concludes that the demand for democracy among the new Malay middle class can be categorised into two groups: the first is the group that accepts BN dominance in national administration and authoritarianism for stability and order; the second group is critical of the BN government and “asserted their political and ideological independence from the state.”<sup>73</sup>

As such, the new middle class is commonly associated with their role in the formation of civil society and the democratisation agenda in Malaysia (Chin-Huat, 2015; Embong, 2018; Jones, 1998; Mujani & Kasri, 2012; Reen et al., 2013; Saravanamuttu, 1989). Despite the

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid., pp. 162-163.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., p. 155.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., p. 161.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., p. 161.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., p. 166.

aforementioned background, there was a change in voting polarisation, especially in the thirteenth and fourteenth General Elections (GEs).

However, the fall of the BN regime in the fourteenth GE in 2018 saw Malaysia's politics swing towards multi-ethnics and ideologies (Noor, 2021, p. 92). Nevertheless, many recent studies have explored the topic of female voting patterns (Zakuan et al., 2018), young voters (Chinnasamy & Azmi, 2018), voters who reside in FELDA and rural voters (Khor & Chia, 2020; Pakiam, 2018), and elite and party politics (Noor, 2021). These studies show a different polarisation of support towards coalitions between BN and Pakatan Harapan (PH) in GE14 that ultimately led to the fall of the BN's domination since Independence.<sup>74</sup> Previous studies have tended to show that rural voters typically depend on BN. In contrast, the urban voter group consisting of the middle-class community tends to support political liberalisation and vote for the opposition party (Ong, 2020, p. 29). In addition, previous literature has focused on political participation in a procedural framework, such as political elites and formal institutions.

Although setbacks are a natural part of any political transition, the past year has demonstrated that Malaysia has not yet shifted to a fully functioning democracy. A study by Noor (2021) confirms that Malaysia's political landscape is still based on the dominance of

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<sup>74</sup> In 2018, there were two major coalition blocks among political parties in Malaysia, namely BN (United Malays National Organisation, UMNO; Malaysian Chinese Association, MCA and Malaysian Indian Congress, MIC). In another block of PH joined by the People's Justice Party, PKR; Democratic Action Party, DAP; National Trust Party, AMANAH and Malaysian United Indigenous Party, BERSATU. However, in 2020, the BERSATU party detached from PH and formed the third block known as Perikatan Nasional (PN) in alliance with the Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS), Homeland Solidarity Party (STAR), Sabah Progressive Party (SAPP). and Malaysian People's Movement Party, GERAKAN).

elite political groups who dictate the direction that administration and political power should take to run its course.

#### **2.1.4 A ‘hidden’ community amongst social and cultural professionals**

As discussed, the Malay middle-class in Malaysia – particularly the so-called New Malay middle class – were associated with the development of civil society. This can be observed through their high educational and professional backgrounds, party membership and association with politicians, and also their strong participation in NGOs and political organisations. At the same time, they are represented and “well attended” as well as “stand[ing] at the centre of the political coalition game”, making this phenomenon the ‘supremacy of middle-class’ (Elkjær & Iversen, 2020, p. 31). The new middle class in Malaysia is also closely related to state industrialisation or what has been argued by Abdul Rahman Embong to be a ‘state-led modernisation’. Sociologically, the new middle-class in Malaysia has successfully been categorised in a very exclusive manner, particularly by their common traits. A clear typology of middle classes in Malaysia can be seen in Table 2.2 below:

**Table 2. 2:** Typology of Malay middle-class in Malaysia

Middle Classes	Colloquial Terms	Origin	Traits	Occupational categories	Political perspectives
Old Middle Class	i. The petit bourgeoisie (Abdul Rahman 2002, 39). ii. <i>Orang Kaya Lama</i> (old rich person).	Generally understood as referring to those belonging to the aristocratic class (Shamsul A.B. 1999, 91).	i. Members of a social category who own some capital to hire workers but who themselves must work. ii. Small proprietor with or without employees. iii. Members of the intermediate class consisting of routine non-manual employees (Abdul Rahman 2002, 10). iv. Traditional aristocrats.	i. Self-employed, petty merchants in retail trade, catering services and lodging services, farmers operating their own independent farm units (Abdul Rahman 2002, 40). ii. Administrator, chieftain etc.	i. Nationalist, feudal.
New Middle Class	Orang Kaya Baru (New Rich People) / Orang korporat (Corporate people) / Orang bergaya korporat (Corporate-style individuals) (Abdul Rahman 2002, 12; Shamsul A.B. 1999, 90).	First theory: traces from the origin of the concept from the Malay feudal system (Shamsul A.B. 1999, 90).	'Achievement-based' non-feudal class of Malay elites during and after colonial rule (Shamsul A.B. 1999, 90).  Deserving civil servants, politicians and other private individuals. Many of these individuals are rich entrepreneurs, including non-Malay who willingly accept the Malay honorific titles such as Dato' and other awards (Abdul Kahar Bador 1973, 148-9; Shamsul A.B. 1999, 91).	Civil servants, Members of Parliament and Legislative State Council (Shamsul A.B. 1999, 90).  Mainly urban based. Bureaucrats, company executives, technocrats, academics, accountants, computer-chip engineers, information technology specialists and a host of other professions demanding high or specialist education and training (Shamsul A.B. 1999, 100).  Managers, professionals and administrators (Abdul Rahman 2002, 37).	i. Neo-feudal, UMNO, Malay hegemony (Shamsul A.B. 1999, 100).  Neo-liberalist. Firmly placed within the ruling party, UMNO and have succeeded in 'mainstreaming' Islam into the everyday activities (Shamsul A.B. 1999, 102-103).
			Second theory: subaltern circumstances and contexts among the grassroots (Shamsul A.B. 1999, 91).	Came into use in daily conversation as part of gossip or rumour-mongering. Used as an expression of envy or jealous directed at individuals who belong to the same class (usually peasants or workers) who recently become wealthy (Shamsul A.B. 1999, 91).	New Malay entrepreneur; mostly rural-based. Involved in traditional, manually oriented, small and medium-size business such as construction and food or handicraft manufacture, or are self employed (Shamsul A.B. 1999, 100).
	New Malay	i. First argument: refers mainly to Malays who are in the corporate sector and 'political elites' (Kahn 1996, 67). ii. Second argument: replacement term for <i>Orang Kaya Baru</i> (Shamsul A.B. 1997b, 92). iii. Third argument: associated with Mahathir and the UMNO leadership as an idea and a project of modernization and transformation of Malay society (Abdul Rahman 2002, 180).	The 'NEP' graduates. Referring mainly to Malays who have become senang (comfortable) or kaya-raya (very wealthy) as a result of the implementation of the long-term pro-Malay affirmative action or NEP (Rustam Sani 1993; Shamsul A.B. 1999, 92).	Corporate players, political elites and the professional middle class (Shamsul A.B. 1999, 92).	Various attitudes: wanted democracy, an independent judiciary and a strong opposition in Parliament to help check abuses of power. Aware of the domination of political parties could lead to abuse of power; in the same time support a strong government and stable political climate (Abdul Rahman 2002, 163).

Notes. Adapted from Shamsul, A.B. (1999b); Abdul Rahman Embong (2002); Khasnor Johan (1984); and Kahn, Joel (1996).

Based on Table 2.2, there are several points that can be highlighted. Firstly, the identification of the Malay middle class has been highly reliant on socio-economic perspective, and which Rustam Sani and Abdul Rahman viewed as “a mainstream economic and quantitative approach adopted by the UMNO leadership” (2002, pp. 180–181). Secondly, a large part of the new Malay middle class is associated with the ruling political party and political organisations. Finally, the New Malay agenda, as mentioned by Kahn and Khoo, is only pertinent to certain Malay entrepreneurs and professionals who belong to the commercial and industrial communities (1995, p. 337; 1996, p. 67).

However, in 2020, the Ministry of Human Resources established a Malaysian Standard Classification of Occupations (MASCO) as a national benchmark for the classification of occupations in accordance with the International Standard Classification of Occupations (ISCO). In MASCO, there are ten (10) categories of major groups. With regard to the subject matter of this study, I will focus on Sub-Major Group 28 Social and Cultural Professionals (SCP), which is listed under Major Group 2: Professionals. According to MASCO policies and principles of classification, the ‘Professionals’ group is categorised by education, skill level as well as occupation. A clear picture of this categorisation is shown in Table 2.3.

**Table 2. 3:** Social and cultural professionals according to Malaysia Standard Classification of Occupations (MASCO)

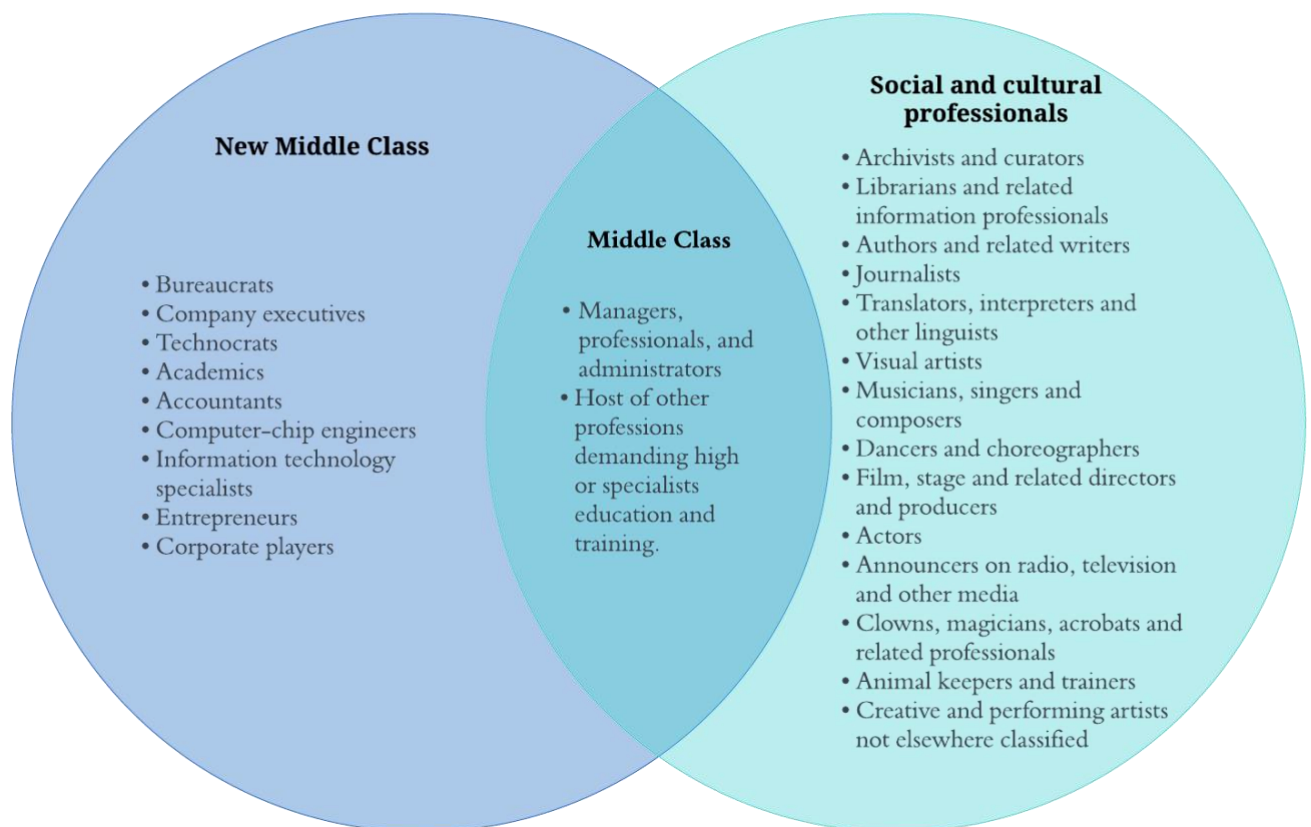
MAJOR GROUP	SUB-MAJOR GROUP	EDUCATION LEVEL	SKILL LEVEL	OCCUPATIONS	SUMMARY
2: Professionals	28: Social and Cultural Professionals	Tertiary education to a university degree or postgraduate degree: Malaysian Skill Advanced Diploma (DLKM) Level 5 and above	Fourth	281 LIBRARIANS, ARCHIVISTS AND CURATORS	Increase the existing stock of knowledge, apply scientific or artistic concepts and theories, teach about the foregoing in a systematic manner, or engage in any combination of these three activities
				2811 Archivists and curators	
				2812 Librarian and related information professionals	
				282 SOCIAL AND RELIGIOUS PROFESSIONALS	
				2821 Economists	
				2822 Sociologists, anthropologists and related professionals	
				2823 Philosophers, historians and political scientists	
				2824 Psychologists	
				2825 Social work and counselling professionals	
				2826 Religious professionals	
283 AUTHORS, JOURNALISTS AND LINGUISTS					
2831 Authors and related writers					
2832 Journalists					
2833 Translators, interpreters and other linguists					
284 CREATIVE AND PERFORMING ARTISTS					
2841 Visual artists					
2842 Musicians, singers and composers					
2843 Dancers and choreographers					
2844 Film, stage and related directors and producers					
2845 Actors					
2846 Announcers on radio, television and other media					
2847 Clowns, magicians, acrobats and related professionals					
2848 Animal keepers and trainers					
2849 Creative and performing artists not elsewhere classified					

Notes. Sources adapted from The Ministry of Human Resources (2020).



Therefore, from the present understanding, the SCP can now be understood as being professionals, simultaneously broadening the previous definition which was exclusively tied to the industrial and businesses community, to one that is much more fluid and nuanced. The recent classification by MASCO also indirectly categorised the SCP as middle class. Figure 2.1 below provides a clear example:

**Figure 2. 1:** Social and cultural professionals in the new middle-class category in Malaysia



Notes. Sources created by the author as referenced from Shamsul A.B. (1999), Abdul Rahman Embong (2002) and The Ministry of Human Resources (2020).

Despite recognising the SCP as a new middle-class category, there is, however, some ‘missing consideration’ in conventional politico-economic analyses of “the complex and dynamic workings of power beyond formal institutions — especially the state apparatus” (Heryanto &

Mandal, 2003, p. 16). Heryanto (2003) also identifies middle-class society according to a broader spectrum:

“Culturally and politically, however, there is an important difference between two groups of middle classes. *Journalists, academics, or artists mainly produce authorised symbols (work and images)*. They are expected or assumed to work with some degree of autonomy, innovation, integrity, creativity, and occasionally subversion. *Because of these expectations, they distinguish themselves (and are distinguished by others) from military officers, state officials, or professionals in commerce, for whom other qualities are more commonly expected or claimed.*” (p. 28).

Sumit K. Mandal also offers a broader definition of middle-class society, explaining that the middle-class group, as understood in this context, is not based on economic terms alone but the group that dominates cultural and intellectual production (2003, p. 186). Based on this, Mandal stated that art workers belong to this same class, even though they differ from the salaried and propertied middle class.<sup>75</sup> His study argues that art workers in Malaysia and Indonesia are also involved in political activism and protest activities, primarily through art activities such as poetry reading, theatre, music, video, pantomime, shadow theatre, dance, and installation art, the majority of which are arranged virtually through internet-based platforms.<sup>76</sup>

As depicted in Figure 2.1, this particular middle-class segment among these art activists is quite disparate from the conventional definition of such. Apart from that, their artistic works are seen as marginalised, mainly due to art activities being controlled by the government and the

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

image of politics and society that is different from “...tradition in high art has been in the making.”<sup>77</sup> Thus, Mandal sees a dichotomy between art and the traditional values of ‘high art’ that the mainstream market and the country try to promote compared to what art activists try to offer. Art that tries to be highlighted is often considered ‘politically subversive’ and ‘retrograde’ by the government.<sup>78</sup>

Art activities and activism outside the formal political environment attract the interest of young people and can be used as a counterculture. A study by Haris Zuan (2021) stated that new activism activities among young people emerged as a result of the ‘depoliticisation’ process, which has effectively removed the ability of students to organise their movement collectively, simultaneously disconnecting them from the historical narrative of the student activism movement (Haris Zuan, 2021; Mohd Hariszuan Jaharudin, 2013). According to Haris Zuan, the depoliticisation of young people since the introduction of the AUKU in the 1970s has indirectly separated them from political activities within political parties or what is known as ‘old politics’.

Although many young people are still members of political parties, this group is seen as continuing the old political tradition. However, Haris Zuan believes several other young people have channelled their activism outside formal organisations, which he refers to as the ‘new social movement’ (2021, p. 261). Their involvement, for example, can be seen through the *Universiti Bangsar Utama* (UBU) group that organises political art activities such as *Teater Bukan Teater* (*transl.* Non-Theatre Theatre, TBT), *Rumah Anak Teater*, the Street Kitchen community

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid., p. 182.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., p. 178.

programme (*trans. Dapur Jalanan*), the *Diskopi* discussion group based at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM), as well as the *Universiti Terbuka Anak Muda* (UTAM).

Although these activities are outside the formal political environment, they also offer a space for political discourse.<sup>79</sup> Other activities, such as *Buku Jalanan* (*trans. Street Book*), created by the youth across the country, also actively empower and discuss art, politics, philosophy, and current issues. Their culmination can be seen in the *Idea Raya* festival in 2015, which was organised by the *Buku Jalanan* community, *Frinjan*, *Kuliah Buku* (KuBu), UTAM, the *Pusat Kajian & Apresiasi Filem* (*trans. Film Study & Appreciation Centre*), The Sponsorship Movement, and *Kelab Filem Bangsar* (*trans. Bangsar Film Club*).<sup>80</sup>

Therefore, it can be concluded that there are different development trends when moving toward political participation and democratisation, especially in the breakdown of categories in the new middle class, old politics versus new politics, and new social movements among youngsters. In this study, political satire is seen as one of the forms of political participation outside of the formal political environment, especially within the framework of political contestation.

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<sup>79</sup> I personally have been involved in a series of discussions with the *Diskopi* group that discussed the subject of philosophy, art and politics and written articles about the issue.

<sup>80</sup> *Idea Raya* Festival 2015 were held on 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> September 2015 at Laman Budaya, Shah Alam. I also have the opportunity to participate in this two-day event. Apart from book sales activities, music performances (gigs), and photography exhibitions, several activities such as cultural speeches, discussions and forums were also carried out throughout these two days.

## 2.2 The application of the *strategischen und konfliktfähigen Gruppen* (SKOG) approach in Malaysia's democratic transitions

Since the 1980s, the transition from authoritarian regimes to democratic has occurred in Latin America, Africa, and Asia, in the latter case in regions such as the Philippines, Thailand, Nepal, Taiwan, and South Korea (Schubert et al., 1994, p. 2). Many of these slow processes were driven by students, lawyers, journalists, middle-class entrepreneurs, and religious-cultural minorities.<sup>81</sup> In Malaysia, after the fall of the UMNO-BN coalition in 2018, scholars such as Rahim (2018), Chan (2018), Welsh (2018), and Haryono and Ziegenhain (2022) saw a democratic breakthrough in Malaysia (Chong, 2018a; Haryono & Ziegenhain, 2022; Rahim, 2018; Welsh, 2018). Ufen saw the previous “electoral authoritarian system is now in a state of transition” and was the result of “longer-term socio-economic transformations.” (2020, p. 167). However, these democratic changes and the transformation process also raise certain constraints. Tetzlaff pointed out these concerns regarding (i) which social groups are interested in political changes towards democracy? (ii) whether democratisation possible under conditions of mass poverty? and (iii) how do traditions that hinder or promote democracy affect cultural norm structures? (1994, p. 5).

This study shows that two groups in the social and cultural community serve different interests. One is the SCP, inclined towards the state's economic agenda, and the other is the art activists, fighting for political causes. To conceptualise this condition, the *strategischen und konfliktfähigen Gruppen* (strategic and conflict-ability group, SKOG) by Schubert, Tetzlaff and

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid. p., 3.

Vennewald (1994) is useful. However, the Strategic Group (SG) concept needs to be explained before discussing the SKOG approach in more detail.<sup>82</sup>

According to Evers and Gerke (2009), the SG approach is helpful in “understanding a current social change and medium range development in fast-developing countries.” (2009, p. 4).

The SG concept can be defined as:

“...neither elites nor social classes. They cut across hierarchies, its members do not carry cards or identification tags, and they may follow different lifestyles and follow different beliefs. They are, however, united by one common goal: to secure present and future chances to gain access to resources; to share chances of appropriation of resources and their distribution. They are not necessarily members of a network nor members of an organisation, though this is not excluded either.” (Evers & Gerke, 2009, p. 2).

Typical SGs are classified in Table 2.4 as follows:

**Table 2. 4:** Typical classification of SG

<b>Government/bureaucracy:</b>	<b>Government employees</b>
<b>Military:</b>	Members of the armed forces, their families and their suppliers of goods and services
<b>Professionals:</b>	Doctors, nurses, members of the pharmaceutical industry
<b>Intellectuals:</b>	Teachers, lecturers, preachers, students, university administrators, poets, artists and journalists

<sup>82</sup> The SG concept was developed by Bielefeld’s developmental sociologists, Hans-Dieter Evers and Tilmann Schiel (Schubert et al., 1994, p. 16).

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**Big business:**

Businessmen, managers, employees of corporations, workers in big industries, and various other quasi-groups.<sup>83</sup>

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Notes. Adapted from Evers, H.-D., & Gerke, S. (2009). *Strategic Group Analysis* (34). 8–9.

In addition, the SGs would likely, “support long-term strategies to secure the resources by shaping or structuring institutions.”<sup>84</sup> However, the SGs also tend to support state activities by supporting the activities of leaders, or those leaders who are thought to represent their aspirations, as well as recruiting fields for political leadership and political pressure groups.<sup>85</sup>

In this respect, “the aim of the SG is to protect the state” and become the state’s personal appropriation apparatus for their social wealth and power (Schubert et al., 1994, p. 61). For example, research from Vennewald shows that Lee Kuan Yew’s administration in Singapore was replete with technocrats and professional groups, giving them the advantage in socio-political policies (1993, pp. 25–26). This became a problem, particularly during the democratic reform, as the SGs controlled economic power. At the same time, the regime effectively determines the pace

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<sup>83</sup> As the SGs usually covered by the elites, the quasi group consists of smaller groups such as farmers, workers, small traders, ethnic and religious groups, social protests movements etc. However, these quasi groups also have their potentials to transform to SGs, as mentioned by Dieter and Gerke, “Quasi groups are thus transformed into ‘strategic groups’, as they now become of strategic importance as groups for political development, for conflict situations, reform or revolution in their societies. They can also be called “strategic” in another sense, as they develop their own strategies and actively promote their own economic or political goals” (2009, p.6):

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., p. 9.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., p. 6.

and quality of the democratic transition itself.<sup>86</sup> In other words, the SGs can potentially become defenders of the status quo (*status-quo verteidiger*).<sup>87</sup>

However, in response to the absence of any critical re-evaluation of the SG concept, Hamburg's scholars, such as Schubert, Tetzlaff, and Vennewald, developed the conflict-ability group (*konfliktfähigen Gruppen*, KOG) concept to be added in the SKOG approach. According to Vennewald, the SKOG approach distinguishes between the (ruling) SG and (oppositional) KOG (1993, p. 19). The SG have control over social resources and monopolises political power by occupying state institutions with their administration, as mentioned:

“*Strategische Gruppen* kontrollieren die ökonomische Verfügungsgewalt über die gesellschaftlichen Ressourcen und monopolisieren die politische Macht. Sie erreichen dies einerseits durch die Besetzung der staatlichen Institutionen mit ihren Sachwaltern, verfügen jedoch andererseits auch über staatsunabhängige, gruppenspezifische Machtressourcen. Die zu einer Regimekoalition zusammengeschlossenen strategischen Gruppen können somit den Vorteil des Zugriffs auf das Staatliche Gewaltmonopol und die Staatsrevenue, im Sinne eines gruppenspezifischen Gesamtinteresses zusätzlich nutzen. Dieses besteht zuvorderst in der Absicherung (oder Erweiterung) der ökonomischen Verfügungsgewalt über das gesellschaftliche Mehrprodukt und der Perpetuierung der politischen Macht in Staat und Gesellschaft.” (Vennewald, 1993, p. 19).

