

# Of interregnum and the formation of Malaysian Subaltern Counterpublics

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The essay focuses on to denote comparative moments of the Gramscian notion of interregnum within multiple contexts of the democratization process in Malaysia and its speculative Subaltern Counterpublics potentialities. By situating the writing on contemporary Malaysia politics starting from the post-Reformasi 98' era, it does provide us the contextualization of the newly unfolded internal and external societal conditions and competing moments attributed to the formation of Subaltern Counterpublics. The emergence of the Subaltern and its Counterpublics spaces in generating contested societal configuration and reclaiming the interpretations against the hegemonic tendencies of the State within the questions of identities, interests, and needs. The articulation of dissent through multiple discursive acts and strategies of social practices within social movements and non-movement – ranging from structured to non-structured – by transgressing beyond the existing order of politics through the participation of wider publics pushing for social change and emancipatory politics. This essay attempts to map the condition and postulate the emergence of a new radical modality of its strategies and acts of social practice in functioning as the networks of Subaltern Counterpublics spaces which function both as autonomous space and as the bases for radical and democratizing possibilities.

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*The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum, a great variety of morbid symptoms appear.”*

Antonio Gramsci (1992)

Indeed, the recent transition of power in Malaysia after more than 60 years under the single-party dominance of *Barisan Nasional* to *Pakatan Harapan*; a new political pact lead by former Prime Minister, Mahathir Mohammad, paradoxically illustrates the much-needed fissures, providing a breath of fresh air in molding the trajectories of epochal transformations in braving the crisis that has engulfed the nations for so many years. This essay would be a modest attempt of conceptualizing and discussing the contentious moments of interregnum in its relation to the moments of crisis, the continuous formation of subaltern counterpublics, and its perpetual process of democratization.

Not to discern Malaysian political development only to 98' *Reformasi* movement; which took place after the former Deputy Prime Minister, Anwar Ibrahim was being charged with alleged corruption and sodomy charges, only for him to consolidate the pro-justice agitation from social movement to electoral campaign in consecutive General Election – and disacknowledge the previous political headways through various stages of periodic challenges, as being comprehensively highlighted by Meredith L. Weiss where “obvious lapses in the prevailing stability were in the mid-1960s (culminating in the violence of May 1969) and the mid-1980” (p, 91). Besides the *Reformasi* movement, the emergence of *Bersih*, an electoral reform protest movement also provides vital trajectories in the culmination of the democratisation process in Malaysia manifest through continuous consolidations by the opposition political pact.

Here, the focus is to trace the mutations of Malaysia’s political opposition during and post the *Reformasi* period in strategizing the multifaceted emergence of political organizations and subjectivities. In tracing the oppositional forces that emerged during the *Reformasi* movement, as aptly further described by Meredith, is the distinct emphasis of “succession of opposition attempts to forge for Malaysia a new political alternative, grounded in the ideology and principles of justices rather than in race and patronage” (p, 2). Though it has been argued as such by Meredith, the communal and identitarian politics are still the dominant factors that keep on surfacing from time to time in various forms of competing essence of the nation-of-intent as being illustrated by; “the Bumiputera group” and “the non-bumiputera (the non-indigenous) group, led by the Chinese, and two *Bumiputera* (indigenous) ones, the non-Muslim *Bumiputera* group and the radical Islamic *Bumiputera* group” that continues to grip the socio-political fabrics of Malaysian political formation. (p, 324)



“Bersih 3.0 – Patriotic man carrying a Malaysian flag” by steven.wong  
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By revisiting the multiple factors aggravating the *Reformasi* movement, amongst others, the Asian flu of the economic crisis in the year 1997-1999 where it brought upon an almost total collapse of the Malaysian economics milieu influencing the social-political meltdown. The traumatic period breeds fertile grounds in capturing the amorphous disgruntlement of the citizen which manifests in the form

of the *Reformasi* movement. Moving forward, the hard-earned maturity of the opposition parties, NGO's and diverse social movements strands in deriving and developing the potentialities of coalitional capital; where diverse "resources and qualities that lead groups to engage with one another for shared ends". (p, 32) albeit the questions of what kinds of 'shared ends' does it entails. In a highly politicized society, the complex weaving of class and identity politics are very much embedded through the manifestations of sixty years of dominance of semi-authoritarian and quasi-liberal democracy with coercive and manipulative State apparatus under the former political regime of *Barisan Nasional* in extending their hegemony.

Expanding on the notion of crisis; from the economic condition of the 98' to the societal discontentment of which explicitly mutates in the form of never-ending the story of contentious racialized and ethnicized identity formation process requires a much-needed diagnosis and critical introspective of the morbid symptoms that are continuously unfolded. In here, recurring problematics of the symptoms need to be unrooted hence the necessity to understand the nature of the discursive practices and the questions of the public sphere which might hold the key to the further process of democratizations.

By situating and identifying the elements that build up the politically engaged public sphere, beyond the confinement of the conceptualization of "two-social reality" as proposed by Shamsul A.B where it takes the forms of "authority-defined" social reality, one which is authoritatively defined by people who are part of the dominant power structure; and, second, the "everyday-defined" social reality, one which is experienced by the people in the course of their everyday life". (p, 9) Of this, unconventional political organizations and practices must be drawn into the discussion to highlight the continuous mutations of the public sphere. Through the re-formulation and re-conceptualizations of the theoretical framework as provided by Nancy Fraser, the term "subaltern counterpublics" might help to illuminate the developmental stages of the Malaysia democratisation process in problematizing its unfolding crisis.

In formulating the term "subaltern counterpublics", Nancy develops on Spivak's notion of subalternity and Rita Felski's "counterpublics" which can be summarised as "their subaltern an alternative space to the dominant bourgeois public sphere (Lim, 2014). To further captures