From this statement, the SG can be considered to have two traits: the first is the dependent SG, which are controlled by the state's administration by their experts, and second, the state-

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid., p. 58.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., p. 42.



independent SG, which united to form a regime coalition. In this regard, the mainstream SCP can be categorised as the former as it is dependent (or bound) to state policies and financial aid.<sup>88</sup> In contrast, the KOG is against the existing power and distribution structures. They are also regarded as essential promoters of political change:

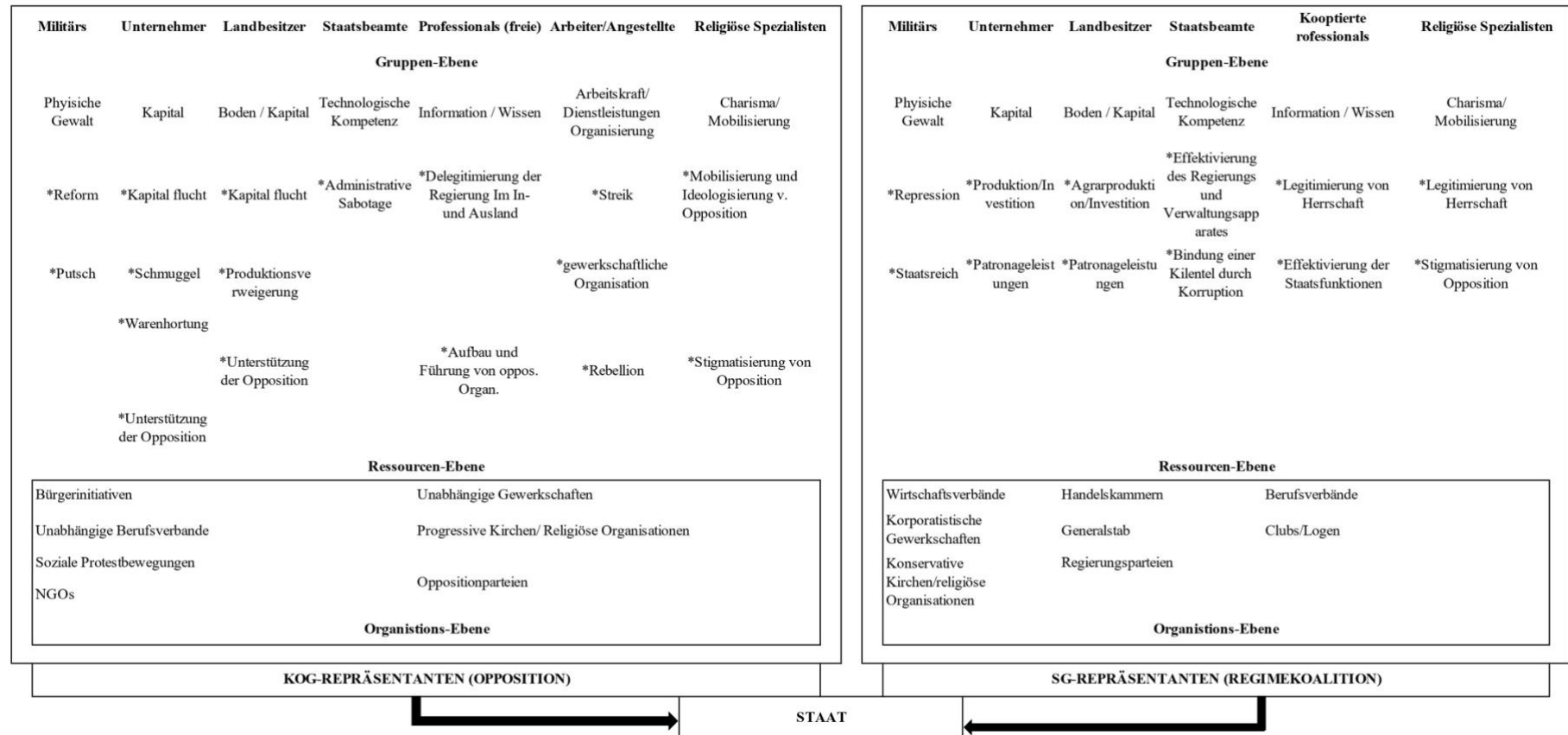
“Demgegenüber wenden sich oppositionelle konfliktfähige Gruppen gegen die bestehenden Macht -und Verteilungsverhältnisse. Da si uber ein hinreichendes Droh- und/ oder Verweigerungspotential (Kon-fliktfähigkeit) zur Durchsetzung ihres (partikularen) Gruppen- oder Standesinteresses verfügen und bestrebt sind, diseses Potential aktiv zur Durchsetzung ihrer gemeinsamen Ziele gegen strategische Gruppen einzusetzen (Konfliktbereitschaft), warden sie zu wichtigen Beförderern von politischem Wandel.” (Schubert et al., 1994, pp. 68–69).

The classification between the SG and KOG groups can be understood from Table 2.5 below:

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<sup>88</sup> See, Chapter 3.

**Table 2. 5:** The specification of power resources/conflict potential and the organisational differentiation of SKOG



Notes. Adapted from Schubert, G., Tetzlaff, R., & Vennwald, W. (1994). *Demokratisierung und politischer Wandel: Theorie und Anwendung des Konzeptes der strategischen und konfliktfähigen Gruppen (SKOG)*, 79, Table 2-3, LIT: Münster, Hamburg.

Based on the table above, it is evident that the SG and KOG adopted different attitudes and reactions during the democratic transformation. While the SG embrace the state's agenda, the KOG, however, execute different strategies:

- Teilhabe an der politischen Macht im Staat;
- Erlangung, Absicherung oder Erweiterung materieller Ressourcen im gesellschaftlichen Verteilungskampf;
- Wahrung oder Verbreitung einer eigenen religiösen oder kulturellen Identität;
- Mehrung von (individuellem oder gruppenspezifischem) Sozialprestige aus Statusgründen oder zur Verbesserung von Durchsetzungschancen bei gruppeinterner Rivalität;
- Durchsetzung von modernen (westlich-sakulären) oder antimodernen (fundamentalistischen) Wertvorstellungen als regulative Ideen für den Gesamtstaat;
- Abwehr der Appropriations- und Machstrategien von strategischen Gruppen zwecks Aufrechterhaltung der eigenen Interessen;
- Abwehr der kulturellen Hegemonieansprüche strategischer Gruppen zwecks Wahrung der eigenen (kulturellen/religiösen) Identität (Schubert et al., 1994, p. 69; Vennwald, 1993, p. 19).

Through SKOG approaches, the SCP group consists of middle-class professionals and intellectuals known for their function as part of the state and personal appropriation apparatus, strategic value in terms of the social, political, and economic, as well as similar goals to gain access to and appropriation of resources. In contrast, the art activist groups are against the appropriation and power strategies of strategic groups in order to maintain their own interests. In this sense, the art activist groups – particularly the political satirists in this study – are also

found to lean towards modern Western secular values by promoting human rights and secular views rather than defending status quos such as the pro-Malay or Islamic-centric.

In the most important part, through this analysis, Malaysia's democratic transformation also observes the emergence and development of the internet as well as new media, has slowly corroded the SG's monopolisation – particularly on information and knowledge – hence giving a chance for the KOG to develop and unleash their potential to mobilise democratic transformation in a broader population (Schubert et al., 1994, p. 69). Therefore, the next section discusses the link between the emergence of *konfliktfähigen Gruppen* (KOG) and the new media.

### **2.3 The emergence of *konfliktfähigen Gruppen* (KOG) after Reformasi 1998 and the new media**

In Malaysia, media organisations were usually close to political elites and various strategic groups (Kim, 2001, p. 72).<sup>89</sup> Both knowledge and access to information from the mass media were influenced and controlled by the state, political parties, corporate entities, lobby groups, and civil society (Mustafa K. Anuar, 2005, p. 25). In addition, during the transformation from industrial to knowledge societies, “Malaysia's political elites developed the vision of

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<sup>89</sup> For example, three of the oldest Malay newspaper in the 1930s were either owned by wealthy family or union organisations. The *Majlis* newspaper was published and printed by Selangor Press and Majlis Company Limited. The *Warta Malaya* was owned by a wealthy family of Arab descent in Singapore, namely Syed Hussain Al-Sagoff, with a capital partnership with his brother Syed Abdullah and his cousin Shaikhah (Nik Ahmad Bin Haji Nik Hassan, 1963, p. 52). Further, the *Utusan Zaman* was owned by the Singapore Malay Union and is the first to be held and managed entirely by Malays (Nik Ahmad Bin Haji Nik Hassan, 1963, p. 65).

knowledge for the key factors of production in the economy.” (Evers, 2003, p. 356). Pursuing ‘knowledge’ in the Knowledge-Society (K-Society) is “subjugated to the demands of the global capitalist market economy.”<sup>90</sup>

Historically, prior to Malayan independence in the 1930s, at least three (3) prominent newspapers were owned by the Malays, namely *Utusan Melayu*, *Warta Jenaka*, and *Majlis*. Post-Independence, twelve (12) Malay newspapers were successfully published, namely *Berita Harian*, *Berita Minggu*, *Suara Kesatuan*, *Mingguan Bahru*, *Semenanjung*, *Warta Ahad Semenanjung*, *Merdeka*, *Suara Dewan Perak*, *Mingguan Kota Bahru*, *Utusan Melayu*, *Mingguan Malaysia*, and *Utusan Malaysia* (Mulyadi Mahamood, 2004, p. 108).

However, by the mid-1970s, only six (6) newspapers had managed to survive, namely *Utusan Melayu*, *Utusan Zaman*, *Utusan Malaysia*, *Mingguan Malaysia*, *Berita Harian*, and *Berita Minggu*.<sup>91</sup> This period also established the English language newspaper *New Straits Times*, which featured the Lat and Zunar cartoons in 1975 and the 1990s. According to Mulyadi (2004), pre-and post-Independence Malay newspapers have different attitudes towards the government and society: “While the Malay press of the 1930s and 1940s was striving to achieve racial consciousness and pressing for independence, the contemporary Malay press has been helping to promote the government’s policies.”<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid., p. 361.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

Muliyadi (2004) added that one of the main factors explaining this change is the newspaper's ownership and the government's regulations and policies. Lent (1987) supports this statement:

“Not only are all Malay newspapers closely tied to the government; government agencies virtually own them. The United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) owns the *Utusan Melayu* Group, a political party of the ruling National Front, and since 1972, the New Straits Times Press, which besides *Berita Harian* and *Berita Minggu*, publishes Straits Times, Malay Mail and several periodical and books, is reportedly 80 per cent owned by PERNAS, a government-funded agency.” (p. 185).

In discussing the emergence of a new SG of knowledge workers in a knowledge society, Evers mentioned that the media institutions such as journalists and artists, publishers, and editors, “will join with other strategic groups like the state bureaucracy and big business to maximise their chance for appropriating wealth and power during the implementation of knowledge society.” (2003, p. 370).

This eventually meant that the SGs, such as artists, cartoonists, or even their organisations, were forced to follow the implemented rules and regulations due to their ties to the state. The relationship between the media, such as the newspaper company and the ruling party, not only affects the policy and direction of the newspaper but also involves several Malay cartoonists, especially regarding the limitations of the style, meaning, and form of criticism of Malay editorial cartoons. However, the development of new media has taken place in the media industry and changed the domination of traditional media (Alivi et al., 2018, p. 13). In this sense, Weiss's (2013) previous essay gave a certain insight into how the power of new media can be linked to the KOG's appearance by creating a collective identity and action, disseminating information and social mobilisation in post-semi-authoritarian Malaysia.

Firstly, the new media has helped to create a sense of ‘we-ness’ by offering space for intersubjective discussion among citizens (M. L. Weiss, 2013, p. 594). Social media such as Facebook and Twitter allow citizens to participate in the discussion and open debate. As stated by Weiss, the state’s hegemonic aspirations and efforts to curb discourse have ultimately promoted an alternative framework for the new media and helped citizens adopt a new collective identity, encouraged by online interactions.<sup>93</sup>

Secondly, during the Reformasi movement, the mainstream media either blocked the information on the event or the journalists from establishing a report.<sup>94</sup> However, new media, such as independent news sites and blogs, “supplied activists, foreign journalists and others with a wide range of materials and critical perspectives on the regime.”<sup>95</sup> On these alternative websites, Malaysians could read reports on and see photos of protest events in progress, as well as follow Anwar’s message to the public.<sup>96</sup>

Finally, the flourishing of civic media sites is tied to specific organisations and parties, not just by the opposition coalition but also by students, human rights, and other alliances.<sup>97</sup> Amid biased and selective reporting by the mainstream Malaysian media (Rodan, 2004, p. 151), these websites and blogs help to facilitate the spread of issue-related and partisan information,

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<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., p. 596.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., p. 597.

simultaneously elevating the visibility and engagement of middle-class urban youths and groups.<sup>98</sup>

Therefore, the emergence of KOG in Malaysia can be witnessed with the help of the new media. The internet and new media did not only succeed in breaking the domination of traditional mainstream media regarding the ‘knowledge and information’ driven by the state and its apparatuses; it also witnessed the development of the oppositional KOG, such as oppositional parties and the new middle class (Embong, 2013, p. 73; Ufen, 2009, p. 608), as well as various NGOs and political activists (Gomez, 2004b, p. 95; Nair, 2007, p. 358). In this matter, the political satirists can be categorised as KOG during the democratic transformation based on the discussions above. Therefore, the following section discusses the contestation and contrasting realities viewed by them vis-à-vis the state and its apparatuses.

#### **2.4 Wiener’s Theory of Contestation and A.B. Shamsul’s Two-Social Reality**

The Theory of Contestation, as highlighted by Anjite Wiener, primarily focuses on international relations. However, her approach to bottom-up contestation is a useful means by which to study various modes of contestation, particularly in the protest movement (Wiener, 2017, p. 113). Contestation begins with the highlights of norms and values constructed by fundamental rights. Following Table 2.1 is the typology of the norm as suggested by Wiener:<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid., p. 118.



**Table 2. 6:** Wiener’s typology of norms

<b>Norm Type</b>	<b>Examples</b>	<b>Level</b>	<b>Moral Reach</b>	<b>Contestation</b>
Fundamental <i>Type 1</i>	Human rights; Rule of law; Democracy	Macro	Wide	More
Organising Principle <i>Type 2</i>	Responsibility to Protect (UN); Rule of law mechanism (EU); qualified majority voting (EU)	Meso	Medium	Medium
Standardised Procedures, Regulations <i>Type 3</i>	Responsibility to protect pillars; Specific rule of law implementation; Electoral rules	Micro	Narrow	Less

Notes. Adapted from Wiener, A. (2017). A Theory of Contestation—A Concise Summary of Its Argument and Concept, 118, Table 1. *Polity*, 49(1), 109–125.

According to Wiener, norms are the “glue of the regime” and function as principles and rules whose role is to guide, monitor, control, or steer governance (2014, p. 21). However, contestation and rejection of norms may occur when there is a clash between individual experiences.<sup>100</sup> She added: “Due to the diversity of individual background experiences which come into play in an intercultural encounter, the shared recognition of norms becomes less likely and, accordingly, clashes about norms are to be expected.” (Wiener, 2017, p. 114).

Based on Wiener’s typology, the norm and formation of values in the Malaysian context can be applied as follows:

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<sup>100</sup> Ibid., p. 41.

**Table 2. 7:** Typology of norms and formation of values in Malaysia’s administration

Norm Type	Examples	Level	Moral Reach	Contestation
Fundamental <i>Type 1</i>	Stability; Racial unity and harmony; Semi-Democratic	Macro	Wide	More
Organising Principle <i>Type 2</i>	Public policy: New Economic Policy, National Development Policy; The National Youth Development Policy; Look East Policy.  National ideologies: <i>Bangsa Malaysia</i> ; Inculcation of Islamic Values; Leadership Through Example, National Pillars; Clean Efficient and Reliable.	Meso	Medium	Medium
Standardised Procedures, Regulations <i>Type 3</i>	Programmes: National Civics Bureau; <i>Rakan Muda</i> youth programme.  Laws: Internal Security Act; Sedition Act; The Universities and University Colleges Act; Multimedia and Communication Act; National Harmony Act	Micro	Narrow	Less

Notes. Adapted from Wiener, A. (2017). *A Theory of Contestation—A Concise Summary of Its Argument and Concept*, 118, Table 1. *Polity*, 49(1), 109–125.

During the Mahathir administration (1981-2003), several policies were implemented to transform values and the values system, as mentioned by Khoo Boo Teik (2002):

“... Mahathir has demonstrated an old and sustained preoccupation with values and values system, and more precisely, their replacement, transformation, absorption, subversion and perversion of ‘values’ and value systems’ within any community, society, nation or people, with laudable or undesirable consequences.” (pp. 54–55).

Another important substance Wiener highlights are the decolonial factor, which she argues can be considered facts and values.<sup>101</sup> These facts and values generate normative knowledge and create differences that affect stakeholders’ interactions.<sup>102</sup> The formation of normative knowledge can be described in the following approaches by Shamsul, known as the ‘knowledge baseline’.

According to Shamsul, the influence of British colonialism on the epistemological space of the Malays has influenced the interpretation of their identity, which is always “redefined, reconstructed, reconstituted and altered hence problematised.” (1996a, p. 8). Hence, racial identity and the concept of ‘nation’ are constantly changing and contested. Shamsul sees nation-building in Malaysia as a “work-in-progress.” (2011b, p. 18). This can be explained as finding a ‘cohesion in diversity’ that can be mutually agreed upon.

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<sup>101</sup> Wiener mentioned this part of the introduction in The European Cyber Diplomacy Dialogue (ECDD) Opening Lecture that took place on 20<sup>th</sup> – 21<sup>st</sup> January 2020 in Florence, Italy. The Opening Lecture series can be viewed at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kJAAy1YU8-Y&t=7s>.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid. p., 14.

It is well known that the advent of the second wave of Chinese and Indian immigrants to Malaya coincided with the arrival of British colonialism.<sup>103</sup> Chinese and Indian immigrants brought by the British to Malaya were intended to address the economic needs of the British Empire. However, these three ethnic groups were separated according to the economic division of labour. In addition to economic purposes, this classification was critical to facilitating British colonial administration and bureaucracy, or “ISO9000 of the Colonial Rule.” (Shamsul A.B., 2008, p. 6). For that purpose, the British needed sufficient knowledge about Malaya. Therefore, the British administration carried out extensive research on the country through six particular steps.<sup>104</sup> The knowledge derived from this study is termed ‘colonial knowledge’. It is further

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<sup>103</sup> The first wave can be seen through the existence of the minority groups of Chitty and Baba and Nyonya, otherwise known as Indian and Chinese *peranakans*. It is known that these ethnic groups descend from earlier Indian and Chinese immigrants in Melaka. The *peranakans* arrived long before the British colonials. However, the exact period of their arrival remains debatable. For further details on the early wave of Chinese and Indian migration in the Malay Peninsula, **SEE:** Su Kim, L. (2008). The Peranakan Baba Nyonya Culture: Resurgence or Disappearance? *Sari*, 26, 161–170, Pillai, P. (2015). 2. The Chitty of Malacca: An Epitome of Cross-Cultural Influences. In *Yearning to Belong* (pp. 42–77). ISEAS Publishing, Raghavan, R. (1977). Ethno-Racial Marginality In West Malaysia: The Case Of The Peranakan Hindu Melaka Or Malaccan Chitty Community. *Bijdragen Tot de Taal-, Land- En Volkenkunde*, 133(4), 438–458 and Gungwu, W. (1985). Migration Patterns In History: Malaysia And The Region. *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 58(1 (248).

<sup>104</sup> According to Shamsul A.B. (2011a, 20-22), ‘colonial knowledge’ was observed by the British through six (6) steps;

- (i) mastering the language of the natives to enable the colonisers to communicate with the local people and enforce the legal system imported from their country of origin;
- (ii) carry out survey activities to gather detailed information about the lives of indigenous peoples and the environment;

strengthened through public policy, census, land enactment, birth certificate, identity card, vernacular school system and others (Shamsul A.B. & Athi, 2014, p. 267).

The research and findings later became ‘factual’ in that they were accepted by and dominated the knowledge and viewpoint of society, especially on economic issues and cultural history, simultaneously “disempowered the native by limiting their ability to define their world.” (Shamsul A.B., 2001, p. 357). This domination of knowledge can be seen through (i) institutional development; and (ii) literature and literary documents. First, an example of institutional development can be seen through all structures and mechanisms of administration and governance inherited from the colonial British by the *Bumiputra*, including the law (Shamsul A.B., 1986). Second, all insights about the treasures of Malay oral literature were documented and processed by scholar-administrators such as R.O. Winstedt and R.J. Wilkinson and then taught in schools as part of the teaching syllabus (Shamsul A.B., 2011a, p. 31; Sweeney, 1980, pp. 7–9).

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- (iii) collect statistical information on the demography of the colony through census activities;
  - (iv) store various materials and artefacts that have been collected from surveys and censuses to be exhibited in museums, zoos, flower gardens and private collections;
  - (v) establish a system of espionage and intelligence to guarantee the security and political stability of the colonial government; and
  - (vi) build a historiographical library that is branded as indigenous property to be used as resources for teaching material passed down for mass consumption through the colonial education system.

Shamsul (2001) added:

“Modern Malaysians have become familiar with ‘facts’ that appear in reports and statistical data on commerce and trade, health, demography, crime, transportation, industry, etc. Hence, these facts and their accumulation, conducted in the modalities designed to shape colonial knowledge, lie at the foundation of the modern, post-colonial nation-state.” (p. 361).

This insight on the part of the British created a ‘scientific’ body of knowledge, in particular involving the discipline of social science studies on Southeast Asia in universities and decision-making research institutes. Additionally, it simultaneously created a ‘knowledge baseline’ that reorganised social scientific knowledge into area studies or those that are ethnically motivated (Shamsul A.B., 2007, p. 126). The ‘epistemological space’ continued in administration, government, and education, because the concept of identity advocated by the state becomes more robust with the support of more scientific ‘facts’ that are “unchanged and unquestioned.” (Shamsul A.B., 2001, p. 362).

However, the interpretation of national identity differs at the level of ‘authority-defined’ and ‘everyday-defined’. Regardless, due to the ‘authority-defined’ being more officially accepted by the state, any narrative from the ‘everyday-defined’ side tends to be side-lined. According to Shamsul A.B. (1996a):

“Generally, the discourse in an authority-defined context is textualised both in published and unpublished forms, some of which have been weaved into ‘official policies’ and others written up as ‘academic publications’. In short, the text of such a discourse, even the oral form, is usually recorded either in printed form (official reports, policy documents, newspaper reports, books, magazines, academic journals, photographs, etc.)

or, more recently, in audio-visual electronic form (tape and video cassette recordings, CD-ROM, diskettes, films, etc.) ...*[I]n an everyday-defined context the discourse is usually disparate, fragmented and intensely personal conducted mostly orally. Since it is overwhelmingly an articulation of personal experience, not meant to be systemised or positioned for a particular predetermined macro-objective, it is therefore not textualised for 'future reference', except occasionally by researchers, such as anthropologists or historians who would have tape recorded or written down, as ethnographic notes, these "personal narratives."* (p. 478).

As explained, this 'everyday-define' narrative is difficult to consider empirical or 'the true reality' at the academic or governmental levels. The challenge arises due to the government's formal stance and regulations, which is why 'everyday-defined' is regarded as non-scientific. Considering these factors, the 'Two-Social Reality' framework can be used to explain the contestation of facts and values formed by the regime vis-à-vis individuals or political satirists across art mediums in printed or digital forms.

Due to the nature of 'everyday-defined' that takes into account an individual's experience, cartoonists function in terms of recording their observations in the form of 'popular forms of expression'. According to Shamsul A.B (1996a):

*"More interestingly, these narratives are often captured in what is generally categorised as "popular forms of expression" or "popular culture", such as cartoons, songs, poems, short stories, rumour and gossip, poison letters and the like. Irrespective of what each 'narrative' has to tell, how popular it has been accepted across society and whether or not it represents contemporary public concern, it is usually considered as an individual or*

*personal contribution from the “author” (cartoonist, singer, poet, short-story writer, etc.)”<sup>105</sup>*

Based on the arguments presented above, several issues are considered relevant and suitable for study through the framework provided by Antje Wiener and Shamsul. Evidently, there have been efforts by the state to implement norms and values within society in the name of racial harmony and unity through a number of national policies, ideologies, programmes, and laws. However, these en masse norms and values imposed at authority-defined levels are contested by the MPS at the individual level, following the everyday-defined.

## **2.5 Summary**

In summary, the attempt has been made to highlight several central points in this chapter. Firstly, the previous understanding of the middle class, specifically how the Malay middle class was confined to the industrial-commercial notion, primarily through type of job and salary. However, there is concrete proof that the previous perspective was later extended to the SCP, particularly from the MASCO classification of the ‘professionals’ group as the Malay middle class. Previously, this group had been excluded from the general notion of the middle class due to the differences in vocation and stratification based on level of education.

Subsequently, the perceived ‘professionals’ group cannot be placed in specific economic categories, mainly due to their unconventional working-employment conditions, such as remuneration that depends on works of art instead of being salaried. However, I have pointed out that there are dividing groups within the social and cultural community itself that

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<sup>105</sup> Ibid., pp. 477-478.



consist of art activist groups. These groups are seen as more independent and unattached to other superiors when they direct criticism and satire at the authorities through their artworks. This observation differs from that made for mainstream SCP workers who are challenged with a conflict of interest, especially those involving the relationship between employer or supervisor and subordinate.

Secondly, to conceptualise the above, I applied the SKOG approach to make a clearer distinction between mainstream SCP and the art activist groups. From the SKOG approach, the mainstream SCP can be categorised as the SG, who are united by one common goal: to secure present and future opportunities to gain access to resources and appropriation of resources and their distribution. The SCP eventually became the state apparatuses by supporting state activities and leaders, in this sense, for economic purposes and with regard to the national agenda. In contrast, the KOG members consist of art activist groups who oppose the appropriation and power strategies of strategic groups in order to maintain their own interests. The KOG members challenge the state's activities and its leaders and attempt to promote their personal agenda, which is much more politically nuanced. They also attempt to promote discourse within and criticism of Malay society.

Thirdly, after the post-Mahathir era, the space for criticism has expanded more than ever before. The satirists are able to express their criticisms freely, at least to a certain extent. Simultaneously, the issues highlighted by MPS have become increasingly complex. Their criticisms now cover themes such as civil rights, humanity, freedom of the media and expression, as well as problems with government such as injustice, corruption, misconduct, and abuse of power. "Satire", according to Hale, "promises to reveal the "truth" and, with its revelation, provide some kind of moral correction." (2020, 208). Hence, satire and satirists play

a role in bringing these issues before the community due to their moral obligations in this regard.

Finally, the general impression still sees satire as a part of comedy and, at the same time, often linked to entertainment. Therefore, the state and its mechanisms are able to form a particular paradigm for the interpretation of ‘consensual entertainment’, especially after the events of 13<sup>th</sup> May 1969. The elements of national culture and exemplary values, especially those based on Malay-Islam, have been proposed by the government with the intention to prevent a recurrence of the previous racial conflict. So, political satire is confronted with the narrative that the country is attempting to develop as a result of the characteristics of satirical works that were previously viewed as libellous and capable of “disrupting the harmony” of racial unity, on top of character assassination.

## **CHAPTER 3: UNDERSTANDING THE ART OF SATIRE FROM THE MALAY**

### **PROFESSIONAL SATIRISTS (MPS)**

#### **3.0 Introduction**

This chapter will describe the approaches to understanding MPS from their characters. To prepare the reader, the first section of this chapter explains the distinct characteristic of MPS, which might differ from those of mainstream SCP. This characterisation provides an insight into general questions on “Who can be described as MPS?” The second section of this chapter explains the main factors of the exclusion of MPS from the conventional understanding of the SCP’s community. To prove this statement, this section describes the absence of MPS in a mainstream SCP that four (4) exclusionary factors can explain. This section answers more specific questions on “Why do MPS exclude themselves from the SCP?” and “What makes MPS different from the SCP?” Finally, to prepare the analysis in Chapter 3, the final section of this chapter provides the themes and issues highlighted by MPS during 2011-2018.

#### **3.1 Defining ‘Malay Professional Satirists’ in this study**

As mentioned by Hale, “Although we recognise satire when we see it as a genre, it is notoriously difficult to define.” (2020, p. 3). The same difficulty arrives when one attempts to answer the question, “Who is the satirist?”, as it involves multiple perspectives. However, several attempts have been made by scholars to explain it according to its characteristics.

According to Farjami, Western literary traditions highlight two kinds of satirists, namely Juvenalian and Horatian (2017, p. 108). These two types have their particular qualities: “The Horatian satirist feels positively toward mankind but wants to cure them of their worst

fault, which he considered to be ignorance. The Juvenalian satirist, on the other hand, dislikes mankind, and his goal is to wound or punish.” (Farjami, 2017, p. 108).

The reference to ancient Greek literary satire – based explicitly on the Menippean satire – continue to be used by scholars such as Northrop Frye, who point out that the satirist is able to show society the darker side of a glorified person and make them appear “as hideous and reeking giants.” (1957, p. 224). Frye also mentioned that the satirist has the high moral ground and is responsible for “lashing the vice and follies.” (1944, p. 78). Nonetheless, as Hodgart emphasises, great satirists attack people or customs that they assume are bad and create their ‘own dream world’ (1969, p. 24). According to Feinberg, satirists are constantly aware of the immediate problems of their day, and simultaneously have “to be detached enough to retain a more accurate perspective than most contemporary judgments are likely to express.” (2017, p. 154). In addition, satirists must also be sensitive enough to observe the weaknesses of men and institutions.<sup>106</sup> However, it is not mean to the institution, per se; instead, as mentioned by Elliott (1954, p. 247): “...he attacks perversions of institutions; when, for example, he ridicules a corrupt judge he intends no reflection on the law as such, he is attacking a corruption which has crept into the law.”

This shows that the satirist has their moral principles and try to establish particular problems that may be mistaken or relatively ignored in the eyes of the public. Satire, as a genre, continued to receive attention from literary scholars until the 20<sup>th</sup> century. During this time, satire was seen as a full-fledged literary, artistic mode (Bogel, 2001, p. 1). Bogel insists that satire is an ambiguous art. Thus, satirists often get an opposing view and are ridiculed because

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<sup>106</sup> Ibid., p. 155.

of their unique ‘perspective’ in the satirical works they produce. Griffin has also presented this argument in discussing the polemic of satire theory in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. According to Griffin (1994, pp. 29–32), the view that separates the satirist from his work is built from the Russian Formalism and the US New Criticism literature movement.

As a work of art, “satire”, according to Griffin, “...tends to separate the work from the author (including satirist) who produced it, the world out of which it grew, and the audience towards which it was directed.”<sup>107</sup> Therefore, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the satirist was seen as an artist and their satirical works were also seen as works of art.

The terms ‘satire’ and ‘satirist’ contain subjective and abstract concepts. Therefore, these terms in this study are loosely used to refer to a genre in the former and the person who produced a satirical work in the latter. From general hindsight, satire and satirists have certain defining characteristics that can be identified, which are: (i) have an object to attack with strong intention (Kuiper, 1984, pp. 462–465); (ii) self-inferior, social injustice, exclusion from the privileged group (Highet, 1962, p. 240); (iii) considered a political outsider, (iv) using a certain technique of language or the visual as an indirection to frontal attack and censorship; and (v) an educated person of university trained (Griffin, 1994, pp. 139–145). However, since the advent of social media, which contains numerous memes, parodies, humour, and satire, it is undoubtedly not appropriate to assume “everyone is a satirist” (Bremner et al., 2010) or as in the present study on ‘citizen satire’.

The term ‘professional satirists’ was used in the previous literature by Crittenden et al. (2011), Connor (2017), Farjami (2017), and Ferrari (2018). Nonetheless, there are no objective

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<sup>107</sup> Ibid.

attributes given to determine who, precisely, the celebrated professional satirists are. Instead, scholars have provided a consensus with a general feature, sufficient for a coarse understanding of this group. According to Crittenden et al (2011, p. 177): "...in the past, political opinion leaders in the role of satirists tended to be professionals employed by newspapers and other forms of media to manage the flow of information from the media source to the general population."

However, since the advent of social media, professional satirists have evolved and become more reciprocal, by inviting the readers to critically engage with their content (Farjami, 2017, p. 94; Ferrari, 2018, p. 2210). Therefore, professional satirists are considered the voice of reason in comparison to non-professional 'citizen satire' (Connor, 2017, p. 198). In this study, I focus on professional satirists. Notwithstanding, based on my observation, Malaysians, in particular, commonly group non-professional 'citizen satirists' and 'professional satirists' together. It is also best to mention that the notion of the professional satirist is determined by their common traits, as elaborated upon in the following chapter.<sup>108</sup>

### **3.2 Behind the jest: The Malay Professional Satirists**

Since the 'middle class' is associated with 'professional' occupations, there are two general understandings of the term 'middle-class professionals': the first is according to "empirical

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<sup>108</sup> It is also worth mentioning that several previous attempts to study the spectrum and personality of satire, satirist and humour were made in the field of psychoanalysis, such as Sigmund Freud's Theory of *Laughter in Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* (1905) and psychology by W.A Pannenberg in his *Satiric Writers: Character and Temperament* (1953). As the subject of these studies was out of my scope and expertise, I used the general concept presented above.

descriptions of some biologically existing individuals with specific names, professions, consumption patterns or institutional affiliations” (Heryanto, 2003, p. 28), in this sense provided by MASCO; and the second is by a more abstract definition, “...as discursive, ideological and mythical concepts.”<sup>109</sup> Nonetheless, as this study focuses on professional satirists, the study of citizen satire or citizen satirists will not be discussed further. Instead, this section will review the common characteristics of MPS.

### **3.2.1 Urban residence**

In Chapter 2, middle-class professional groups were described as commonly residing in urban areas. A similar observation was reported by Mandal, as he claimed that “for the most part, the art activists described thus far tend to be the urban and of the higher middle class.” (2003, p. 186). As shown, the MPS in this study are part of the middle class and mainly live in the urban city, either in Selangor or Kuala Lumpur. Their geographical residency factor is crucial, particularly in these two cities. While Kuala Lumpur is known as the capital of Malaysia, Selangor is considered crucial by political parties as “its performance in governing a state will be closely observed by the public.” (Yeoh, 2010, p. 178).

### **3.2.2 Education**

The minds of satirists have been said to be “...be superior to that of the average of man.” (Feinberg & Connery, 2017, p. 186). Peters claims the satirist is “also a public intellectual.” (2022, p. 853). All MPS in this study have completed tertiary education or once enrolled in a higher studies programme. Overall, the key informants’ highest level of education is at the

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<sup>109</sup> Ibid.

doctoral level, while the lowest is at least at the Diploma level. However, education in this context should not be narrowed down to formal education, per se. No MPS have a formal education in politics. In addition, some of their study programmes are unrelated to the social sciences or humanities. Nevertheless, they gained an informal political education by reading political books or biographies on political figures, attending and participating in political discussions, listening to protest music such as punk, or through their personal involvement with activism.

### **3.2.3 Primary occupation**

Crittenden et al. (2017) pointed out that the present characteristic of professional satirists has now evolved and is not only confined to a specific form of employment. All of the MPS in this study have a primary source of income through working as graphic designers, cartoonists, and as academicians. For most MPSs, their primary occupation rarely involves political or satirical work. The MPS can be described as having a double life; in one part by having an ordinary day job, while in another by being a professional satirist. Feinberg also argues that satirists struggle with ‘dualism’ in terms of their “separated identities.” (2017, p. 149).

### **3.2.4 Ideologies**

From observation, all MPSs are actively involved with activism, particularly on human rights, political activism, and freedom of expression. Therefore, they have robust principles and ideologies. Usually, their principles and ideologies differ from conventional beliefs and are hence deemed controversial. Most MPS also believe they should warn the public about specific issues that might be against their principles and ideologies. However, this does not necessarily mean the MPS persuades their audience to trust and follow their principles. From my point of view, MPS assume their role as an initiator to the public, inviting them to ask questions and



critically think about issues, point-blank messages, and allowing room for political discussions. Professional satirists, somewhat taking on the role of a formal educator in a standardised classroom, have the responsibility “to educate” and “to inform”; it is only that the classroom is, in fact, in the public sphere.

### **3.3 Different strokes for different folks**

In his study of satirical performance during election seasons, L. M Bogad developed the theory of guerrilla theatre performance. According to Bogad (2005, p. 3), this satirical political performance is: “...an expression of the frustration felt by individual citizens and social movements who feel excluded from the real decision-making process.”

Satirical performers, or what Bogad called electoral guerrillas, consist of political actors and performance artists who are guided by their aesthetic consciousness as well as socio-political agendas and grievances.<sup>110</sup> These satirical performers use popular genres such as agit-prop theatre, satirical performances, stand-up comedy, and parody, which are far more available than a street protester.<sup>111</sup> Therefore, their work must be entertaining and engaging to their chosen audiences and often considered catalysts or facilitators.<sup>112</sup> The key elements to understanding the notion of electoral guerrilla performers are exclusion and underrepresentation from the right to know and take action.

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<sup>110</sup> Ibid., p. 8.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid., pp. 2-6.

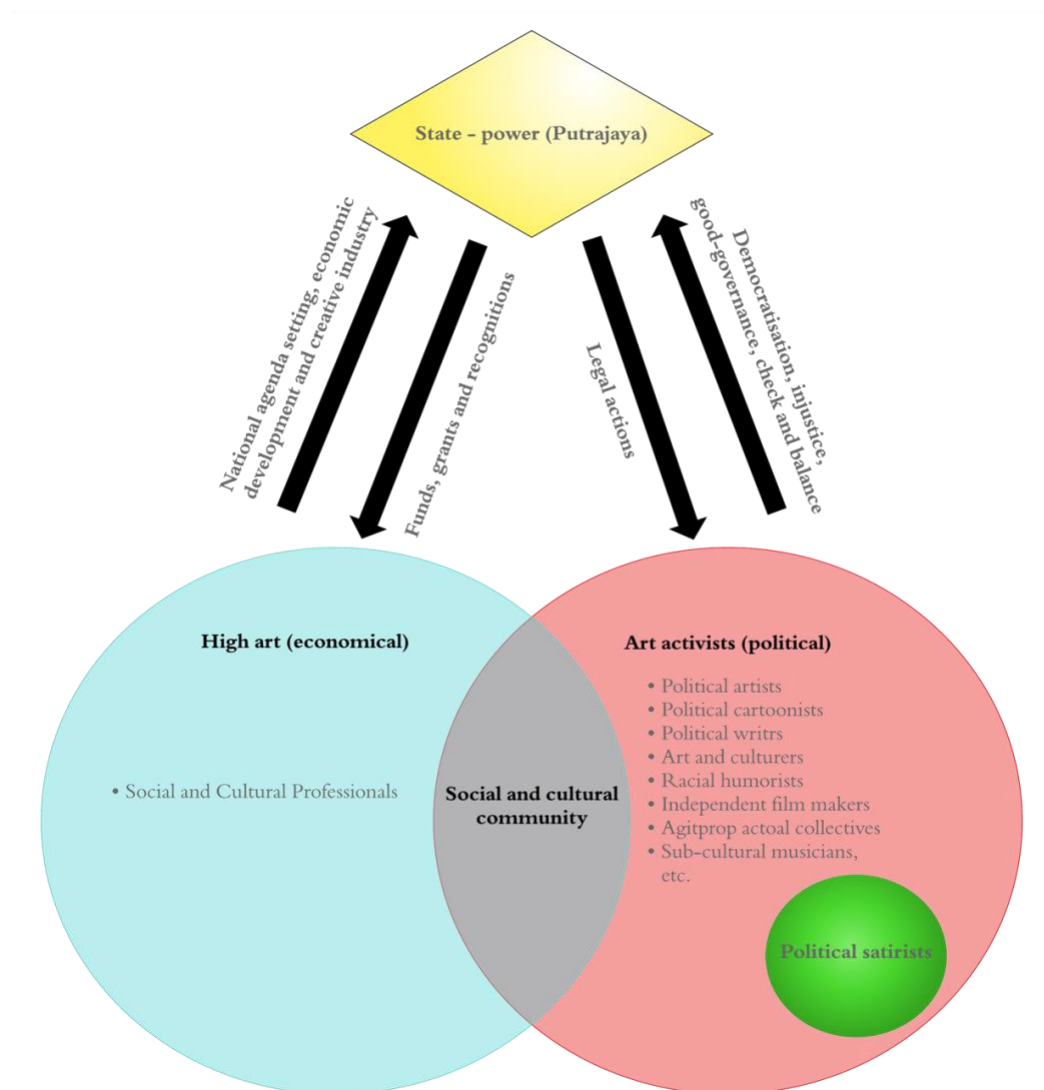
<sup>112</sup> Ibid., p. 11.

It has been established that the SCP has been recognised and represented in various state and private agencies, in this case through Government-linked Companies (GLCs) such as the Cultural Economy Development Agency (CENDANA) and MyCreative Ventures Sdn. Bhd. These entities were responsible for managing grants, equities, and loans to improve the cultural sector of the creative economy (CENDANA, 2023; MyCreative, 2023). One poignant example is the relationship between the SCP and *Rumah Yayasan Kesenian Perak* (trans. House of Perak Arts Foundation, Rumah YKP) and the Perak state government, as mentioned by Nurhanim Khairuddin (2012):

“The Yayasan Kesenian Perak (YKP), or Perak Arts Foundation, was an institution that was funded by and works closely with the government of Perak...registered as a non-profit making organisation, YKP had substantial autonomous power over its administration and activities. *However, it still served as an agency that was required to abide by the Perak public service’s rules and regulations and operate within its institutional parameter.* Therefore, the presentation of art and culture was essentially informed and at the same time by the state government’s policies and strategies.” (pp. 71–72).

However, while the former group enjoyed recognition and representation from the state, their art activist counterparts, on the other hand, faced their own challenges. As explained by Leppänen, political dissenters rarely receive recognition and equal rights since they tend to disregard the scope of institutional politics (2018, p. 13). The following model in Figure 2.2 explains the division between high art (mainstream) and art activist community. The mainstream community consists of entities that tend to be recognised by the state, while the art activists who carry their social and political messages usually face adverse impacts.

**Figure 3. 1:** The comparison between high art and the art activist community<sup>113</sup>



Notes. Created by author, adapted from Mandal, Sumit K. (2003) and The Ministry of Human Resources. (2020). *Malaysian Standard Classification of Occupations (MASCO)*.

<sup>113</sup> The high art follows Sumit K. Mandal's (2003, pp. 182-183) points on art projects initiated by the state and private enterprises. Mainstream, in this context, refers to normative and conventional ideas, attitudes, and beliefs, and activities involving arts.

The Venn diagram in Figure 3.1 illustrates the observations and interviews conducted with MPS and several other informants in this study. From the model, there are two separate groups, yet they belong to the same social and cultural community. The state and its agencies usually support the high art or the mainstream SCP for economic purposes, while the art activist group is more political but also belongs to the MPS, minus the support.

In her long essay, Jo Kukathas (2020) points out several problems with how culture, art, and artists are perceived in Malaysia. Firstly, according to her, culture, art and artists were only perceived through the utilitarian model via ‘capitalist-driven’ and ‘Return of Investment’ (ROI) modes of thinking. This type of thinking has driven unnecessary competition between artists, which resulted in predictable, non-innovative, and lack-of-courage types of works. According to Kukathas, the arts scene in Malaysia is not developing organically, but rather economically.

Secondly, there is a tendency to fail to distinguish between arts and show business or ‘showbiz’. In this sense, Kukathas argues the two different understandings of arts and culture between Nancy Shukri, the former Malaysian minister of MOTAC, and Monika Grütters, the former Germany Staatsministerin für Kultur und Medien (Ministry of Culture and Media). Kukathas mentioned that while Grütters addressed the vital role of arts and artists in Germany during the COVID-19 pandemic, Nancy Shukri merely focused on helping music bands and held a singing competition. As mentioned by Kukathas, this shows that arts in Malaysia were usually understood from an entertainment perspective and is, ultimately, profit-driven.

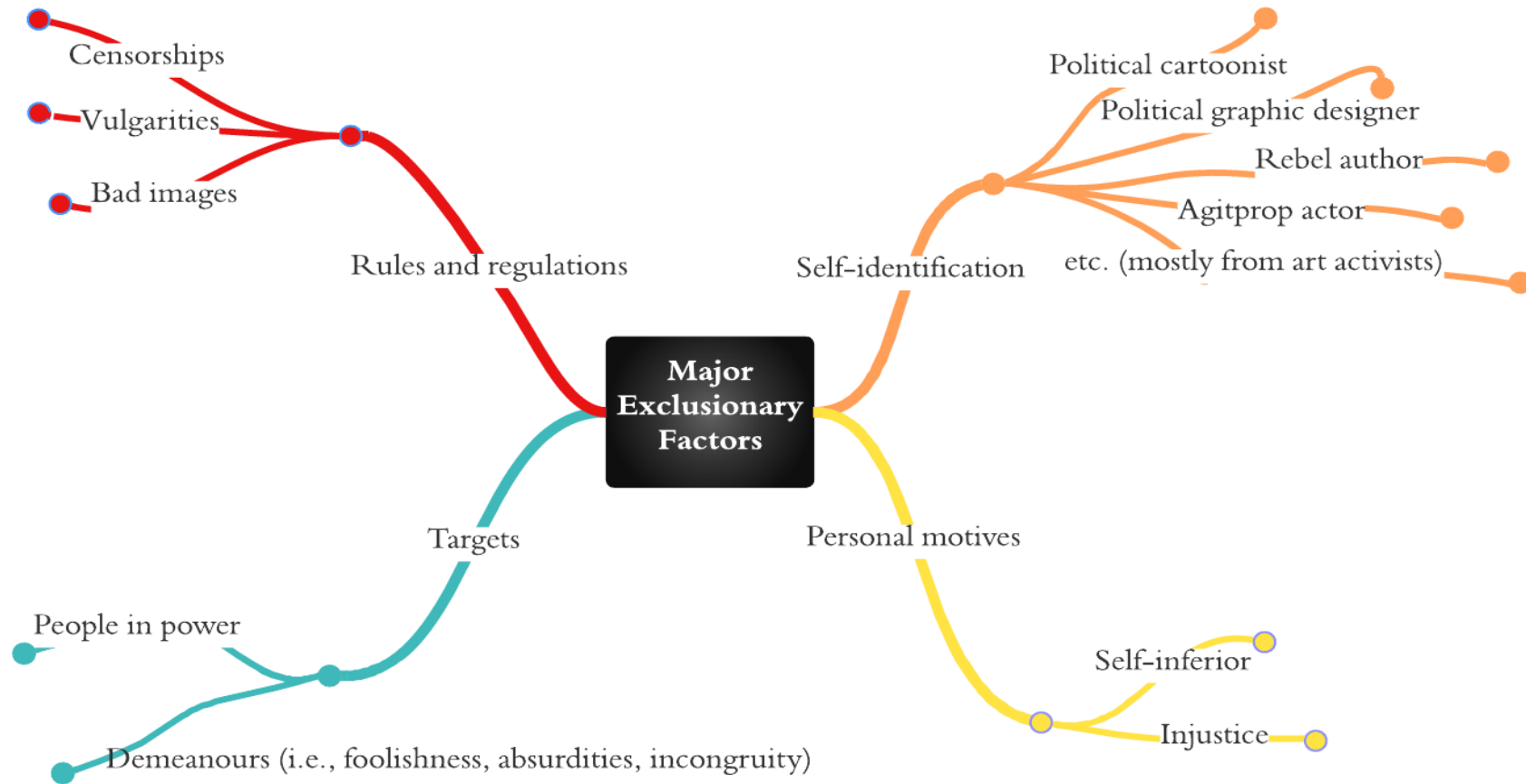
In the interview session, it was found that all four (4) MPS faced legal action by the authorities, such as jail, censorship, fines, and monitoring by the authorities due to their satirical

political artworks.<sup>114</sup> Many such also exclude and distinguish themselves from mainstream social and cultural professionals, simultaneously exposing themselves to legal action. In this sense, there are at least four major exclusionary factors identified in Figure 3.2.

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<sup>114</sup> However, this does not negate the risks and actions faced by high art community.

**Figure 3. 2:** Four major exclusionary factors



Notes. Created by author.

### 3.3.1 Self-identifications

One of the informants in this study, Zunar, a political cartoonist, excluded himself from other labels, such as painter, and from other cartoonists in the mainstream comic scene. In his opinion:

“I don’t see myself as an artist or a painter like them. I see the constraints these painters have to depend on others [the galleries]. They cannot go forward and produce what they want to create. For example, to hold an exhibition at the National Art Gallery. How do you want to have an exhibition in important galleries? How do you want to do it? Of course, there are many obstacles. So, I think I’m not from that group because I’m not that kind of painter. I’m a cartoonist. But I didn’t see this kind of group with me then [when facing the authorities]. Only those who were abroad were there. I need to move as a cartoonist because, in Malaysia, there is no group of cartoonists like that [political]. Some cartoonists have established popularity, and they take other topics. So, I am indeed a one-person. The medium is not the same. The groups are also not the same.” (Personal communication, March 23, 2021).

The same is true of Fahmi Reza, where he is always misunderstood and labelled by media or audiences as a ‘cartoonist’ and ‘drew the satirical cartoon for his living’. When Fahmi Reza is asked, what the message he is trying to deliver in his work is, and how he feels when his audience misinterprets his message, Fahmi firmly stresses his personal identification. He distinguishes himself from the label artist or political cartoonist. Instead, he recognises himself as a professional graphic designer, a position which also is categorised by MASCO under professional group 216, on par with Architects, Planners, Surveyors, and Designers.

According to Fahmi:

“My artworks have a clear message with no [room for] interpretation. That is a clear purpose messages of what I want to deliver. And if the audiences interpret my artwork differently, I have failed because I am not an artist. Because my artworks have a message, usually the message is political – that is very clear, direct and closed to any interpretation.” (Personal communication, March 24, 2021).

Self-identification is highly important for both Zunar and Fahmi as this distinguishes them from art activists and the mainstream community. However, as lone individuals without attachment to another similar unit, group or community, particularly with the mainstream community, both lack representation and recognition, particularly from the authorities. This self-identification leads the binary between ‘We’ and ‘The Others’, with Fahmi and Zunar excluded from shared membership with SCP.

### **3.3.2 Personal motives**

After Zunar quit his permanent job as a lab assistant in 1985, he focused on being a full-time cartoonist at *Gila-Gila*, a leading comic magazine in Malaysia. However, he was disappointed as the readers at that time did not like his style and opted to read cartoons purely for entertainment purposes. According to Zunar:

“...I produced many satirical cartoons. My column ‘Gebang-Gebang’ was full of satire, and I am also [in] Panaurama [column]. They already know that I like satire at that time. At that time, I was disappointed because the young people who read *Gila-Gila* were not interested in satirical cartoons, so they chose entertainment cartoons. So, my name is not very well known, so I am somewhere that is almost non-existent. So, I feel a lot of disappointment. Other friends got a lot of fan letters, I had one or two, but not so much, and my name was not the talk of the town at the time. This caused me, as a young



cartoonist, to be disappointed to see my friend getting a lot of responses, so finally, after those few years, I said it would be difficult if I were still with *Gila-Gila*. Maybe my approach was not suitable for this magazine.” (Personal communication, March 23, 2021).

Even though Zunar has worked as a full-time cartoonist in the comic industry since 1985, he has also been involved in social and political activism. When asked about his intention to do satirical political cartoons, Zunar mentioned his ‘resentment’ of injustice, particularly during the controversial case of the then Lord President of the Federal Court of Malaysia, the late Salleh Abbas. Salleh was removed from office during the Mahathir administration in 1988, after long complaints and allegations by the former PM about the Malaysian judiciary system. As a result, there was strong public distrust of the Malaysian judiciary as the executive branch had acted *ultra vires* (Aun, 1999, p. 131). This case triggered Zunar to do satirical cartoons:

“[My] motivation arises from *sakit hati* (trans. resentment). I’m sick of seeing things like this. For example, we see corruption in Malaysia. We have two things: corruption and injustice. I’m sick; I can’t see [it]. It was very early on when we knew the story of the 1998 dismissal of Chief Justice Tun Salleh Abbas. This hurts me, and I attend the Bar Council forums to hear it. I ask questions. For a long time, I have felt hurt. Where do I want to express myself? Why don’t I make it into a cartoon? So, this cartoon posits the feeling of heartache.” (Personal communication, March 23, 2021).

Like Zunar, Faisal Tehrani treats all human as equals. As a human rights activist, scholar, and writer, Faisal felt responsible for warning society about the dangers of a feudal mentality and obsession with religious leaders. Faisal states:

“From a sociological point of view, feudalism is a big problem in Malaysia because it hinders progress. It prevents progress. The progress I am talking about is not [about] the building or technology, although that is also what is meant. But also, the mind. That is the feudal problem that prevents progress. Not only democracy but also everything. Way of thinking. So, in my opinion, what is more terrible is our feudal or obsessive madness towards religious people. It’s another dangerous form of feudalism that must be dealt with seriously. If I do not reprimand this matter as an author or writer, then who am I writing for?” (Personal communication, May 7, 2021).

It was found that both Zunar and Faisal share the same resentment of injustice. They both also have their own understanding of socio-political ideologies, which may differ from other mainstream communities. However, both of them also feel some self-inferiority regarding their profession. In Zunar’s case, satirical political cartoons may not receive much acceptance from audiences and magazine companies compared to his mainstream cartoonists’ counterparts. As a result, he was disappointed and chose to retire circa 1991 until he made a comeback during Reformasi in 1998.

Faisal’s opinion mirrors that of Zunar. In the interview, he admitted that a novel – particularly a satirical one – will only attract a certain fragment of readers. With the advent of the internet and social media, satire in visual form gained considerable popularity among audiences as it can be far more easily transmitted and quicker to relate to current issues. In comparison, satire in literary form has to be published in a lengthy written form. As mentioned by Faisal, when the satirical novel is finally published, audiences are not so able to relate to what would then be relatively stale issues.

### 3.3.3 Rules and regulations

Themes and issues regarding politics and religion might as well be deemed sensitive and hence rejected from the mainstream comic scene. In a strictly controlled media environment like Malaysia, satirical political cartoons tend to be rejected by mainstream comic scenes as they might harm their images. In addition, such satirical works can be very dangerous and might seem frivolous (Bogad, 2005, p. 7). However, satirical cartoons in Malaysia also have their own juxtaposition. On the one hand, satirical cartoons are rejected and underappreciated; on the other, mainstream newspapers and magazines allow their publication and distribution. In Amin Landak's words:

“When you do political satire, they [the mainstream comic community] will look at you as a person who tarnishes the comic scene image. Because you do a cartoon that mocks a person, it is seen as negative for [Malaysia's] comic scene...[F]or me, political satire is one of the genres in a comic. Comics have various genres, such as horror, romance, and science-fiction; one is political satire. That [political satire] is not acceptable by the people—but it is also contradicted because other cartoonists have done it in Utusan (the national newspaper). They were accepted. That is the problem. They were taken because supporting the government, while on this side, was not.” (Personal communication, April 9, 2021).

In Malaysia, any publications regarding issues on Islam are highly controlled by the Department of Islamic Development Malaysia (Jabatan Kemajuan Islam Malaysia, JAKIM) and the Ministry of Home Affairs (Kementerian Dalam Negeri, KDN). For a bold writer like Faisal, his critical and satirical writing on Islam and the institution has left him in trouble with the authorities on several occasions, including banning and interrogation:

“There is a TV drama [Pelangi Ada Tujuh Warna] (*trans.* Rainbow Has Seven Colours). I wrote the screenplay. Actually, I wrote [the script] [and] I sent it [to] a competition organised by the Institute of Islamic Understanding Malaysia (IKIM) and won a prize...It is a satire. Then, Sultan Mizan gave the present. Then came Erma Fatima and Bade. They want to make a TV drama. I said, do it, but it’s hard because this drama is wordy, preachy. There are many sermons. It will be preachy...[S]o, what happens, it has to go through the permitting process. The drama is to be shown in conjunction with Awal Muharram, if I’m not mistaken, I don’t remember. It has to go through JAKIM. So, the drama was sent to JAKIM. I can’t remember what year this is. It’s a satire but a satire like Putera Gunung Tahan. It’s not like a SHIT satire. So, what happened was that JAKIM suspended it. JAKIM disapproved. When JAKIM disliked it, RTM didn’t want to pay Erma...So, JAKIM called. Ready to install cameras, five [or] six cameras like Ashaari Haji Muhammad to make that confession... I’ll explain. I won a prize. Sultan Mizan gave it. The story is like this, and this is how we broadcast it. Then, suddenly a JAKIM’s officer who always targeting me entered [the room]. He entered. He was also the person behind the banning of [my] books. He was behind it...[T]he debates was quite long. That was the first encounter with them, with religious people. The other thing is banning. They don’t even call me. The lawyer, when opposing the gazette [on the banning], right we say that not being called is illegal. Book banning in Malaysia is actually [under] Publication and Quranic Text Control Division [power]. We understand the role of the unit. They want to control the Al-Quran, which is wrong, misprinted, etc. We understand that. But it has overflowed its power to ban other books as well. Surprisingly, Malay books are banned, but English books are not. The title is the same when translated.” (Personal communication May 7, 2021).

There are various laws provided to limit, screen, and control freedom of expression and media content such as the Federal Constitution, the Sedition Act 1948 (Act 15), the Control of Imported Publication Act 1958 (Repealed by Act 301), the Internal Security Act 1960 (Act 82), the BERNAMA Act 1967 (Act 780), the Official Secrets Act 1972 (Act 88), the FINAS Act 1981 (Act 244), the Printing Press and Publications Act 1984 (Act 301), the Broadcasting Act 1988 (Repealed by Act 588), and the Communication and Media Act 1998 (Act 588) (Mohd Sani, 2008, pp. 73–83). In addition, as Islam is the official religion, there is also the Printing of Qur’anic Text Act 1986 (Act 326) to ‘regulate the printing, importation, sale, publication and distribution of Qur’anic texts and materials’.

From these acts, state agencies introduced various guidelines such as Film Censorship Guidelines, Guidelines for Publications of the Ministry of Home Affairs and Internal Security, Guidelines on Content Censorship of Islamic Broadcasting Materials or a specific guideline for Ahl-Sunnah Wal Jama’ah sect in Guidelines for Printed and Audio-Visual Related to Elements That Contradict the Faith and Practice of Sunnah Wal Jamaah.<sup>115</sup> These guidelines were provided to secure public order and security, morality, public opinion, and public and national interests. MPS, in this sense, challenges these rules and regulations by producing works that are considered ‘undesirable publications’ and simultaneously are subject to legal action.

### **3.3.4 Targets**

Satirists, as Juvenal famously declared, “speaking out freely, seeks to laugh men out of their follies.” In the interviews, it was found that the MPS are highly observant of injustices in and

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<sup>115</sup> See Chapter 5, p. 130.

around their environment. Furthermore, MPS are also selective in targeting their object. For example, Fahmi Reza chooses to attack and laugh specifically at the people in power or, according to his ideal philosophy, ‘punching up’. According to Fahmi, people will be less afraid of people in power through mocking them:

“So, for me, political satire is when we make fun of people in power. The effect makes us lose a slight fear of people in power. People in power the way they make us feel afraid. We are so scared to look at them. We are afraid to criticise and talk badly about them. Political satire makes us laugh at people in power. You lower their dignity a little when you make fun of that person. You lower their status. When we laugh, we are not so afraid of them. We lose our fear.” (Personal communication, March 24, 2021).

After the 13<sup>th</sup> May 1969 tragedy, the state’s power gradually burgeoned and became visible. The incident became a genesis of various security and sedition laws. As mentioned by Lee, “these laws are a vital aspect of the state apparatus for which the question of national security is defined principally in terms of controlling ethnic disturbances.” ((1990, pp. 492–493). This strong state approach became a potent formula in ensuring political stability for years (Slater, 2012, p. 20). As a result, state apparatuses became very powerful and authoritative, creating a dire situation for those with differing opinions.

In addition, consociationalism practice among major ethnic parties since post-Independence in Malaysia has also been hailed as the key to gaining political stability (D. Mauzy, 1993, p. 109). To date, ethnic representation in a political party has been critical during elections as it is among the most significant of draw factors in terms of attracting a particular segment of voters. In Means’ (1991, p. 296) words: “...elections have become accepted as the

foundation for the Malaysian political system, and as such, they have been the prime instrument for preserving and sustaining the democratic component in that system.”

Therefore, in Malaysia’s situation, democracy is much more understood from instrumental perspectives, per se, such as electoral, merely fulfilling the requirement of procedural democracy (Howe, 2020, p. 13; Loh, 2008, p. 135). Regardless, political parties are also one of the objects of attack by cartoonist Amin Landak. According to Amin:

“I make comics, I can condemn their [political] party, but they hire me as a graphic designer. But for comics, they didn’t hire me. They didn’t even touch me...I don’t think they have any right over me. If I think your party is very stupid, I [will] just criticise it.” (Personal communication, April 29, 2021).

Nonetheless, several important conclusions are based on my findings on MPS exclusion factors. First, art activists, in general, and satirists, in particular, are seen as more vulnerable to the authorities due to their approaches being more radical, open, transparent, and without the framework of the ‘proper channels’ favoured by the state.

Secondly, the state’s policies of ‘homogenising identity constructions’ in arts activities and associated community, as mentioned by Hoffstaedter, has “closed the door to the alternative discourse.” (2009, p. 538). Finally, the ‘two-way rejection’ from the mainstream community and the satirists themselves in terms of being associated with one another resulted in both groups’ perceptions of their positions and general acceptance of their works.

### **3.3 What is so funny?**

There are five (5) selected satirical works made by the MPS between 2011-2018. These satirical works’ categorisation is mapped in Table 3.1:

**Table 3. 1:** Political satire artworks produced by MPS between 2011-2018

<b>Name</b>	<b>Works</b>	<b>Media</b>	<b>Years</b>
<b>Faisal Tehrani</b>	<i>Tiga Kali Seminggu</i>	Short-stories	2011
<b>Zunar</b>	<i>Ros in Kangkong Land</i>	Comics	2015
<b>Fahmi Reza</b>	<i>Kita Semua Penghasut</i>	Graphic-visual	2016
<b>Amin Landak</b>	<i>Balak &amp; Red Carpet</i>	Cartoon	2016 & 2018

Notes. Created by author.

From this categorisation, there were at least two (2) central themes that can be identified, namely (i) politic and administration, and (ii) Islamic institutions and Islamic parties. Based on these two themes, this study found that four (4) particular issues were commonly raised by the informants, which are (i) the 1MDB scandal; (ii) Malaysia's First Lady; (iii) religious elites; and (iv) the Islamic political party during the interval years. Both themes and issues are reviewed in Table 3.2:

**Table 3. 2:** Common themes and issues highlighted by MPS between 2011-2018

<b>Name</b>	<b>Themes</b>	<b>Issues</b>
<b>Fahmi Reza</b>		1MDB
<b>Zunar</b>	Corruption	Malaysia's First Lady
<b>Faisal Tehrani</b>		Religious elites
<b>Amin Landak</b>	Islamic institution and Islamic political party	Islamic Party

Notes. Created by author.

Referring to Table 3.1, it can be seen that there has been a significant increase in issues raised in works of political satire between 2015-2018. These gradual appearances of works of political satire can be directly linked to the premiership of Malaysia's sixth prime minister,



Najib Razak. Two years after Najib assumed office from [the fifth prime minister] Abdullah, he announced the abolition of the ISA and amended a number of laws that were considered to be “stifling the democracy” (Malaysia Kini, 2011). However, after the 1MDB scandal was exposed in 2015, several laws were created and implemented extensively, such as the Sedition Act, MCMC Act, and Anti-Fake News Act. These laws were used against political dissidents and, indeed, citizens, which later sparked reactions among civil societies and highlighted the 1MDB scandal. As a result, several series of street rallies, such as Bersih 2.0, Bersih 3.0, and Anti-Kleptocracy, led to huge losses for the BN coalition during the fourteenth GE and Najib’s being sentenced to time in prison.

### **3.4 Summary**

This chapter has discussed MPS characteristics and their exclusion from mainstream social and cultural professional categories. According to the arguments presented, the MPS and SCP practise two-way rejection, alienating them from their communities. This rejection is caused by their different perspectives as based on four factors, which can be described as (i) self-identification; (ii) personal motives; (iii) rules and regulations; and (iv) targets. Therefore, from this pattern, the MPS can be described as urban Malay middle-class individuals with ordinary occupations, acquired artistic skills, and self-ideologies and principles. They use their creative talent in satirical ways to mock demeanour (political) behaviours and disseminate such works to the public. This chapter also provides selected satirical works from 2011-2018 according to theme and issues. From the thematical perspective, there are two particular themes on (i) corruption, and (ii) the Islamic institution and political party. The following two chapters will analyse common themes, issues, and the MPS’s experiences.

## CHAPTER 4: SATIRICAL CRITIQUE OF SYSTEMIC MISCONDUCT

### 4.0 Introduction

This chapter highlights the works of two individuals, namely Fahmi Reza and Zunar. In this chapter, themes of politics and administration were brought by both the above in their works, namely *Kita Semua Penghasut*, and *Rosmah in Kangkong Land*. These works were produced in 2015 and 2016 and highlight the 1MDB scandal and issues relating to Malaysia's First Lady, Rosmah Mansor. Both Fahmi Reza and Zunar were subject to separate legal actions for producing these works, including being arrested and a book being banned.

### 4.1 Fahmi Reza: Designing for a cause

Mohd Fahmi Reza, or Fahmi Reza, is a graphic designer, musician, activist, and documentary producer. He was born on 7<sup>th</sup> June 1977 and grew up in Kuala Lumpur. After receiving his primary and secondary education in Cochrane, Kuala Lumpur, he was admitted to a science boarding school in Pahang. Following his excellent academic results in SPM,<sup>116</sup> Fahmi was offered a scholarship from Telekom<sup>117</sup> to pursue a degree in electrical engineering at Vanderbilt

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<sup>116</sup> Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (*trans.* Malaysian Certificate of Education, SPM or MCE) is a national-level exam taken by upper-secondary students throughout Malaysia. This exam is equivalent to the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) conducted in England, Wales, and Northern Ireland, and Nationals 4/5 in Scotland. SPM is also equivalent to the GCE Ordinary Level (O Level) conducted by the Commonwealth of Nations. Before continuing to study at the foundation level, *Sijil Tinggi Persekolahan Malaysia* (*trans.* Malaysian Higher School Certificate, STPM or MHSC) or diploma, this exam must be taken.

<sup>117</sup> Not to be confused with Germany telecommunication company, Telekom. Telekom Malaysia or TM Malaysia is a Government Link Corporation (GLC) which provides the main telecommunication service in Malaysia.

University, United States of America. Fahmi then lived in the US for four years, from June 1995 until 2000.

After he returned to Malaysia in 2000, Fahmi decided not to work as an electrical engineer. Instead, he continued to work as a graphic designer, mainly for activism purposes. He worked for various non-governmental organisations (NGOs) that fight for democratic freedom and human rights, and against discrimination and racism, such as in Amnesty National Malaysia, *Suara Rakyat Malaysia* (SUARAM), and *Pusat Komunikasi Masyarakat* or the Community Centre of Communication (KOMAS Centre). According to Fahmi, many of these NGOs have an important political message to convey but do not have the funds to hire proper graphic designers. Hence, he often decided to offer them pro bono services.

Per his involvement in activism, Fahmi also created his personal protest messages by producing multiple offline satirical graphics, such as graffiti and posters. He once published a satirical colouring book titled *Buku Mewarna: ABC Politikus Malaysia* (2015), which contains satirical caricatures of Malaysian political leaders. Fahmi has faced various legal actions and prosecutions in court. He was charged in 2016 under Section 233(1) of the Communications and Multimedia Act because he produced and broadcasted a satirical clown caricature depicting the former Prime Minister of Malaysia, Najib Razak (Ging, 2016). In addition, in 2021, he was also charged under Section 4(1) of the Sedition Act and Section 233 of the Communications and Multimedia Act for insulting the royal institution as a result of producing a song playlist on Spotify and iTunes.<sup>118</sup>

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<sup>118</sup> For context, the six-hour long playlist was created by Fahmi Reza on 23<sup>rd</sup> April 2021 as his reaction to a comment on Instagram by the Supreme Queen Consort of Malaysia, Tunku Azizah Aminah. During the early

In the same year, Fahmi Reza was charged under Section 500 of the Penal Code and Section 233(1)(a) over his two satirical works, which were accused of insulting the former Minister of Health, Dr Adham Baba, by depicting the minister as a missing person and restaurant coupons for a reduced period of mandatory quarantine for overseas travellers (E. S. M. Chin, 2022).

As a political activist and documentary filmmaker, Fahmi Reza is also well known through works like the documentary, ‘10 Years Before Merdeka’ (2007), the #OccupyDataran campaign in 2012, and his political poster’s solo exhibition ‘12 Years of Visual Disobedience’ (2014).

#### **4.1.1 Punk and politics**

In America, the early punk movement was succeeded by college-educated middle-class youth as a self-reflection, reaction against mainstream culture, and artistic rebellion (Henry, 1989, p. 69). However, in Britain, punk as a subculture is much more political. It started from the

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period of Malaysia’s COVID-19 vaccination programme and the strict Malaysian Government Movement Controlled Order (MCO), Tunku Azizah uploaded pictures of a cooking session in the palace kitchen with the chefs. A user then asked in the photo’s comment section, “Chefs can get the vaccine too?” This question was answered by Tunku Azizah, “Dengki ke? (*trans.* Are you jealous?). This reply seems to allude that there is a difference in treatment between the royal group and the community. The response to the comment caused a flood of reactions because the royal family allegedly received their COVID-19 vaccine earlier than the commoners. Fahmi uploaded the 101-song playlist on Spotify and iTunes. Most of the songs include the word ‘jealous’ or ‘*dengki.*’ A recent update mentions that this case was dropped on 25<sup>th</sup> August 2021 and classified as receiving No Further Action (NFA).

enraged reaction of working-class youth towards Britain's 1970s stagflation (Clark, 2003, p. 225). The early punk, as stated by Dylan, "sought to tear apart consumer goods, royalty and sociability; and it sought to destroy the idols of the bourgeoisie."<sup>119</sup> British punk, both as an art form and social commentary, is synonymous with the band the Sex Pistols as they posit a 'cultural and political signifier' by establishing an explicit youth culture that challenged the preconception of the music industry and evoked moral panic (Worley, 2017, p. 4). Punk was also attracted by political organisations, left or right, as it "used youth culture and music to open up a space through which to voice dissent and satisfaction." (Worley, 2012, p. 348).

Punk music in Malaysia emerged during the 1970s through three main factors: (i) dissemination by Malaysian student studies in the UK; (ii) circulated at elite and boarding schools; and (iii) cassette announcement, shortwave radio frequencies, used magazines from the UK, and others (Sharifah Nursyahidah Syed Annuar et al., 2016, p. 109). As a boarding school student born in the 1970s, there is no doubt Fahmi was also caught in the zeitgeist. He started collecting cassettes and listening to songs of this genre at the age of 15. His early exposure to political awareness was primarily motivated by its vocally protesting lyrics. In the US, Fahmi had ample access to cassettes, compact discs (CDs), vinyl records, and other punk material.

Despite receiving a bachelor's degree in electrical engineering from the United States, Fahmi instead chose a career as a full-time graphic designer. As a student in the US, he started attending punk music gigs, student protests, and demonstrations on current issues. He also designed posters and graphics for protest demonstrations; hence, the main elements of his

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<sup>119</sup> Ibid.

works are protest art. As stated by Fahmi, the punk genre carries many protest messages and contains elements of irony and sarcasm. Fahmi added that most of the punk music he heard discussed current and topical issues, as the lyricists use a lot of elements of political satire in their songs. This view was also confirmed by Worley as he mentioned, “the lyrics employ wit, satire and play on words to convey any ideas/inspirations/observations...” (Worley, 2017, p. 72).

In addition, the images and visual design of flyers and posters of punk bands also influenced his interest in graphic design. According to Fahmi, political satire could appear in various forms. However, his work focuses more on the graphic and visual, specifically physical and digital posters. Fahmi often includes elements of satire and parody in his works, but some only show elements of protest. According to Fahmi, humour is essential in satirical work; his main targets are powerful individuals and the authorities. According to Fahmi, the interpretation of “powerful parties” is not limited to the government, per se, but even more broadly to “anyone in a position of power”, including the opposition, the police, and employers who oppress workers. He added that satire is a powerful “weapon” to “speak of the truth” and at the same time laugh at those in power. Fahmi sees that most people in Malaysia are still afraid of those in power due to “the existence of various laws that are misused to silence critics.” (Personal communication, March 24, 2021).

Fahmi is against censorship and promotes freedom of speech and expression. However, he sets certain boundaries for both himself and his work; in particular, he would not make fun of a person’s physical appearance or satirise minority communities. Fahmi says his satire is

used to “*punch up, not to punch down.*”<sup>120</sup> In Fahmi’s view, satire should not be used as a weapon to satirise or attack oppressed minority communities. The purpose of the satirical works he posts on social media is for public consumption. His works’ production is to “open society’s eyes” to the flaws and problems in Malaysia. His works can also be freely shared and disseminated by the public. In Fahmi’s observation, his audience mainly comprises the young generation.

However, Fahmi admits there are certain difficulties when he produces parody works. He explained, “parody is imitating something real,” he added, “...the humour comes from its being an imitation and altered, but it is perceived as a crime for you to post it... It is indeed false.”<sup>121</sup> Therefore, his works of satirical parody are often interpreted as being libelous, exposing him to Act 803 of the Anti-False News Act 2017.<sup>122</sup>

The messages in each of his works are conveyed in Malay and have a direct meaning. Fahmi thinks he would consider he failed as a graphic designer if the audience were unable to grasp his messages. He added that graphic designers have a more straightforward message to convey than artists; hence his refusal to be labelled as an artist or cartoonist.

Fahmi Reza was heavily influenced by punk’s attitudes, which can be known by their Do-It-Yourself (DIY) aesthetic, counterculture, protests, and political. Moreover, punk critique of development and the working class’s struggle vis-à-vis elites were engrained in his

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<sup>120</sup> Ibid.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid.

<sup>122</sup> This Act was repealed on 9th October 2019 in the Dewan Rakyat through the Anti-Fake News (Repeal) Bill. 2019.

worldview simultaneously spilled in his artistry work. Many of his satirical works he produced himself and disseminated to the public without any intention with regard to profit-making.

Fahmi consistently denied his involvement with a particular political party, instead freely criticising them all, including the royal institutions. Towards the end of the interview, Fahmi stated that satire and sarcasm had been integrated into local media practice since nearly the beginning. Taking the example of *Gila-Gila* magazine, P. Ramlee's films, and the newspapers of the pre-Independence period, he claimed that satire directed at the authorities had already been practised by the mainstream media. However, the sarcasm that existed then was described as "heavily padded", "indirect", and "more generalised rather than directly pointing out to the person or groups of interest."<sup>123</sup>

#### **4.1.2 Punching up the political elites and money politics**

When asked about the subject(s) of his attack in political satire, Fahmi said:

"Whoever is in the position of power. One, the government definitely...but it is not exclusive to the ruling parties because I also criticise oppositional parties a lot. Because they are in a position of power – a part of the system. Even though they are not ruling, they are waiting to rule if they win the elections. So, my target is the ruling class, including politicians from opposition parties and those who are in [a] position of power, particularly [those] who abuse it, such as the police. Sometimes, the CEO of any corporation exploits their workers...[S]o I satirised them because they are economy elites too." (Personal communication, March 24, 2021).

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<sup>123</sup> Ibid.



In his 'Elites and Regime in Malaysia', Case (1996a) devised three (3) categories of National Elites, as indicated in Table 4.1:

**Table 4. 1:** Case's components of National Elites

<b>Elite Component</b>	<b>Organisational Base</b>		
<b>State Elites</b>	Governing ruling party, coalition or movement.	Bureaucratic Civil service, state enterprises, judiciary.	Military Armed forces and police.
<b>Economic Elites</b>	Industrial, Commercial, Financial & Landed Banks, agency houses, large business firms, and trade & employer associations.		
<b>Civil Elites</b>	Opposition Parties, coalitions & movements.	Occupational Small and medium business organisations; professional groups; labour & peasant organisations.	Voluntary Ethnic, cultural, religious & public interest associations & movements.

Notes. Adapted from Case. W. (1996) *Elites & Regimes in Malaysia: Revisiting a Consociational Democracy*, 16, Table 1.1. Monash Asia Institute: Clayton.

Historically, the state elite under the alliance of UMNO, MCA and MIC were known for their huge support from and confidence of their respective communities (Crouch, 1996, p. 20). However, the governing UMNO elites transformed to a private economy sector, particularly after the NEP was introduced in 1971.<sup>124</sup> As discussed in Chapter 2, the emergence of the new middle class has transformed and elevated the status of certain groups, explicitly Malays who are associated with the UMNO party. This symbiotic relationship also helped to stabilise the political system in the 1970s “in favour of authoritarian elements after 1969.” (Giersdorf & Croissant, 2011, p. 9).

According to Case, state elites possess ultimate and uniquely legitimate powers to rule (1996a, p. 16). In Malaysia, before the fall of the BN-UMNO in 2018, this coalition clearly prevailed over the bureaucracy and armed forces.<sup>125</sup> Regarding economic elites, state and economic statuses have “nearly merged” through the malpractices of money politics.<sup>126</sup> The term ‘money politics’ in Malaysia, as explained by Loh and Kahn (1992, p. 2): “...covers a range of practices whereby the benefits of State economic sponsorship and protection are channelled to individuals, groups and private companies associated with the ruling political parties, in particular, UMNO.”

The emergence of money politics has blurred the line between the state and UMNO’s business interests, simultaneously increasing UMNO’s political dominance and their associated

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<sup>124</sup> Ibid., p. 111

<sup>125</sup> Ibid.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid., p. 19.

enterprises in the economy.<sup>127</sup> The use of money politics does not involve mainly economic activities. In addition, it was also practised during the elections in terms of funds from businesspeople and rich individuals and vote buying (Teh, 2002, p. 340). Despite adequate laws to prevent the practice of money politics, such as the Elections Act 1958, Elections Offences Act 1954, and Election Regulations 1987, its practice has remained rampant.<sup>128</sup>

The problems were also addressed by Mahathir in his speech at the 35<sup>th</sup> UMNO general assembly in 1984 (Boo Teik, 1995, p. 258). However, illicit campaign funds were usually welcomed by a majority of politicians, as the elections cost huge sums of money.<sup>129</sup> Politicians who aspire to enter elections require wealthy friends or backers who can help further their careers. In return, they repay this financial help through the award of business contracts should they actually be elected.<sup>130</sup>

Therefore, as an activist and also professional satirist who believed in the power of people and anti-corruption attitudes, Fahmi created his satirical works to “raise awareness” amongst the masses and to allow for “punching up” the elites:

“[F]or me, this political elite, elite economy and those who are in the ruling class are the targets for my satire. So, I did not do satire that – for me – is punching down...[I] always use political satire as a weapon to punch up, to speak the truth to power that freezes.

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<sup>127</sup> Ibid.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid., p. 341.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid.

Those who are in the upper class when they have the power.” (Personal communication, March 24, 2021).

These satirical attitudes, as adopted by Fahmi, are aligned with what has been recognised by scholars as a ‘wounding weapon’ (R. C. Elliott, 1960, p. 281), claimed to ‘tell the truth and deliver warnings’ (Highet, 1962, pp. 234–235), and ‘sensitivity to the importance of good moral values’ (Frye, 1944, p. 78). The elite dominations are viewed by Fahmi as unjust and corrupt, particularly as a result of money politics and corruption practices.

In addition, Fahmi also viewed Malaysian democracy as a “broken representative democracy” (personal communication, March 24, 2021). As the state and economic elites gain stability and economic growth, they prefer not to liberalise the regimes they operate, looking instead to preserve their autonomy and exclusivity (W. Case, 1996a, p. 20).<sup>131</sup> As a firm believer in deliberative democracy, Fahmi added:

“That’s why we need our mechanism to have a direct say in terms of decisions that were implemented in our name or ours. Because now, the only decisions were made by the elites. Clearly, the elites should represent us in a representative democracy system. However, they are not representing us; instead, they are only representing their own political parties.”<sup>132</sup>

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<sup>131</sup> Ibid. p., 20.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid.

Therefore, as an individual who wanted to “advocate the freedom of expression and speech” and urge the masses to “explore alternative options to the present [system]”,<sup>133</sup> Fahmi used his creative protest to deliver his various criticisms and messages. Some examples of his satirical work can be found in the following section.

#### **4.1.3 *Kita Semua Penghasut (We Are All Seditious)***

In Malaysia, the term kleptocracy has been used to refer to the 1Malaysia Development Berhad (1MDB) scandal, which was regarded as “one of the largest cases of kleptocracy worldwide” during the premiership of Najib Razak (Abadi, 2022, p. 136). Briefly, the 1MDB is a Malaysian state-owned strategic development corporation established by the sixth prime minister during his premiership in 2009.<sup>134</sup> The 1MDB corporation originated from the Terengganu Investment Authority (TIA), which was intended to be a sovereign wealth fund to promote the economic interests of the state of Terengganu (Ali, 2016, p. 134). However, after the company succeeded in securing RM5 billion in a federal government-guaranteed bond issue, the federal government, under Najib’s rule, took over the entity and renamed it 1MDB.<sup>135</sup>

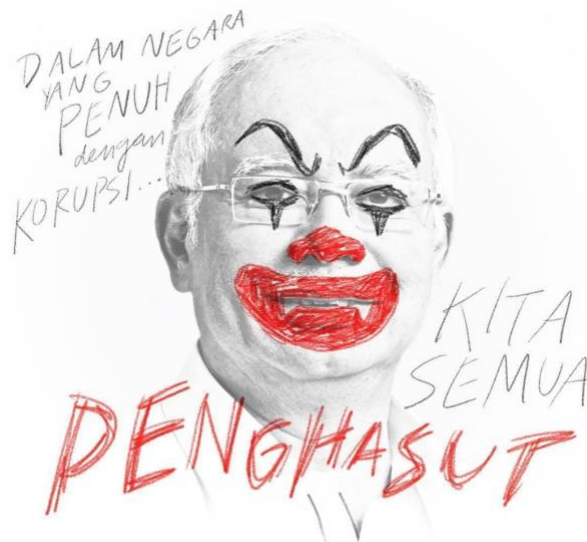
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<sup>133</sup> Ibid.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid.

**Figure 4. 1:** A sketch of the face of the former sixth Prime Minister of Malaysia, Najib Razak, modified by Fahmi Reza to resemble a clown, with the caption: ‘In a country full of corruption...We are all SEDITIOUS’



Notes. This original photo of the former sixth Prime Minister of Malaysia, Najib Razak, was modified by Fahmi Reza by depicting him as a clown in the campaign “We Are All SEDITIOUS.” Photo from Fahmi Reza’s Social Facebook account [Retrieved 18 May 2021].

The original caption in Figure 4.1 read, “*Dalam negara yang penuh dengan korupsi, kita semua penghasut.*” (*trans.* In a country full of corruption, we are all seditious.) During this time, the 1MDB scandal was heavily associated with the former sixth prime minister. Fahmi Reza had consistently attacked the PM and his wife, Rosmah Mansur. 1MDB later came to public attention in 2015 when the Sarawak Report exposed the money trail from the 1MDB fund to Najib’s personal account (The Sarawak Report, 2015). After the twelfth GE, large-scale public gatherings were held in protest against the Barisan Nasional-UMNO government.

#### 4.1.4 1MDB and Kleptocracy

The term ‘kleptocracy’ has been used by Stanislaw Andreski to refer to, “the wealth acquired through illegal use of public office.” (1966, p. 62). In a kleptocratic regime, “the state is controlled and run for the benefit of an individual, or a small group.” (Acemoglu et al., 2004, p. 162). The kleptocratic system under Najib’s administration not only manipulated the public service bargains and foreign policies (Abadi, 2022, p. 138), it affected the freedom of expression and the media as it has “turned to dangerous identity politics and cracked down on independent media and civil society.” (Walker & Aten, 2018, p. 22). Some examples of various intimidations received by activists and protestors during several series of street rallies to protest against corruption and the limitations on freedom of expression, particularly in BERSIH 2 (2011) and 3 (2012) (Chong, 2018b, p. 112; Ying Hooi, 2014, p. 97). The *Sayangi Malaysia, Hapus Kleptokrasi* (trans. Love Malaysia, Destroy Kleptocracy) rally held in Padang Timur on 14<sup>th</sup> October 2017 was also first denied by the Police Chief and accused of being “designed to bring down the image of Prime Minister Najib Razak” and a “gimmick to shame Najib and UMNO” (Hani Shamira Shahrudin, 2017; The Star, 2017).

Therefore, the BN component also was attacked by Fahmi, which was long associated with corruption and money politics (Gomez, 1991). In addition, Fahmi’s experiences with raids, lock-ups, and accusations under the Sedition Act became a personal subject in criticising the oppression and injustice during Najib’s BN administration. Fahmi Reza altered Najib’s Facebook profile picture into that of a clown during his campaign for the anti-corruption and anti-Sedition Act. Around the production of this caricature, Najib’s administration was famous for the ‘Cash is King’ principle (Teh Athira Yusof, 2021). According to Fahmi (personal

communication, March 24, 2021), the target audience for the picture was not particularly the politicians themselves, but rather for the masses.

In a Deutsche World interview, Fahmi claimed that “Malaysian politics is a circus full of clowns, with Najib being the biggest clown of all, feeding us with lies to distract us from knowing the truth about his corruption and wrongdoing.” (Brenda Haas, 2018). In addition, a popular musical band in 2019 called ‘Drama Band’ publicly broadcast the clown mask akin to the persona in Figure 4.2 in one of Malaysia’s well-known singing competitions, and the image also appeared as a cameo in a Korean Pop music video, “Falling in Love”, by Woo Jin Young and Kim Hyun Soo in Figure 4.3 (Malaysia Kini, 2018), creating a sensation and influencing the emergence of a new pop culture around the clown graphic image.

**Figure 4. 2:** Fahmi Reza’s political satire appearance during the Drama Band’s performance during the 34<sup>th</sup> *Anugerah Juara Lagu* 2019



Notes. This photo was taken during the performance of Drama Band, where two characters emerged, depicting the ex-PM Najib and his wife Rosmah lookalike. TV3 later warned the band for allegedly breaching the broadcasting code and ethics. Original photo by Mstar. 2019.

<https://www.mstar.com.my/spotlight/hiburan/2020/02/11/drama-band> [Retrieved 19 November 2023].



**Figure 4. 3:** Fahmi Reza’s political satire’s cameo in a Korean duo music video entitled ‘Falling in Love’



*Notes.* A screenshot from the music video ‘Falling in Love’ by South Korean duo Woo Jin Young and Kim Hyun Soo. This satirical image of Malaysia’s former PM, Najib Razak, was seen repeatedly in the music video. At the completion of this research, there had been approximately 791,000 views of this video on YouTube since being uploaded in 2020. Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-nGBQG9uir4> [Retrieved 9 November 2022].

The impact of the caricature was so widespread that an associated new pop culture actually emerged, such as souvenirs, t-shirts, and masks that were openly sold with the clown image printed on them. As a result, Fahmi Reza was blacklisted from entering Sarawak and from travelling overseas by the Immigration Department and also charged with a month in jail and a fine of RM30,000 under the 2333(1)(a) Communication and Media Act in 2016 over the picture, which was deemed to be “obscene, indecent, false, menacing or offensive in character with intent to annoy, abuse, threaten or harass another person.” (Azril Annuar, 2018; New

Straits Time, 2018). However, the charge was dropped in session court in 2018 (Farah Marshita Abdul Patah, 2018).

At the time of completion of this study, there is still no scientific and systematic research on the impact of this usage of caricature on Najib and the BN. Nevertheless, the presence of and extent to which these caricatures could be observed increased gradually over the years in rallies, and indeed toward the GE14; they were widely used by protestors as Fahmi had freely uploaded the image onto his social media accounts to be used by anyone who so wished (Malaysia Kini, 2016).

#### **4.2 Zunar: The black sheep of the mainstream comic community**

Zulkiflee Anwar Haque, or Zunar, is a cartoonist from Kedah, Malaysia. Born on 15<sup>th</sup> May 1962, he received his early education in Pendang and Jitra, Kedah, before continuing his tertiary education at the University of Technology Malaysia (UTM). Zunar did not complete his studies at UTM; instead, he did various jobs before being offered work as a laboratory assistant at the University Hospital, University of Malaya, and later at the National Population and Family Development Board Malaysia (NPFDB).

Initially, Zunar started producing controversial cartoons in his school days as a way to express his thoughts. His early cartoon contributions were widely published in entertainment magazines such as *Gila-Gila*. However, realising that the readership was less interested in the critical issues raised in the cartoons and that the themes were unsuitable for the magazine, Zunar decided to switch to publishing cartoons in newspapers. His interest in comics and drawing prompted him to leave his job as a lab assistant and devote his entire career as a full-time cartoonist in 1985.

He finally joined the *Berita Harian* newspaper group in 1991. However, he was subject to certain restrictions in terms of censorship imposed by the editors and was not allowed to produce cartoons that touched on certain issues. Some of Zunar's works were also rejected for publication. Due to this conflict of interests, Zunar's employment ultimately only lasted six (6) months at *Berita Harian* before he retired from cartooning in 1995. However, the 1998 Reformation movement fuelled his interest in returning to cartooning, with him working for the *Harakah* newspaper until 2003.<sup>136</sup>

Following his departure from *Harakah*, Zunar has worked with the *MalaysiaKini* digital newspaper to date. Throughout his career as a political cartoonist, Zunar has produced a number of controversial comics that the government banned in 2010, such as '1Funny Malaysia' (2009) and 'Perak Darul Kartun' (2009). However, he challenged the government regarding their decision in this regard, with the Court of Appeal finally lifted the banning order in 2014 for at

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<sup>136</sup> Harakah is a newspaper owned and published by Parti Islam SeMalaysia (PAS). Founded in 1951, PAS is one of Malaysia's oldest political parties, with over 800,000 members (Sinar Harian, 2021). PAS was initially established as a component of the ruling party, the Alliance Party (now Barisan Nasional, BN), during the early independence years. However, it split away from the BN component in 1978 and subsequently became one of the main opposition parties in Malaysia. In 1998, PAS merged with other opposition parties under the Barisan Alternatif (BA) coalition following the controversial dismissal of Anwar Ibrahim from the position of Deputy Prime Minister. However, in 2016, PAS was no longer with other opposition alliances and subsequently joined Gagasan Sejahtera (2016-2020), Muafakat Nasional (2019) and now Perikatan Nasional (2020).

least some of his works. However, at the time of writing, several other of his books and artworks remain banned.<sup>137</sup>

Zunar had been arrested several times and even imprisoned under the Sedition Act 1948. The authorities have also confiscated his books and electronic devices. He has been held for questioning, his office searched, and also prevented from leaving the country.

Despite facing legal action from his homeland, Zunar received various awards and recognition from abroad, such as the ‘Courage in Editorial Cartooning Award 2011’ from Cartoonists Right Network International (CRNI), ‘Artist-In-Residence 2011’ from BilbaoArte/Fundacion Bilbao Bizkaia Kutxa (BBK), Spain, ‘Human Rights Watch Hellman/Hammett Award for 2011 & 2015’ in New York, ‘Cartooning For Peace Award 2016’ from Geneva, and the ‘International Press Freedom Award, Committee to Protect Journalist 2015’ in New York. He actively publishes his caricatures on Facebook, Instagram, and the website [www.zunar.my](http://www.zunar.my).

#### **4.2.1 Why pinch when you can punch?**

Zunar had already sent his cartoons to *Gila-Gila* magazine in 1983 before joining as a full-time professional cartoonist in 1985. Among his important and iconic comic strips in *Gila-Gila* were *Gebang-Gebang*, *Ofis Korner*, *Liza*, and editorial cartoons in *Cili Padi* and *Panaurama* (Mulyadi Mahamood, 2015, p. 204). According to Mahamood, Zunar has been critical,

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<sup>137</sup> At the time of this study, Zunar’s books that were still banned are, ‘*Gedung Kartun*’ (2009), ‘*Isu Dalam Kartun Vol 1, 2 and 3*’ (2010), ‘*Sapuman: Man of Steal*’ (2017), ‘*Pirates of Carry-BN*’ (2013), ‘*Conspiracy to Imprison Anwar: Najib Convicts, Judges Follow The Script*’ (2014 ) while some of his books namely ‘*Cartoon-O-Phobia*’ (2010) and ‘*Ros in Kangkongland*’ (2015) are still under investigation under the *Sedition Act* (Zunar, 2014).

cynical, and funny from the start.<sup>138</sup> For example, his strip cartoons in *Gebang-Gebang*, *Ofis Korner*, and *Liza* all have a similar philosophy which satirises any wrongdoing in life, though *Cili Padi* and *Panaurama* were much more critical and harsher with regard to national and global socio-political conditions.<sup>139</sup>

This philosophy was again echoed by Zunar during personal communication with him in 2021. According to Zunar, “cartoons should not only be an empty joke but also contain a message.” (Personal communication, March 23, 2021). He did not favour a soft critique technique or what he called ‘soft-pinching’ towards any wrongdoings or injustice. Instead, Zunar hold to a more radical philosophy of “why pinch when you can punch?” The ‘punch’ he refers to was the harsh and direct technique of satirising and mocking powerful people. This approach was in contrast with other cartoonists who criticised using the soft-pinching technique, simultaneously saving them from any legal action, or what Mahamood called reactive action among cartoonists (2004, p. 301).

According to Zunar, “the critique won’t mean anything if it is channelled to the powerless or weak people.” (Personal communication, March 23, 2021). When asked, who the powerful people were that he wanted to ‘punch’, Zunar specifically mentioned politicians, regardless of being in the incumbent parties or opposition. However, Zunar felt his approach was not very suitable and pleasant for either the magazine or for readers, as he rarely received much attention from readers.

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<sup>138</sup> Ibid.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid.

While Zunar adopted a ‘punch’ philosophy, other cartoonists used different formulas in doing socio-political cartoons or what Mahamood classified as ‘critical humour’. According to Mahamood (2004):

“The use of caricatures as a weapon of critical humour was becoming quite common after independence; features nevertheless remained moderate and far from grotesque. Most caricatures of local leaders or personalities are neither harsh nor degrading. Some caricatures, even more, look like portraits, while others are merely depictions or light exaggerations of specific features of the individuals portrayed.” (pp. 285–286).

The approach to producing critical humour was essentially determined by the cultural values of the cartoonists and their audience, the object of their criticism, the ownership of the newspaper, as well as the rules and regulations.<sup>140</sup> Mahamood also suggests that, “in most caricatures, it is the issue which is being criticised by or attacked by the cartoonists.”<sup>141</sup> This is the critical factor in distinguishing Zunar from other cartoonists as he channelled his criticism directly both towards the person and issues.

#### **4.2.2 Two views on self-censorship**

As he openly and actively produces controversial political cartoons that satirise politicians, Zunar has faced various forms of legal action, including censorship. In Malaysia, the provisions in Part IV of the Printing Presses and Publications Act through Article 7(1) of the Federal

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<sup>140</sup> Ibid., pp. 286.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid.

Constitution, give a considerable mandate as authority to the Minister to determine the content of a publication:

“If the Minister is satisfied that any publication contains any article, caricature, photograph, report, notes, writing, sound, music, statement or any other thing which is in any manner prejudicial to or likely to be *prejudicial to public order*, morality, security, or which is likely to alarm public opinion, or which is or is likely to be contrary to any law or is otherwise prejudicial to or is likely to be prejudicial to the public interest or national interest, he may in his absolute discretion by order published in the *Gazette* prohibit, either absolutely or subject to such conditions as may be prescribed, sale, issue, circulation, distribution or possession of that publication and future publications of the publisher concerned.” (*Act 301 Printing Presses and Publications Act 1984*, 2012).

Despite such provisions, political satire in editorial cartoons remained lively and direct, including that directed against the UMNO party (Provencher & Omar, 1988, p. 90). However, around 1987, it became more allusionary in nature, and cartoonists began to practice self-censorship:

“The political spiciness of these magazines and their cartoons was greatest up to mid-October 1987. After that point, coinciding with the detention of a large number of politically active persons (none of whom were cartoonists), political commentary has been more subtle, but it is there and requires more detailed exegesis than illustrated here... There has been no direct censorship even after October 1987, but ‘self-censorship’ has been imposed on cartoonists through their editors, and a few cartoonists have been warned by the government.” (Provencher, 1990, p. 22).

According to Lent (2015, pp. 168–169), cartoonists usually get a degree of leeway from the authorities in producing satirical works according to several factors:

- a. the government is less interested in banning Malay humour magazines;
- b. many of the Malay community themselves hold essential positions in politics;
- c. this freedom is rooted in the history of Malay culture, which sees cartoons as a replacement for traditional arts that are dying, such as *boria*, *wayang kulit*, *folk tales* and the Bangsawan Theatre as well as allowing the general public to channel their displeasure towards leaders through the medium of humour;
- d. many Malaysians associate cartoons as a medium only for children. Subsequently, the authorities do not truly view cartoons as a political threat;
- e. cartoon and humour magazines published in a colloquial dialect see widespread acceptance among Malaysians in general; and
- f. cartoons are commonly used and tolerated to handle (cope) pressure in a multicultural urban society.

The development of cartoons in magazines and newspapers simultaneously saw the establishment of the Malaysian Cartoonist Association (PEKARTUN) and Malaysian Comic Activist Society (PeKOMIK). Through these associations, cartoonists were able to run annual comic conferences, receive grants from the government, and organise comic awards.<sup>142</sup> The very existence of these societies shows that scholars recognised moderate freedom and flexibility, especially in Malay humour magazines. However, this freedom does not negate the pressure from the government, as stated by Lent (1997, p. 5): “Cartoonists who take on political

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<sup>142</sup> Ibid., p. 169.



subjects often pay a heavy price to practise their craft... To survive, the cartoonists have become masters of subtlety, stealth, insinuation, innuendo and the double entendre.”

Cartoonists are still seen as bound by the decisions of their magazine’s publisher, editor, owner, and investors, as well as aspects of self-censorship and copyright issues. As stated by cartoonist Lat, the duty of the editorial department is to avoid “things so that nobody gets into trouble” and be careful not to offend the government or any public figures (Lent, 1987, pp. 28–30). This practice also implies that ownership is vital in publishing cartoons in magazines and newspapers to balance Malaysia’s social and political fabric.

Malay editorial cartoonists also experience limitations regarding ideas, particularly criticism directed towards the government. One comparable example is as noted by Provencher (1999):

“Once in the late 1980s, when a number of opposition politicians had just been detained, the Prime Minister invited several of the best-known cartoonists as a group to meet with him. One of the groups, a very close personal friend of mine, told me later that they were all very nervous and joked among themselves about the strong possibility that they might not be returning home that evening. They were served food and drink and engaged in polite conversation with the Prime Minister for almost an hour. As time dragged on, they became more nervous. Finally, one of them presumed to ask if they had been invited for any particular reason. According to my friend, the Prime Minister cleared his throat and paused for a long moment, seeming to be considering his words carefully, and then he said, “Please remember that a humorous poem, story, joke or cartoon should always have a humorous point.” They were graciously excused, and they left, perplexed but greatly relieved.” (p. 21).

The cartoonists were not the only group that was facing such risk. Surprisingly, the writers who work alongside cartoonists and the content writers are more exposed to potential litigation. Therefore, as a countermeasure, authors' names are placed at the end of each text but not in the list of staff members at the front of the magazine.<sup>143</sup> The names of actual staff writers are in the list of 'editors', so the contributions made by particular individuals are not apparent and the magazine as a whole would bear any liability.<sup>144</sup> As a result, "publishing companies continue to exercise self-censorship to avoid economic problems caused by government censorship." (Provencher, 1997, p. 14).

Self-censorship is also practised by political cartoonists like Zunar. However, the notion of self-censorship and personal boundaries in producing satirical cartoons carries a different meaning than mainstream editorial cartoonists. According to Zunar, the practice of self-censorship is not due to any legal liability as perceived by editorial cartoonists, but instead for the audiences' enjoyment:

"I want my cartoons to be enjoyed by many. That is why I did not use any foul or obscene language, including race or religion. This is my own ethic. I believe that we are all human. I did not have any objections in your life, similar to my works, I do not have any religious obstacles. For me, it is your religion of choice, I cannot hold you for what you believe. We cannot change our race or ethnicity. That is why there will be no elements to widen these gaps in my cartoon. Instead, I criticise the people who create it." (Personal communication, March 23, 2021).

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<sup>143</sup> Ibid.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid.

Therefore, there are different notions of self-censorship held by Zunar and other editorial cartoonists. While the editorial cartoonists practise self-censorship, which is much more compliant with the state's rules and regulations, Zunar, on the other hand, imposes self-censorship at the point of his own moral boundaries, which are much more aligned with his personal principles.

#### **4.2.3 *Ros in Kangkong land***

On 9<sup>th</sup> February 2015, Zunar launched his controversial comic book title, *Ros in Kangkong Land*.<sup>145</sup> The comic book is a compilation of his satirical cartoons poking fun at Rosmah Mansor, the powerful wife of previous Malaysia's sixth prime minister, Najib Razak (Heinemann, 2015). Before the book launch event took place, the police raided Zunar's office, confiscated hundreds of copies of the book and threatened to detain him – again (Spiegel, 2015). Five days previously, on 14<sup>th</sup> February, Zunar had already been arrested and detained for three days over a tweet criticising the imprisonment of Malaysia's now tenth prime minister, Anwar Ibrahim (Committee to Protect Journalists, 2015). However, it was not the first time Zunar's book had been confiscated by the authorities; indeed, over 1,000 copies have been

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<sup>145</sup> *Kangkung* (lit. water spinach), sometimes spelt as *Kangkong* is a tropical vegetable. It's popularly known and consumed in Southeast Asia. *Kangkung* usually grows in any damp soil, including near riverbanks or drains. The term *kangkung* in the Malaysian context has two meanings, first refers to the plant; second, in a much pejorative sense. For example, the well-known Malaysian sociologist, the late Dr Syed Hussein Alatas, first coined the term 'kangkung professor' to label scholars who distorted knowledge (Yik Koon, 2021) and were no different from corrupt and evil politicians (Free Malaysia Today, 2019). In Zunar's comic context, it also may refer to a parody of once popular video games 'Donkey Kong Land'.

seized by the police since 2009. He was also accused of a hate campaign against the ruling regime, and his book was considered ‘detrimental to the security of the country’ (The Straits Times, 2015a).

**Figure 4. 4:** Zunar’s banned comic book, *Ros in Kangkong Land*



Note. Sources adapted from Zunar’s website <https://www.zunar.my/shop/cartoon-books/ros-kangkong-land/> [Retrieved 8 March 2023]

#### 4.2.4 Imeldific reflections of Malaysia’s First Lady

Imeldefic was the term coined by the press for Imelda Marcos, the First Lady of the Philippines, to refer to her grandiose, excessive, extravagant behaviour (Eng, 2019, pp. 994–995). Imelda was known for her interest in luxurious accessories such as handbags and pearls and was well known for her collection of 3,000 pairs of shoes (Picart, 2005, p. 104). Marcos ultimately fled to Hawaii in exile after the February Revolution sparked in the Philippines following corruption cases years later.

In Malaysia, the shocking book, *Billion Dollar Whale*, likened Rosmah to ‘modern Imelda Marcos’ referring to her extravagant tastes and lavish spending on high-end accessories like Birkin handbags, expensive pieces of jewellery, silks, and other luxurious items using public funds (Wright & Hope, 2018, p. 31). Rumours and gossip also surrounded Malaysia’s ex-First Lady as she allegedly controlled and manipulated her husband and was inclined towards mysticism (Lemière, 2018, p. 119). It was these shenanigans that were used by Zunar to attack Rosmah. Her character is continuously lampooned by Zunar as he believes that she is “obviously one of the powerful people.” (Personal communication, March 23, 2021).

Compared to Fahmi Reza, who focuses on satirising Najib Razak, Zunar seems to continuously lampoon Rosmah in his various series of political cartoons. Zunar’s cartoon on Rosmah had added elements of humour and a strong formalistic style to emphasise certain characteristics and issues (Noorhazalen Saad et al., 2021, p. 17; Syaza Marina Ramli & Mokhtar Muhammad, 2019, p. 76). Many of Zunar’s cartoons display a very distinct and recognisable character of Rosmah. For example, his colossal hairstyle caricature satirises Rosmah over her remark on home-service hair dyeing, which allegedly cost her RM1,200 (The Straits Times, 2015b).

Another familiar symbol of Zunar’s cartoon included the infamous diamond ring worth RM24 million, allegedly purchased by Rosmah (New Straits Times, 2018). Nonetheless, these stereotypes remain allegations at the time of this study as they still cannot be proven. However, on 1<sup>st</sup> September 2022, Rosmah was found guilty by the Federal Court of Malaysia of three other charges of soliciting and receiving bribes to help a company win RM1.25 billion (BBC, 2022). As stressed by Zunar in our personal communication, he strongly refused to be called an artist but preferred to be known as a political cartoonist. Interestingly, his point of view is

recognised, as when he gave himself this label, as akin to owning a ‘license to heckle’ and to mock his object of attack, a proposition argued by Gamson and Stuart (1992, p. 62). In addition, cartoonists, as mentioned by Morris, are often representational artists and do not seek to show politicians literally. Instead, they exaggerate and distort the ‘true’ character of the person portrayed (1993, p. 196).

### **4.3 Summary**

These two examples in Chapter 4 have shown that corruption in politics and administration has become a central theme for Fahmi Reza and Zunar. CNN (2019) hailed them as ‘the cartoonists who helped to take down a Malaysian prime minister’ and detailed how their political satire work nearly landed the two men in prison (James Griffiths, 2019). From the analysis, there are a number of apparent similarities they share. Firstly, the object of attack by Fahmi and Zunar is very clear as they mock both the person and the issues. Najib Razak’s image was heavily altered by Fahmi, to the extent of becoming a clown, while Rosmah’s image was depicted in an exaggerated fashion for her rapacious appetite for luxurious items. Secondly, both Fahmi and Zunar have also been subject to legal action, such imprisonment and a string of court cases concerning their political artworks. Thirdly, they also work alone, producing and disseminating their artworks using the internet and social media.

In Fahmi’s descriptive analysis, the protest culture and punk attitude significantly affected him. His experience overseas during his student days in the US allowed him to join protests and rallies that local Malaysian students would restrict through the implementation of AUKU. In addition, punk’s anti-establishment principle, ingrained within its members, also influenced Fahmi’s political perspective. Fahmi often work for free and freely, which allowed him to create satirical designs without restriction. As an avid history buff, he is sometimes

considered an independent historian who stressed nationalism and Malay-left history. Therefore, Fahmi consistently advocated ‘the people’s struggle’ (*perjuangan rakyat*), a philosophy that was translated into many of his graphic designs. As an advocate for the people’s struggle, Fahmi saw the inherent gaps between society’s elite groups and its ordinary citizens. Therefore, through the selected work of Najib’s Clownface, Fahmi criticised Najib’s kleptocratic administration, specifically on the issue of 1MDB.

In Zunar’s analysis, his moral philosophy had begun to be engrained from his youth. He was experienced in both the mainstream and alternative worlds of comical cartoons. However, his personal philosophy may be crossed with conventional interests, leaving him to be his own ‘political cartoonist’. In general, cartoons in Malaysia seem to be understood as a mere form of entertainment, and accordingly Zunar was relatively ‘unpopular’ among mainstream readers. Zunar’s philosophy of ‘punching’ had its consequences; he preferred to avoid innuendo, or what he called a ‘soft-pinch’, in his political cartoons. However, his bold and harsh style in mocking particular individuals can be seen as a double-edged sword. From his perspective, Zunar’s formalistic style and the use of familiar faces and symbolism in his cartoons bridge a mutual understanding for his readers but simultaneously expose him to possible lawsuits for libel or other legal actions.

## **CHAPTER 5: SATIRICAL REFLECTIONS ON ISLAMIC INSTITUTIONS AND POLITICAL PARTIES**

### **5.0 Introduction**

The main themes highlighted in this chapter are the politico-religious aspects of Malaysia. This chapter analyses the selected work of Faisal Tehrani through his controversially acclaimed short story, *The Fake Religious Leaders Who Consume Pork* (2011) and the caricatures by Amin Landak entitled *Balak* (2016) and *Red carpet* (2018). The issues examined in these works are politico-religious in nature in Islamic institutions, and the political legitimacy in the PAS party. Both works led to negative consequences; the authority later banned Faisal's book, while Amin faced the wrath of PAS's supporters.

### **5.1 Faisal Tehrani: Rebel writer's journey**

Mohd Faizal Musa, better known as Faisal Tehrani, was born on 7<sup>th</sup> August 1974 in Kuala Lumpur. He then grew up in Malacca and received his early education at the Sacred Heart School and Sultan Mahmud Secondary School. Faisal then continued his studies at Kolej Islam Sultan Alam Shah (Sultan Alam Shah Islamic College, KISAS) and completed his tertiary education at the University of Malaya in Islamic Studies in 1998. He then completed his master's studies at Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) and his Doctorate at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) in Comparative Literature. Apart from serving as an academician and publishing academic-based works, Faisal is known as a novelist, poet, short story writer, screenwriter, and human rights activist in Malaysia. His satirical literary works are not only published in the form of novels but many are also in the form of short stories through digital newspaper columns and also the production of scripts for television dramas. Faisal Tehrani has received multiple awards and recognition for his writing, and still actively



writes his opinions in newspaper columns related to current issues and was applauded by *The Jakarta Post* as a ‘rebel writer’ (Nadeem, 2017).

Due to his different views on Islamic practices in Malaysia, the Malaysian government, through the Ministry of Home Affairs, banned seven (7) of his books, namely *Sebongkah Batu Di Kuala Berang* (2011), *Karbala* (2008), *Tiga Kali Seminggu* (2010), *Ingin Jadi Nasrallah* (2010), *Perempuan Nan Bercinta* (2012), *Sinema Spiritual: Dramaturgi dan Kritikan* (2012), as well as, *Aku \_, Maka Aku Ada!* (2015).<sup>146</sup> In addition, these books also allegedly contain Shia elements and beliefs that deviate from the Islamic sect of Ahlus Sunnah Wal Jama’ah, which is the primary practice in Malaysia.<sup>147</sup>

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<sup>146</sup> Another satirical political novel of his, which is also popular, *Ketupat Cinta*, also received a negative reaction from the religious bodies governing the state, that is, the Perlis State Mufti, Dr Mohd Asri Zainal Abidin, who objected to the publication of the novel series. Although Dr Mohd Asri has written a letter of objection to the Islamic Development Department of Malaysia (JAKIM) and the Ministry of Home Affairs (KDN), at the time of writing, no action has been taken against the novel.

<sup>147</sup> Ahlus Sunnah Wal Jamaah or Sunni (People of the Sunnah and the Community) is a majority tradition in Islam. In the tradition of Ahlus Sunnah Wal Jamaah, there are four (4) more divisions of schools of thought known as 'mazhabs', namely, Hanafi, Maliki, Syafi'i and Hambali. These schools of thought were founded by scholars known as Imam Abu Hanifah (Hanafi School), Imam Malik (Maliki School), Imam Syafi'i (Syafi'i School) and Imam Ahmad bin Hanbal (Hambali School). The main sect practised in Malaysia is the Syafi'i sect. However, another great tradition of thought in Islam is known as the Shia School. This trend began to gain a place in Malaysia after the success of the Iranian Revolution in 1979. Initially, the Muzakarah of the Fatwa Committee on 24<sup>th</sup> and 25<sup>th</sup> September 1984 [Paper No. 2/8/84, Article 4.2. (2)] decided that the Shia sects from the Al-Zaidiyah and Jaafariyah schools are accepted for practice in Malaysia. However, the decision of the Special Muzakarah of the Fatwa Committee of the National Council for Islamic Religious Affairs of Malaysia (MKI Muzakarah

Recently, the focus of his satirical criticism has not only been limited to the dominance of some religious groups in Malaysia over their followers but also touches on political, historical, and human rights issues. Faisal Tehrani has also encountered hate and criticism and even received death threats from unknown individuals over the course of his career.

### **5.1.1 Against the grain: Intellectual journey, activism, and ‘poisonous’ mouth**

The journey of Faisal’s life as an author and researcher are growing and changing, causing him to become more critical in his works. Initially, he became well known among readers and literary activists through novels that raised the resistance agenda, such as *Cinta Hari-Hari Rusuhan* (2000) and *Perempuan Politikus Melayu* (2000) (Rowland, 2017).

During the Reformation period of 1998, Faisal was also in a circle of activist friends from Artis Pro Activ (APA). In shaping his identity as an author, Faisal received guidance from two famous mentors, National Writer A. Samad Said, and Shahnnon Ahmad, famous for his controversial political satirical novel *SHIT*. As a result of his views, which are considered different from other authors in his cohorts, as many as seven (7) of his novels have been banned by the Malaysian government. Circa 2000s, Faisal placed considerable emphasis on sectarian issues in Islam and minorities, especially his views on followers of the Shia sect in Malaysia and his criticism of religious institutions in Malaysia.

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Committee), which convened on 5 May 1996, repealed the previous decision; at the same time establishing the banning of any publication, broadcast and dissemination of any book, pamphlet, video film, and others related to Islamic teachings that are contrary to the tenets of Ahlus Sunnah Wal Jamaah. For a full reading of the decision of the Special Muzakarah of the Fatwa Committee of the National Council for Malaysian Islamic Religious Affairs, **SEE:** <http://e-smaf.islam.gov.my/e-smaf/index.php/main/mainv1/fatwa/pr/10011>.

As an author, Faisal does the work of composing alone. Thus, Faisal, in a very authorly fashion and academic method, explained his journey in writing according to three (3) main phases of authorship that affected his identity and personality, which can be categorised as (i) a teenage writer; (ii) the religio-nationalist phase; and (iii) the human rights phase. Each phase was “patterned from the past five years” as if he were writing chapters of his life (personal communication, May 7, 2021).

In the first phase, when the Reformation occurred in 1998, Faisal was involved with APA and in staging plays at the Actors Studio and poetry readings. His famous satirical poems popular among the middle class at that time included *Babi* (trans. Swine). During Faisal’s first phase, he also worked on his PhD at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM). During the second phase, Faisal’s written works could be seen to be heavily governed by Islamic literature and influenced by Affandi Hassan and his main doctoral supervisor, Ungku Maimunah; both are known for their celebrated work, ‘*Persuratan Baru*’ (trans. Genuine Literature). His first phase was “cut off” after he “travelled for a long time and mingled in conservative circles.”<sup>148</sup> He then received his doctorate in 2010, and simultaneously graduated from the first phase of his writing journey. During his second phase, the presence of Islamic preaching elements can also be detected in his novels, such as *1515* (2003), *Tunggu Teduh Dulu* (2008), and *Bahlut* (2010) (Tengku Intan Marlina Tengku Mohd Ali et al., 2017, p. 272)

However, following the banning of his novel *Perempuan Nan Bercinta* in 2014, Faisal quickly moved to the third phase of his writing. Beginning his academic career in 2009, his reintroduction to activists and human rights ideas transformed him into a universalist (Rowland,

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<sup>148</sup> Ibid.

2017). Themes include indigenous minority rights, LGBTQ,<sup>149</sup> freedom of expression and religion, as translated into the novels *Bagaimana Anyss Naik Ke Langit* (trans. How Anyss Ascended To The Sky) and *The Professor*. As in his previous books, Faisal also uses satirical methods in his works, especially against religious groups and corrupt governments. Besides books, Faisal also writes short stories, columns, and articles, which hold a significant satirical and cynical tone.

According to Faisal, not all authors are capable of satire, including other great authors. A satirical author “has unique characteristics, critical and even ‘crazy’” (personal communication, May 7, 2021). His mentoring by Shahnnon Ahmad led to his explanation that the purpose of satire is “to hurt the heart and change the morals of the other party.”<sup>150</sup> Faisal thinks that “a satirist cannot be created” and it is natural for him to produce satire, with him being ‘one sandwich short of a picnic.’<sup>151</sup> On the contrary, he believed that someone is “born to be a satirist” as a satirist is raised by the influence of the environment in which he is nurtured. This birth is linked to his experience growing up in Malacca, a state rumoured by many Malaysians that people residing there are blunt and straightforward but not rude.<sup>152</sup> According

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<sup>149</sup> The LGBTQ is an acronym for ‘Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer’.

<sup>150</sup> Ibid.

<sup>151</sup> Personally, being an author of Malay descent, there is a calling to care for one’s ‘*Air Muka*’ (Saving one’s water face). As this value is also ingrained in me as a Malay, writing with an intent to hurt and brought forth emotional damage and being purposefully malicious is an unfamiliar concept, one that is laden with guilt and absurdity.

<sup>152</sup> It should be clarified that Faisal’s parents and relatives utilise such bluntness in speaking and communication to demonstrate the strong bond between the family rather than to intentionally hurt people. Interestingly, Utusan

to Faisal, in a traditional home, he is conditioned by parents and relatives who speak straightforwardly and who are claimed to possess ‘*mulut berbisa*’ (*trans.* venomous mouth).<sup>153</sup> So, on that account, Faisal also attests to owning similar qualities: sarcastic and venomous.

The dramatic adaptation of his work also faced obstacles from JAKIM in terms of being screened on Malaysia’s television networks. As a result of his novels delving into sensitive issues, even with their satirical style, the authorities have subsequently banned them. Faisal has also received warnings from his employers, criticism from the community, and death threats from unknown individuals.

As a literary author, Faisal is more inclined to write his satire in prose form. However, he admits that most of his audience constitute those who read novels and short stories instead of poetry. This simultaneously limits of the audiences he might reach to those interested in digging into the layers of satire and criticism, especially in contemporary society, and young people who are more interested in graphic visuals. On the one hand, Faisal added elements of satire that can also be observed through the characteristics and everyday speech of the people of each state. Faisal also emphasised that there is no separation between satire which is said to

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Malaysia (2022) also recently published an article entitled “People in Melaka might be blunt in speaking, but they are not impudent.”, further solidifying the rumour of Melaka people. **SEE:** <https://www.utusan.com.my/nasional/2022/06/orang-melaka-mungkin-kasar-tapi-bukan-kurang-ajar/>

<sup>153</sup> The colloquial ‘*mulut berbisa*’ is also often used interchangeably with the term ‘evil mouth’, ‘laser mouth’, or, more recently, ‘savage’. According to Kamus Besar Bahasa Indonesia (KBBI, 2012-2022), ‘poisonous mouth’ is a metaphor that refers to someone whose nature of speech is to utter harsh, sharp, and hurtful words.

be ‘hard’ or ‘soft’; on the other, the context of the time influences the audience’s acceptance of a satirical work.

Therefore, Faisal’s motivation for satire can be traced through his long intellectual and authorial journey, primarily when he examines the attitude of the community that does not dare to oppose the powerful religious groups and the feudalistic mind considered obstacles to progress. He clearly states that satirists and political satirists have a moral responsibility to give advice and teach their audiences. This has resulted in Faisal’s persistence in producing satirical political work. His tenacity can be attributed to external influences that shaped his idealism and personality, the experience of dealing with injustice, and the impact of his involvement with social movements.

According to Faisal, ‘satire’ has existed for a long time in every culture. In Malay culture, satirical elements are seen in poetry, jokes, oral literature, proverbs, and poems. These elements of satire can be traced through oral stories such as fables and folk tales and from storytellers. Faisal concludes, “Indeed, satire is part of the Malays.” (Personal communication, May 7, 2021).

### **5.1.2 Two-tier version of Islamic *dakwah***

The Islamic *dakwah* development in Malaysia can be divided into two tiers. In the ‘first-tier’ version, the government received more comprehensive subscribers involved in the everyday practice of government social interaction, engineered by its large bureaucratic agencies with effectively unlimited resources (Shamsul A.B., 1997, p. 221).<sup>154</sup> The creation of the uniform

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<sup>154</sup> Ibid.

*dakwah* institution and its development can be traced back to colonial times, as noted by Maznah Mohamad (2020):

“...to centralise Islamic authority within each *negeri* (state), and then to ‘pigeon-hole’ Islamic law and its administration to the domain of a lower court so as not to interfere or overlap with other legal and governmental reforms introduced for other areas of life.” (p. 38).

The standardised, organised, and bureaucratic government version established an official, authoritative position such as a *mufti*, *kadi*, *imam*, and organised class of *ulama* and formal Islamic administrative laws according to the state.<sup>155</sup> The officials holding these positions are regarded as highly knowledgeable and expert in Islamic practice compared to the Muslim community in general.

On the other hand, in the second-tier version, there are *dakwah* groups that have been created outside the government’s structure. However, these outside *dakwah* groups often persist and are dismantled by the government. As a result, this ‘two-tier’ version has created a different paradigm. A clearer example of this can be found in the establishment of the National Council for Islamic Affairs (Majlis Kebangsaan Islam, MKI) and the National Fatwa Committee on 1<sup>st</sup> July 1969, which “aimed to establish effective and standard coordination among states in matters of Muslim affairs administration within the country.” (Nasohah et al., 2012, pp. 924–925).

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<sup>155</sup> Ibid.

In Peninsular Malaysia, Islam has been recognised as an official religion. However, even though the Federal Constitution did not specify the specific school of thought (*madhhab*), it is well known that most Malay Muslims practise the Ahlus Sunnah Wal Jama'ah *madhhab* of the Asya'irah doctrine of faith (Adam Badhrulhisham, 2016, p. 129). On 5<sup>th</sup> May 1996, the National Fatwa Committee Conference 1996 decided that the Muslims in the country could only abide to “the teachings of Islam based on the doctrine of the Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jama'ah” and that “the propagation of any teaching other than that of the Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jama'ah [would be] prohibited.” In addition, it also extended this prohibition to any “publication, broadcasting and diction of any books, leaflets, films, videos and others relating to the teachings of Islam that contradict with the doctrine of the Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jama'ah” (Department of Islamic Development Malaysia, 1996).

Faisal Tehrani was known for his critical view of the Islamic institution in Malaysia, generally with regard to human rights issues, and particularly regarding the Shia minority community. As an academic, Faisal's extended research on the Malay–Shia community in Malaysia can be found in his academic publications and research. In addition, he was also appointed by Harvard Divinity School as Project Associate on Project on Shi'ism and Global Affairs.

Contrary to popular belief, Faisal's view on Shia in the Malay community was not related to his principles on human rights at all. Instead, it came from his previous conservative view towards Islam, mainly through PAS and the *Ulama* Association which was reasonably tolerant of Shia beliefs during the late 1980s and early 1990s. As an author, many of his literary works, such as novels and short stories, are allegedly filled with “Shia propaganda”, “depicting [a] negative view towards Ah' al-Sunnah wa al-Jama'ah” and “disturbing public harmony.”



(Amran et al., 2015, p. 41; Mas'od & Hamat, 2018, p. 25; Mohd Aizam Mas'od & Mohd Fauzi Hamat, 2018, p. 8). In addition, Faisal's Islamic educational background in school and universities, as well as his early phase as an author – which skewed towards Islamic literature – were also among the factors contributing to his conservative stand on Islam.

However, through new experiences and ways of thinking over time (or phases), Faisal has radically changed his view toward that of more liberal and critical thinking. He is not just critical of the conservative views among Islamic institutions and practices, but also of the Shia community itself. In his words, he attacked both:

“In fact, you can look at my critiques during my current phase three. I wrote about Shirin Ebadi, the Iranian Nobel Peace Prize Laureate. I also wrote about Ayatollah Saanei. And then there is one [writing] that made Shia believers angry at the female Iranian cleric.” (Faisal Tehrani, personal communication, May 7, 2021).

Due to his now critical view of Malaysia's formal Islamic institution and conservative Shia belief, he is frequently accused of trying to gain popularity for his academic career:

“If you ask the Shia believer, they will tell you that I am not a Shia. If you really asked the person, they will tell you that Faisal Tehrani is not a Shia. He only likes to read [about Shia]. He only made a good rapport with the Shia community. Or, he is only ‘riding’ Shia for his own career. If you ask a Sunni believer, they will tell you he [Faisal] is a Salafi. I don't even care now.”<sup>156</sup>

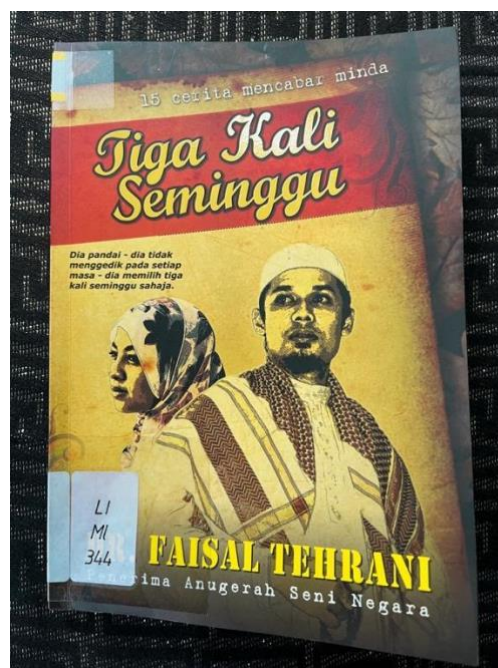
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<sup>156</sup> Ibid.

According to Faisal, he now rarely writes satire, “Not that I am not writing it, but none of the publishers dares to publish it.”<sup>157</sup> Based on this analysis, it could be concluded that there are at least two versions of Islamic views practised in Malaysia. However, as the state version was very much established, Faisal’s views on Shia were considered contrary to the uniform *dakwah* institution, leading to the banning and prohibition of many of his books.

### 5.1.3 *The Fake Religious Leaders Who Consume Pork*

**Figure 5. 1:** Anthology of *Tiga Kali Seminggu*



*Notes.* Anthology of *Tiga Kali Seminggu*. Personal photo from the collection of Bibliothek Sprach – und Kulturwissenschaften (BSKW), Goethe Frankfurt University am Main [Retrieved 10 December 2022].

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<sup>157</sup> Ibid.

Tiga Kali Seminggu is an anthology of fifteen short stories by Faisal Tehrani. In this compilation, one particular short story was written in a humorous and satirical manner: *Abuya Dongeng Tokoh Yang Memakan Babi* (The Fake Religious Leaders Who Consume Pork, ADTYMB).

**Synopsis:** ADTYMB is a story of an old and a young religious leader in a Muslim community. The story starts with the senior religious leader leading an *Isha* congregational prayer while crying when reciting the *Surah Ali-Imraan*. The old religious leader, known as *Abuya*, was told by his followers to retire as he was too old and had held the position in the organisation for a long time, so he should pass on the leadership position. *Abuya* refused to withdraw and wanted to remain in the position until his death to receive many deeds from God for his servitude. He would be emotional and cry when his followers advised him. As a senile man who lives far away, *Abuya* seldom attends organisational meetings. In addition of his worsening health, he does not understand the decision making to any great extent. One day, several followers met the young religious leader and complained about one influential figure who liked to eat pork – an animal prohibited (*haram*) for Muslim consumption. The notable figure wanted to eat pork to satiate his carnal desire (*nafs*) and defended his act according to his self-religious interpretation. The young religious leader was worried that his followers would succumb to their *nafs* and follow this act, as his followers also liked to share the profits received from the figure rather than treat their hearts with sincerity. He also worried he would be held responsible for not leading his followers to their betterment. The young religious leader informed the other respected *ustaz* but was scolded for believing a libel (*fitnah*), even when the misdeed was evident. He finally told *Abuya*, the older man with absolute authority in decision making, but *Abuya* refused to listen and believed the accused figure had not consumed pork. The story's ending mirrors the opening, with *Abuya* sobbing while reciting the *Surah Ali-Imraan*, Verse

103, which reminds one of the necessities to hold to Allah's path and not being divided.<sup>158</sup> In the end, the author reminds us that it is undoubtedly a tale, as people always discuss it.

#### **5.1.4 At the intersection of Islam, state, and politics: The Malaysian experience**

As discussed earlier, the first-tier of Islamic *dakwah* established an organised authoritative position. According to Zainal and Nasir, these classes of groups were called a "circle of religious elites" and often critiqued as "those who allegedly abused their power for personal gain." (2021, p. 136). Critique of religious elites are not new. They also go back to 1959 in a Malay comedic film by the legendary film icon P. Ramlee in his film *Musang Berjanggut* (The Bearded Fox), who weaved the satirical element in one scene of the movie.

In *Musang Berjanggut*, one of the clear examples of critique of politico-religious issues can be seen through the dialogue between an elite religious leader, a character named *Datuk Nikah Kahwin*, with his girlfriend in her house. The girlfriend was already a married woman, so when the lady asked, "Is it wrong for a man to enter a lady's house when her husband is away?" he replied, "That is a big crime!" The lady answered him in jest, "That means you are breaking the law too, aren't you?" The *Datuk Nikah Kahwin* replied remorselessly to the lady, "Yes, but it is all right. Because I am the one who set the law in this country, it does not apply to me." Undoubtedly, the movie is fictitious, as also is Faisal's writing where he depicted the fictitious religious leader who consumes pork, performing an action that is impermissible in Islamic teachings. The politico-religious element and manipulation of Islamic values to fulfil

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<sup>158</sup> Surah Ali Imraan; 3:103, Tafsir Ibn. Kathir.

one's *nafs* are parallel. During the interview, Faisal admitted his critique of the religious circle in *Tiga Kali Seminggu*'s introduction, the ADTYMB short story:

“...it is my honest reprimand to any local Islamic movement supporter. That is, in political Islam, we cannot practise a dirty politic *a la* Muawiyah and Yazid; we have to practise the genuine Islamic politic as was shown by Sayyidina Ali ibn Abi Thalib.” (Faisal Tehrani, 2010, p. xii).

As discussed by Zainal and Nasir (2021), who had also interviewed Faisal:

“...such an attitude, according to the author [Faisal], is synonymous with those of present-day religious leaders. It is unfortunate that in a country, some manipulate Islamic preachings to boost their political power or reap gains, gaslighting the people while masquerading as devout.” (p. 134)

This view can be validated from a personal interview with Faisal, citing the renowned sociologist Syed Husein Alatas “feudalism and feudal mentality have created the establishment of the class among religious clerics in Malaysia.” (Faisal Tehrani, personal communication, May 7, 2021). As previously shown by Alatas, “the present prevailing order of occupational prestige amongst the Malay is based on such feudal values.” (1968, p. 155). Faisal added, “What is even more, to be afraid of, is the much more complex class when the society is afraid to challenge negligent religious clerics (such as Abuya in ADTYMB) or the lamentable ulama” (personal communication, May 7, 2021).

He cited a previous incident by the then Minister of Religious Affairs, Dr Zulkifli Mohamad Al-Bakri, and a famous Terengganu cleric who allegedly failed to observe the COVID-19 Standard Operating Procedures (SOP) by attending a wedding and performing a

prayer *Tahnik* ceremony for their VIP and celebrity acquaintances (Farik Zolkepli, 2021; The Straits Times, 2021). According to Faisal, religious feudalism is a primary obstacle that prevents development in many ways, including one's way of thinking and democracy.

Faisal also quoted Jose Rizal's critique in the novel *Noli Me Tangere* (Do Not Touch Me) about Christian clerics that conspired with Spanish colonials in the Philippines and *El Filibusterismo* (The Reign of Greed). He also mentioned Kuntowijoyo and Jalaluddin Rakhmat's thoughts that featured the need to reform and reconstruct thought in Indonesia's political, social, cultural, and economic fields.

Faisal emphasised, "If I were to be called as an author or writer but did not rebuke, then whom am I writing for?" (Personal communication, May 7, 2021). Therefore, the ADTYMB can be viewed as Faisal's satirical critique against the religious elites, primarily when the story mentioned the old leader who refused to retire and believed he had absolute authority with regard to decision making, plus the religious followers who preferred personal benefits and ignored misconduct to preserve their high positions.

## **5.2 Amin Landak: From piety to creativity**

Ahmad Noor Amin, or Amin Landak, is a cartoonist, graphic designer and political activist. He was born on 27<sup>th</sup> November 1988 in Kelantan. Amin Landak received his primary and secondary education in Islamic studies focusing on qur'anic studies at three *tahfeez* schools in Kelantan, namely *Maahad Tahfiz Al-Quran Wal Qira'at*, *Maahad Tahfizul Qur'an Al-Ikhlās*, and the Qur'an Study Centre Darul Qausar. Since his *tahfeez* school did not offer a mainstream academic curriculum, he took his SPM examination as a private candidate in 2007. Amin decided to continue his studies in culinary arts at the National Youth Skills Institute (Institut

Kemahiran Belia Negara, IKBN) in Kelantan for a year before going to the Malaysian Institute of Art (MIA), Kuala Lumpur, and pursuing diploma studies in illustration.

Amin started drawing cartoons criticising social and political issues through the comic *Yak Bok Te!* In addition, Amin also works under *Suara KeADILan*, a newspaper owned by *Parti Keadilan Rakyat* (PKR) and is involved in GE's work and political campaigns. Amin's criticism is now focused on PAS and the administration of the Kelantan government.<sup>159</sup> Although Amin Landak was never prosecuted for his satirical political caricatures, he was once arrested and charged in 2021 under Section 500 of the Penal Code and Section 233 1(a) for his animation in the video 'Chilli Powder and Thinner', which depicts the violence inflicted by the police against detainees in lock-up cells (Cartooning for Peace, 2021; The Vibes, 2021).

### **5.2.1 Alternative history**

After Amin started his journey, he began to get a different exposure to current issues – particularly in politics and history — after he migrated to Kuala Lumpur. His acquaintance with an MIA student allowed various dialogues, discourses, and debates, regarding almost any topic, to be established. Even though he attended an Islamic religious school, Amin personally did not favour it. On top of religious study, he was hooked on reading at his school's library. In addition, Amin admitted that he liked to read Malaysian 'alternative history'. In Malaysia's case, the 'alternative history', as explained by Syed Husin Ali, "can be simply explained as the alternative to the Official History" (2018, p. 10). The 'Official History', as earlier explained by

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<sup>159</sup> His works are posted on social media pages @aminlandak on Instagram, Twitter and Facebook *Yak Bok Te!*.

Syed Husin, "...is officially promoted and manifested in most books on Malaysia...often reflects the historical point of view of the victorious elite – the group which rules a country."<sup>160</sup>

It is known that the early struggle for Malayan independence started with the efforts of Malay Nationalist Parties (MNPs), or what is referred to as the Malay radical left (AlJunied, 2007; Roff, 1965). However, after Malaysia gained independence, the Malay-led UMNO-Perikatan coalition, now known as the BN, became the government and ruled Malaysian until 2018. Therefore, the efforts by earlier nationalists "have been persistent attempts to underplay the Left's role in the independence struggle" (Syed Husin, 2015, p. 35). As explained earlier by Shamsul, this view was strengthened through vernacular school, public policy, and administrative and governance structures. A similar view was held by historian Azmi Ariffin, who explained that "historians normally credit the UMNO as [being responsible for] the earliest nationalist movements that fought for Malay causes and eventually pushed for independence." (2014, p. 6).

The opinions then became "'the official national history' presented in secondary school textbooks to create [the] historical myth that UMNO was the only party that fought for the interests of the Malays and sought independence from the British."<sup>161</sup> Therefore, the MNPs were often portrayed as a radical group, influenced by Indonesian nationalist movements, 'rebels' and 'traitors', which led them being banned by the British government (Azmi Arifin, 2014, p. 8; Ramlah Adam, 2004, p. 40).

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<sup>160</sup> Ibid. p., 3.

<sup>161</sup> Ibid.



The claim with regard to the historical narrative was essential to UMNO-BN as it also maintained its status quo by allowing it to be seen as “the only champion in the quest to liberate the Malay Peninsula” (Azmi Arifin, 2014, p. 8) and also a ‘protectorate’, as mentioned by Chandra Muzaffar, “which enabled the new UMNO leadership to expect unquestioning loyalty, not only from UMNO members but also from the community as a whole (1979, p. 75). This narrative was continued, which can be seen in Mahathir’s accusation made in 1999 regarding the Chinese-dominate party, DAP Secretary-General Lim Kit Siang, and a recent statement by PAS President Abdul Hadi Awang accusing DAP of being pro-communist (Fuad Nizam, 2022; Malay Mail, 2015a).

In relation to the above narratives and status quo, Amin claimed that “satire has threatened their position” (personal communication, April 29, 2021). However, this is not a new phenomenon. Amin added that “this [satire] has already existed in our [Malay] tradition through Seloka, Si Luncai story or anything in Malay stories which has been written by the Malays – of course in a different approach.”<sup>162</sup>

Through personal communication and analysis, it can be seen that the most significant paradigm shift that Amin went through was when he met a fellow punk classmate while studying at MIA:

“In MIA, I met with this one guy, his name is Khalil. He was a punk. I am from Kelantan, *tahfeez* school [student]. I have my sentiment about the Israel-Palestine War. I told him that the Jew was terrible. Then this Khalil scolded me, “You cannot generalise that all Jews are bad!” Then he explained to me, but I was egoistic. I fought back. However, after

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<sup>162</sup> Ibid.

that, I agreed with all of what he said. He, basically, was the one who ‘carried me’. I like to debate with him. One day, he told me about Fahmi Reza’s 10 Years Before Independence film screening. I saw the film. I went to the screening in 2010. I felt sceptical of what Fahmi showed in the documentary. So, I started to find out about the left movement. I found revolutionary leaders’ books such as Boestamam and Ibrahim Chik. So, now I know that history has its alternative history. From then, I became a fan of Fahmi. And then Fahmi started the Student’s Assembly in 2011. So, when I joined the community, I started [to know] other activists. From there, it started.” (Personal communication, April 9, 2021).

Amin’s exposure to and interest in the history of MNP and, indeed, alternative history shaped his opinion of politics and history. In addition, Amin’s association with various activism activities also began appearing in his works, particularly in the short film “Chilli Powder and Thinner” regarding the issue of torture and deaths in police custody, which led to a police raid on his house, and those of other activists, in 2021, simultaneously alerting Amnesty International (Amnesty International, 2021; Jason Thomas, 2021).

### **5.2.2 Sensitivity, too hot to handle?**

When asked for his opinion on sensitive issues in his cartoons, Amin countered this question with one of his own. He asked, “Have you ever wondered, the more ‘open’ our world in social media, the more sensitive we are?” Amin then gave an example of old Malay movies in the 1950s and *Gila-Gila* magazine during the 1980s, which he claimed were more open and direct to satirising ‘sensitive’ issues (as understood today), such as the monarchy as an institution and various political figures.

This brings us back to the question of identity, particularly when tackling issues of sensitivity in Malaysia. Mouffe suggests two perspectives on political identity. First, the communitarian view of politics and citizenship is constituted by shared moral values derived from the idea of the ‘common good’. Second, the liberal idea of ‘citizen’ is restricted to legal status and possession of rights that we hold against the state. In short, citizens must sacrifice their common good for individual rights (1992, p. 29). In the case of Malaysia, as Shamsul suggested, there are ‘two-social realities’ between the authority-defined and everyday-defined in understanding the macro-level of Malay socio-political concepts, categories, and classifications such as nation, state, Malay dominance, nationalist movement or nationalism, national identity, and nation-of-intent (1996a, p. 477, 2001, p. 356).

For Amin, as a political cartoonist and individual, ‘sensitivity’ is relative to individuals’ perceptions. Sensitive issues depend on the situation at the time; as he noted, “I think when something [satirical artworks on sensitive issues] is not done for a long time, people will assume it cannot be done” (personal communication, April 29, 2021). However, the ‘sensitivity’ and boundaries viewed by political cartoonists like Amin may have different connotations from the perspectives of the previous fourth and seventh Prime Minister, Mahathir.

In his words:

“Artists are like anybody else. Some are supportive, some are not. They feel that I was oppressive. I don’t know but they say that I was oppressive. And I think political jokes are using cartoons and all that is a way of expressing yourself. It is very good. I like, I followed all the cartoons in the...that we have in our media, including foreign media. You know, sometimes that they draw things to show that you are not very, very attractive [laugh], for example. They made your head so big, [and] the body so small. But somehow,

rather, it influences people. *But if they had good intentions, that is very good. But of course, people are more attracted to negative attitudes.*” (Personal communication, August 9, 2021).

Mahathir also clarified:

“In other words, when the artists poke fun at a leader, ha~ that is [laugh] the people like to see. So, I get my share of criticism from the artists, but I felt it doesn’t matter. It didn’t affect my performance. I kept on every election, I used to win by two-thirds majority despites [of] all the attacks against me.”<sup>163</sup>

Mahathir then added:

“In our country, there are certain issues which are sensitive. You know what Charlie Hebdo did? Where, they poke fun at the Muslim but [the] Muslim takes it very strongly. That kind of the issues are [should] be avoided. You don’t insult people. *Even if we had freedom of speech, it does not mean that you can go up to a man and say a lot of bad things about him.*”<sup>164</sup>

Therefore, the ‘good intention’ in Mahathir’s remark was subject to different interpretations from political cartoonists such as Amin. Mahathir is inclined to look at sensitivity on a larger scale as it involves the ‘common good’, particularly to avoid racial tension, while Amin is more inclined to practice his individual rights as a citizen by tolerating jokes and satire regarding political issues. Nonetheless, like Zunar, Amin also practises his self-

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<sup>163</sup> Ibid.

<sup>164</sup> Ibid.

editorial cartoonists, ensuring his satirical cartoons do not touch on racist issues or one's personal appearance, like body dysmorphia.

The idea of sensitivity and Mahathir's common good are also shared among other mainstream cartoonists. The role of the well-known cartoonist Lat exemplifies the stark contrast between political and editorial cartoonists. Although Lat's work delves a lot into racial and national identity issues, he exhibits a certain brilliance in responding to sensitive and political issues in a 'safe way'. Additionally, Lat does not consider himself a political cartoonist (Rahman & Bahfen, 2014, p. 71). Cartoonists Zoy and Rossem, for example, shared certain limitations that an artist must follow in editorial cartoons, such as:

- a. insulting the sovereignty of Malay rulers and certain government bodies;
- b. condemning something without evidence;
- c. insulting any ethnic group, race, or people with disabilities;
- d. insulting religion;
- e. imposing one's individual agenda; and
- f. insulting ongoing court cases.

According to Mulyadi Mahamood (2010, pp. 48–49), editorial cartoonists such as Lat, Zoy, and Rossem emphasise the importance of not being rude and producing works that border on the relationships between ethnicities. However, there is no denying that the acceptance of Lat and his work is also helped and supported by the government, which aligns with the themes he raised with regard to the state's policy. Rahman and Bahfen (2014) added:

“In many ways, Lat is a pro-government cartoonist. In comparison to Lat's earlier series, his news cartoons are exposed in a voice that is unifying, while his own nationalist pride shapes his narratives in reporting current issues. Therefore, even though in some of his

cartoons he criticised current issues and mocked political attitudes and characters (as in the case of the *Melayu Baru* or New Malay concept), his cartoons have not been considered satirical but humorous, not having reached a level that will provoke discomfort among Malaysians. Lat's role as a cartoonist in Malaysia was significantly expanded through branding and promoting the country's nation-building activities through national visual icons in his cartoons in order to integrate government policies on nation-building in Malaysian society." (p. 72).

Although Lat's cartoons can be seen as satirical works satirising certain political issues and individuals of the time, he seems careful with regard to issues considered taboo or that might offend any 'sensitivity'. Instead, Lat focuses on mutual aid, cooperation, village lifestyle, and others. These specific themes that Lat identified makes his cartoons a relatable nostalgic documentation of life instead of a tool for political satire. As previously established, in Malaysia, cartoons are seen as entertainment rather than an expression of resistance.<sup>165</sup>

The image of *Bangsa Malaysia* highlighted by Lat also seems to align with the authority-defined national identity image that the government is attempting to promote. As such, this also encourages the local community's acceptance of Lat's works, which is how the series gained such popularity since it is more widely seen in a positive light compared to political cartoonists such as Zunar and Amin, who are often considered seditious and rude (Deutsche Welle, 2016; MalaysiaKini, 2018).

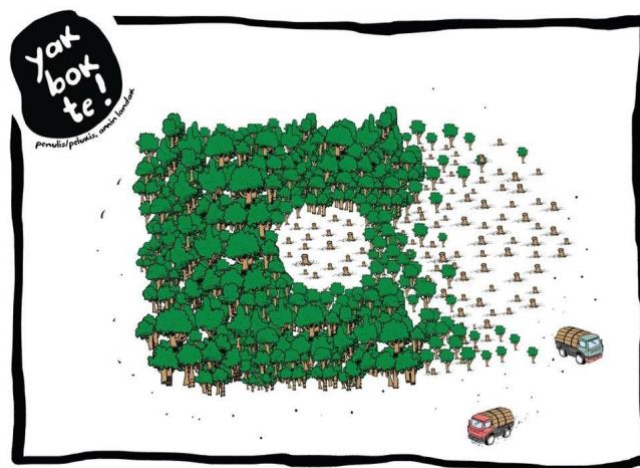
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<sup>165</sup> Ibid., p. 73.

### 5.2.3 Making fun of religious parties in *Balak* and *Red Carpet*

Amin, born in a PAS-oriented family and educated in Kelantan, is highly critical of and vocal about the PAS administration. So, as a cartoonist, Amin has critically pointed out the issue of deforestation issue repeatedly satirises the PAS administration in Kelantan that allegedly turned a blind eye to the illegal logging occurring in the land in the state. According to Amin, the original production of this cartoon was in 2015 after a massive flood hit Kelantan that was caused by uncontrolled logging activities, an effect that had already been warned about by ecological experts (Malay Mail, 2015b; Malaysia Today, 2015).

**Figure 5. 2:** *Balak* caricature



*Notes.* A caricature by Amin Landak depicting illegal logging activities with a piece resembling the PAS party flag. Photo from the personal collection of Amin Landak. [Retrieved 12 Mac 2021].

The Kelantan administration consistently denied that logging activities were the main reason for the flood, instead blaming heavy rainfall, the national park, and a test by God of one's patience and faith (Isham Jalil, 2017; Malaysia Kini, 2017). Therefore, in 2022, the

Kelantan administration continued to approve of logging in permanent forest reserves (Free Malaysia Today, 2022; The Star, 2022). According to Amin, this particular cartoon occasionally circulates, especially during the monsoon season, witnessing the massive flood in Kelantan. He criticised how PAS members or religious leaders are prone to the use of the ‘religious-perspective’ to deflect from actual issues.

One of the cartoons he produced in 2018 depicts two PAS-like leaders wearing green and white, rolling a red carpet out to a BN candidate, symbolising PAS’s decision to sit out the Sungai Kandis by-election so as not to split votes against Pakatan Harapan (The Star, 2018). This paved the way to a free win, hence the red-carpet analogy. This cartoon is depicted in Figure 5.3 below:

**Figure 5. 3:** Red carpet (2018)



*Notes.* Cartoons of two PAS-like leaders wearing headpieces rolling out the red carpet to someone raising his hand clad in a blue shirt, riding a blue car with a BN sign on the door to a region on blue Sungai Kandis signpost. Blue is the colour that represents the BN. Photo from the personal collection of Amin Landak. [Retrieved 19 March 2021].



According to Amin, instead of responding to the decision to pave the way to a BN victory, he was instead criticised by PAS supporters over “insulting the Sunnah’s attire” (personal communication, April 29, 2021). The wrath of the PAS supporters was that he had drawn a caricature of the Islamic turban and cloak and kept a beard on the face, which is a *sunnah*, a look that PAS leaders typically wore.

The notion of the Islamic religion was long embedded with the party’s image through its morally loaded symbols, values, and tropes, together with the discourse of resistance (Farish A. Noor, 2004, p. 705). As discussed by Azmil Tayeb, the systematic and long process of political socialisation, outreach efforts, conflating party interest with state government interest and, more importantly, the centrality of Islam in political discourse are among the factor’s indicative of PAS dominance in Kelantan (2022, pp. 19–23).

The party succeeded in ‘out-Islamising’ other opponents, becoming the symbol of holiness, a representative of the religion, and practising its ‘heaven-hell politics’ (*politik syurga-neraka*), which indicated “voting in this world equals voting in the afterlife” to its followers.<sup>166</sup> Therefore, the closeness of PAS with the image of Islam makes the situation more difficult for people, even satirists, to criticise or make fun of, even for any wrongdoing.

#### **5.2.4 Divinity and political legitimacy**

According to Amin, many of his readers are Malays. However, he was stunned:

“The weird part is — my artwork attacks both the government and also the opposition.

However, most [followers] got angry when I attacked PAS. If PAS, they will come to

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<sup>166</sup> Ibid.

you *like they wanted a war*. They were writing all of this in [social media] comments. But if I attack the other opposition parties, they will not complain about anything, no. Previously, during [the] PH [administration], I attacked Mahathir [and] Anwar, those two. At that time, I attacked whoever in the government. But there was no response. I mean, the PH supporters. Just like when I did [satirical cartoons] about [the] PKR. There is no curse [to me]. But when I do one with PAS, the worst is PAS followers. It's like there was *like someone pushed a button to war. Therefore, war!*" (Personal communication, April 29, 2021).

In political science analysis, although PAS is often associated with an Islamic image, "it has always been a political party" (Farish A. Noor, 2014, p. 223). Nevertheless, its long-time objective "of creating an Islamic state in Malaysia" has been the factor that drove the party and its members to move forward.<sup>167</sup> As explained by Farish, the Iranian Revolution in 1979 directly impacted the Islamic movement, including the PAS party. As a result, between 1982-1990, there was an emergence of the *ulama* leadership in the PAS led by Ustaz Yusof Rawa, Tuan Guru Nik Aziz, the 'Young Turks' of ABIM,<sup>168</sup> and also the now PAS president, Tuan Guru Abdul Hadi Awang (Farish A. Noor, 2004, p. 336).

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<sup>167</sup> Ibid.

<sup>168</sup> According to Kassim Ahmad (1984), three significant streams clash with each other in the Islamic world, namely, (i) the traditional or conservative; (ii) reformist Islam (known as *Kaum Muda*, *al-Islah*); and (iii) the modernist (secular), which was led by Mustafa Kamal Atatürk in Turkey. The success story of modern Turkey has inspired some members of ABIM, particularly young activists. According to Siti Ruzana Ab Ghani, Rahilah Omar, Azlizan Mat Enh, and Russli Kamaruddin (2022, p. 58), the modernist Young Turks differ from the previous reformists or the *Kaum Muda* movement in Tanah Melayu. While the reformist called for total views in

As previously explained by Farish, during the 1980s and 1990s, “PAS became the most important Malay-Muslim opposition party in Malaysia.”<sup>169</sup> To date, the PAS remains an important party, particularly during the previous PRU15 in 2022 which saw a huge win of forty-nine (49) Parliamentary seats. Among PAS’s success factors, as recognised by scholars from their mobilisation and cadre-creation programme (Liow, 2011, p. 666), were positioning themselves as a unifier of the *ummah* (Wan Saiful Wan Jan, 2020, p. 22) and the centrality of Islamic values in their political ideology (Azmil Tayeb, 2022, p. 19). These contributing factors were not just success in sustaining compliance among members but also gained traction amongst the Malays, particularly with regard to Islamic elements. However, the idea of political compliance – particularly towards the leader and *ulama* – was long rooted and bound in traditional Malay customs. According to Suwannathat-Pian (2011):

“...the idea of legitimate monarchy...firmly implanted in the form of myth and legend, or a conqueror blessed by the Almighty and/or the gods whose favour transformed the institution and its occupants into a ruling authority with divine rights and as representatives of God on earth in tow.” (p. 1).

In addition, “Malay kingship was grounded in the mythical genesis of mixed Hindu-Buddhist and Islamic elements,”<sup>170</sup> Malay rulers were regarded as “Allah’s shadow on earth”,

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returning to Al-Quran and Al-Sunnah, the so-called modernist Young Turks advocated the idea of a modern and secular state.

<sup>169</sup> Ibid., p. 330.

<sup>170</sup> Ibid., p. 7.

and in Malay masterpieces (Naskhah Agung Melayu),<sup>171</sup> the King was conceptualised as *Khalifat-ul-ardh* (God's representative on earth), whilst at the same time being viewed as the protector of Islam (Azman Yusof & Mariati Mohd Salleh, 2021, p. 3; Madiawati Mustaffa et al., 2020, p. 118; Wan Hussain et al., 2017, p. 29). Since Islam has long been an important aspect of Malay kingship, the *sufi ulama* also plays an important role in Malay kingship and public life. As mentioned by Al-Attas, "...it was the *sufis* who actually propagated and finally made it possible for Islam to become well established among the people" (1963, p. 21). Their role can be viewed through the *dakwah* effort among society in various *tariqats* and *tasawwuf* Islamic teachings (Azra, 2004; Hamzah, 2011; Winstedt, 2018). The position of *ulama* is also solidified through *hadith*: "And certainly the "Ulama are the heirs of the Prophets" (Abu Dawoud, At Tirmidhi, Ibn Majah and Ibn Hibban).

The need for Islamic education and the important role of *ulama* also continued during British colonial, as the Malays preferred the Islamic religious school and technical and agricultural education (Nur Atiqah Tang Abdullah & Liu, 2018, p. 78). In contrast, the British education system was "received half-heartedly by the Malays due to the secular nature of the syllabus."<sup>172</sup> Moral philosophy was among the main subjects taught in Islamic teaching. It became essential in Islamic teaching with Al-Quran and Al-Hadith as the frameworks, while prophet Muhammad S.A.W became the role model for Muslims in every way (Al-Attas, 1995, p. 11).

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<sup>171</sup> The Malay's Naskhah Agung included Sulalatus Salatin, Hukum Kanun Melaka, Taj-us-salatin, Bustan-us-salatin and Adat Raja-Raja Melayu.(1963, 21).

<sup>172</sup> Ibid.

Therefore, the role of *ulama* is important among the Malays as they were responsible for maintaining the integrity of the Muslim community by offering a space for dialogue in independently-run education institutions such as a *madrasah*, *zawiyah*, and *ribat*, otherwise called *pondok perguruan*, which was supported by the authorities at the time as a result of the symbiotic relationship between the *ulama* and Malay sultanates (Ahmad Fauzi, 2019, p. 11; Meerangani, 2019, p. 67). This synergy between Malay kingship and Islam continues in the modern political and administrative system as it is embedded in the concept of ‘Malayness’ and the basis of the constitution:

“The “Malayness” came to be defined in terms of the three pillars of agama, bahasa dan raja, i.e., Muslim religion, Malay language, and the aristocratic government of the sultans. These pillars were then written into the constitution of postcolonial Malaysia.” (Shamsul A.B., 1997, p. 209).

Although the PAS have not championed their view over Malayness and Malay kingship compared to UMNO, they did, however, succeed in ‘out-Islamising’ others by creating and embedding the Islamic image in their party (Farish A. Noor, 2004, p. 724). In relation, the King is blessed with so-called divinely sanctioned (*raja berdaulat*), hence from the religious perspective it is strictly forbidden for the people to disobey their *berdaulat* ruler as “[t]hose who committed such a heinous crime would be committing the crime of *derhaka* (disobedience or treason) (Suwannathat-Pian, 2011, p. 13).

In addition, as mentioned by Shamsul, “multitudes of people have died or are willing to die, rightly or wrongly, for the sake of the ‘nation’ and ‘religion’...” (1997, p. 209). Therefore, the justification for the reaction to Amin’s works when attacking the PAS is that this can be viewed as strong compliance by PAS members or the Malays to the divinity and

important role of the *ulama* PAS, since it is essentially taboo for PAS members to disobey their religious leaders, which explains the backlash Amin has received.

### 5.3 Summary

It should first be emphasised that there are differences between Islamic practices in the notion of Islam as a religion and the Islamic institution practised by the state and religious party. However, these concepts tend to intertwine as the notion of Islamic religion is also a part of the state and the party agenda. Therefore, the theme of Islamic institutions and the party has become the major point of contestation raised by both Faisal Tehrani and Amin Landak through their particular satirical work on *The Fake Religious Leaders who Consumed Pork, Red Carpet, and Balak*.

In Faisal's own descriptive analysis, there were three phases to his career as a writer. This experience shaped his view of religious practices and identity, particularly on the Malay-Muslim experience in Malaysia. As a student of Islamic Studies, Faisal's initial views were somewhat conservative. These views were also extended during his doctoral study under Ungku Maimunah, a strong advocate of Genuine Literature (*Persuratan Baru*). However, Faisal's huge networking and acquaintance with activists, NGOs, actors, intellectuals, and academics, particularly during Reformasi, also prevented him from being confined to a particular way of thinking. In addition, his willingness to seek new experiences by travelling around the world expanded his view on human rights.

These factors drew him to his ideal of Islamic institutions in Malaysia. As a human rights advocate, academic, and writer, Faisal wrote extensively about Shia minority groups in Malaysia, though at the same time attracting the attention of the state's Islamic institution. As mentioned by Shamsul, there are two-tier *dakwah* movements in Malaysia. Therefore, Shia

minority groups were seen as an outside version of the Islamic structure in Malaysia. As a result, Faisal's books were banned and deemed to deviate from the state's version of Islam. In an analysis performed through his work, Faisal saw that religious elites tend to be selective and used to further the state's agenda. In the satirical short-story ADTYMB, Faisal criticises the abuse of power in the relationship between religious elites and politicians, which has been used for personal gain and simultaneously undermined the purpose of Islamic institutions to cater to all Muslims, particularly in Malaysia.

There are alternative historical aspects in the descriptive analysis performed by Amin Landak. From Amin's perspective, the official history taught in conventional education in Malaysia today is widely accepted by many, undervaluing the efforts by the earlier struggle of what shaped his view of the condition of what is termed the 'official account' inherited from British colonialism and subsequently developed, particularly through modern institutions. As a result, Amin's position as a political cartoonist was often marginalised compared to editorial cartoonists, who chose to bow to state pressure, and magazines and newspapers' rules and regulations.

From the analysis of the *Balak* cartoon, Amin faced the wrath of PAS supporters for his works. The declaration of 'war' against Amin was due to the allegiance of PAS members (and, indeed, some Malays) to the *ulama*. From this perspective, the PAS succeeded in associating, inculcating, embedding, and also 'out-Islamising' others with their image of Islam, which later blurred the line between a political party and the Islamic religion.

## CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

### 6.0 Breaking the mould: A tale of contested values

Malaysia's democratic change has required a long process. Since gaining independence in 1957, Malaysia has diversified its economy from agricultural and commodity-based to manufacturing and service sectors, rapidly boosting its economy and income (The World Bank, 2022). However, a prosperous market economy also led to the emergence of a well-developed civil society, as posited by Carothers and Barndt, "as the citizens reach a comfortable standard of living, they have more time, education and resources to support and take part in associational life." (1999, p. 24). The NEP catalyses the phenomenal growth of Bumiputra in higher education (Kamogawa, 2003, p. 548; Selvaratnam, 1988, p. 180, 2016, p. 203). As the NEP succeeded in improving the social-economic condition of the Malays, the number of highly educated middle-class Malays also rose.

In Malaysia, since the beginning of the 1980s, middle-class NGOs have begun "to play an increasing and distinct political role by advocating human rights, social justice, environmental, feminism, governance and other causes." (Rodan, 2014, p. 828). However, as civil society is now well-developed, another dilemma arose, as noted by Alagappa: first, should membership of civil society be restricted to voluntary associations or individuals? and second, should it include ascriptive and other groups that limit membership based on ethnicity, religion, or class? (2004, p. 34). As discussed in Chapter 2, after the 13<sup>th</sup> May tragedy, the government were committed to enhancing national unity among the country's ethnicities. Therefore, specific issues were deemed sensitive and were forbidden from public discussion, often in the name of preserving national harmony. However, KOG members such as MPS are likely to lean towards individual rights such as human rights, freedom of speech and expression, freedom of



privacy and other causes. This classic example of individual freedom versus collective responsibility has become a continuous struggle and remains an issue of significant contestation in Malaysia's developing society.

This study illustrated the emergence of a new-middle class group consisting of social and cultural community, a community that can be further divided into two groups, namely the strategic and conflict-ability groups. With the inception of the NEP in the 1970s, there were vast developments in SGs consisting of Malay middle-class professionals, intellectuals, and entrepreneurs. As an economic policy, the NEP acts as a socio-economic tool in restructuring Malaysian society, helping Malaysians – particularly the Malays and the indigenous population – to participate in economic activities and acquire ownership within the economic sector. However, as Vennewald stressed, “socio-structural development processes linked to the state-political control system” and “social actors shaped and influenced by their social environment.” (1993, p. 18).

In this sense, Malaysian professionals and intellectuals within the social and cultural community were shaped and influenced by (i) the state's national ideologies and moral policies; and (ii) common goals to appropriate, secure, and gain access to resources. Therefore, in terms of ‘stabilising order’, ‘national harmony’, and ‘economic development’, the social and cultural community tend to be seen in terms of a functionalist purpose within the ‘corporatist framework’.<sup>173</sup> The mainstream SCP's satirists and cartoonists, for example, were likely to produce artworks that conformed to what state policies, rules, and regulations required. The same goes for artists in the Malaysian art scene, which was highly influenced by the

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<sup>173</sup> Ibid., p. 21.

government's pro-Malay and Islamisation policies during the 1970s and 1980s (Abdullah, 2020, p. 9). However, the Reformasi event of 1998 and the advent of new media have led to the emergence of the oppositional KOG and their promotion of discourse culture, criticism and contestation, whilst at the same time decreasing SG's monopolisation of the traditional media. By implying the SKOG approach, it is clear that MPS act as a 'promoter for political change'.

In this study, I first established the SCP as a new possible group for inclusion in the Malaysian middle class. Since the creative industry contributed almost RM9.6 billion to Malaysia's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in 2008, increasing to RM29.4 billion in 2019 (The Malaysian Insight, 2021), the government has set its eyes on the creative community. Thus, the SCP is now recognised as being professional compared to previously being industrial-commercial centred. In this sense, the SCP has established a relationship with the government through its agencies and GLCs, understandably for economic purposes.

However, as Mandal (2003) mentioned, another group of art activists differed from the SCP. These art activist individuals were typically involved in political activism and protest activities. This is where the Malay Professional Satirists (MPS) are located, dissociating themselves entirely from the SCP. To put in a pattern, four characteristics of MPS were examined: (i) urban residence; (ii) education; (iii) primary occupation; and (iv) ideologies. It was found that all of the above have similar characters, mirroring one another.

Firstly, all MPS in this study live in urban residences, either in Kuala Lumpur or Selangor. Residents of Kuala Lumpur, Putrajaya, and Selangor have the three highest median incomes in Malaysia, where the majority of those on a middle income resided (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2020b, 2020a). Besides economic prosperity and being politically concentrated by the various political parties, these federal territories and states were known as

a popular rendezvous for public rallies. Secondly, their level of education. Despite the depoliticisation in higher education institutes, as Haris Zuan (2021) noted, some young college and university students opt to join alternative political activism outside formal politics. In this study, at least three MPS received their political knowledge and awareness by participating in activism during their time as students. Thirdly, most MPS have ordinary occupations such as cartoonists, graphic designers, and academicians, which, by the state's definition, are considered professional groups. Finally, all MPS have their vital principles and ideologies, which might be contrary to the 'authority-defined' connotation.

From the interviews, it was found that all MPS effectively dissociate themselves from the mainstream SCP. This dissociation is the result of four exclusion factors based on (i) self-identifications; (ii) personal motives; (iii) rules and regulations; and (iv) targets. However, it was also found that the SCP, too, tried to dissociate themselves from MPS, who are also deemed more radical and political; I refer to this as a two-way mutual rejection. This study finds from the classifications that the MPS can be described as creative, conscientious urban Malay middle-class individuals with ordinary occupations who use their creativity to mock demeanour (political) behaviour for public consumption.

Compared to the mainstream SCP, which focuses more on the issues and satirises via innuendo, the MPS focus their satirical works on the issues and the person. The MPS has the direct objective of attack in their satirical work, but which exposes them to legal action such as defamation or libel. In addition, most of their targets are those in positions of power with particular reputations. Therefore, specifically attacking these people will tarnish their public images and careers.

Although the themes and issues raised by the MPS were seen as relevant to democratisation and the good governance agenda, in general, MPS receive mixed reactions from their readers. Some groups of readers, for instance, among civil society, enjoy, celebrate, and are inclined towards their satirical works. However, others may find their works to be seditious and rude, particularly when touching on issues that are deemed sensitive such as religion, ethnicities, and the Malaysian monarchy. The complex amalgamation of Islam, state, politics, and culture in Malaysia were also challenges to MPS when mocking even one of these bodies. As already mentioned by Lever, studies of satirical expression as a form of political dissent and resistance rarely appear in Southeast Asian studies as compared to riots, public demonstrations, and the like (2019, p. 44). In addition, the study of satire or satirists, per se, was limited to its technique and form. Therefore, this study has tried to fill the gap by studying satirists collectively as a group of Malay professional satirists known as the MPS. The Theory of Contestation and Two-Social Reality was felt to provide a suitable framework to explain this phenomenon.

As explained in Chapter 2, Malaysia has a complex and diverse history, ethnicities, beliefs, and traditions. In politics, the Malay elites can claim victory over Malaysia's independence and have succeeded in the continuation of their power for over 60 years. However, the unequal distribution of wealth among ethnicities, especially the poor Malays, created dissatisfaction among them. To make matters worse, the victory of the Chinese-dominated party during the third GE worried the Malays over their loss of grip on political power. Therefore, after the 13th May 1969 racial riot incident and the introduction of the NEP, the BN-UMNO government succeeded in securing their Malay-led agenda and simultaneously introduced formal norms and values in the name of national unity and harmony to prevent the incident from recurring. However, many did not accept these norms and values, mainly due to

its Malay-Islamic-centric elements, unjust and regressive laws, and semi-authoritarian administration.

Nevertheless, professional satirists seem more vocal in voicing their opinions during the post-Mahathir era. Two factors can potentially explain this phenomenon: firstly, the Reformasi 1998 and the advent of the internet simultaneously had tremendously positive effects on the development of civil societies, freedom of speech and expression, and dissenting voices in new media; secondly, there is a significant amount of space to allow for their freedom of speech and expression, or at least partially, to criticise the government and its mechanisms during the administration of Abdullah Ahmad Badawi and Najib Razak compared to the Mahathir era.

As explained through the Two-Social Reality approach, ordinary everyday individuals adopt different attitudes and interpretations. Consequently, the MPS voice their contestation of these formal-authoritatively-define values through their satirical works; hence, their motivations were constructed through personal experiences and reactions to issues that departed from their principles. According to Fairclough, the state uses educational institutions to propagate national ideology, and “social conditions of interpretation” to shape public interpretations (1989, pp. 25–33). National ideologies and moral policies such as *Rukun Negara*, the National Cultural Policy, Leadership Through Example, the Inculcation of Islamic Values, the National Youth Development Policy, Asian Values, and many others were implemented by the government and taught early in school as a framework for good moral values and good citizenship (B. P. Tan et al., 2018, p. 131).

From an authority-defined perspective, national unity and racial harmony will always be the top priority of the state and government, mainly to prevent racial riots from recurring.

Therefore, various efforts were employed, including implementing laws – that might be repressive to particular individuals or groups – to handle delicate and ‘sensitive’ issues as defined by the authorities. Nonetheless, the ‘everyday-defined’ notion of the Malaysian socio-political fabric offered by MPS never matches the state definition.

## **6.1 On the issue of transparency**

Among the frequent criticisms of qualitative research, particularly the interview method, are the issues of bias and data transparency. These criticisms include design, the selection of participants, methodology, data collection and measurement, analysis, and publication (Smith & Noble, 2014, p. 101).

In addition, researchers are exposed to the Halo Effect, particularly when evaluating informants. The Halo effect can influence the researcher’s evaluation according to the interviewee’s personality (Nisbett & Wilson, 1977, p. 250). Accordingly, this study took precautions throughout the research process, particularly during the interviews, coding, categorisation, data analysis, and data reporting phases. As Farjami explains, it is naïve for a researcher to believe that someone’s intentions justify their actions thoroughly. This is crucial, in fact, if the person of interest is bound by legal action or under scrutiny (2017, p. 178). Therefore, to reduce the possibility of bias, I have justified each method or procedure used throughout the study.

In addition, I have utilised several approaches suggested by Noble and Smith (2015, pp. 34–35), including:

- i. consider and be aware of all possible personal biases affecting the findings;

- ii. accept and acknowledge bias in sampling and critically reflect on this so that data interpretation is consistent and transparent;
- iii. keep records of data and show a clear decision-making process parallel to the interpretation of meaning;
- iv. cross-comparing cases/finding similarities and differences across sources to ensure a comprehensive picture from multiple perspectives;
- v. include verbatim descriptions from informants to support arguments; and
- vi. demonstrating clarity of the frame of mind during data analysis and interpretation of meaning.

Regarding saturated data, researchers have proposed that not all study designs are universal, as the nature of any given study is unique. Fusch and Ness stressed that there is no “one-size-fits-all” approach to achieving data saturation (2015, p. 1409). Rather, the number of samples in a qualitative study depends on the needs of the study and is used to identify categories that apply to certain cases (Neuman, 2014, p. 247).

The recommended number of interview samples can range from six to ten (Morse, 2000, p. 5), one, two, or more depending on the collective story to be amassed (Creswell, 2007, p. 126) or only six samples (Guest et al., 2006, p. 64). Therefore, the four (4) samples selected as informants in this study are deemed suitable and sufficient with regard to achieving the study’s objectives.

## **6.2 Suggestions for future research**

Realising that this study has limitations and restrictions, I have suggested some perspectives that could be explored in the study of political satire and democratisation in Malaysia.

Firstly, one might consider additional studies of professional satirists from a new perspective, whether from other ethnicities, classes, or political communication points of view. Future researchers may find this study useful in investigating the increasing number of works of political satire and satirists in recent years.

Secondly, a quantitative study of political satire's influence on Malaysian society. The lack of impact studies employing quantitative methods can be traced back to previous works of literature, such as this one. Therefore, I suggest that this type of research can be conducted to investigate how satire effectively conveys its message, as asserted by certain populations.

Thirdly, the epistemology of satire in traditional Malay literature. The Western concept of satire and literature often frames the study of satire. However, there are differences in terms of etymology, concept, and the usage of satire in the Malay culture, particularly in its oral literature. Admittedly, there are a number of previous research efforts on satire in language and literature. However, they are loose attempts to study the subject in philology.

Finally, studies of citizen satire might also be considered. Various satirical works produced and published on social media have been considered in this study. These works have been presented as visual graphics and digital comics. During political unrest in Malaysia during the COVID-19 pandemic, following the response to the change in government regime and the management of the infectious disease health crisis, such political satire was observed to increase exponentially. Due to these justifications, I propose that this phenomenon be further explored, particularly in terms of media and politics.



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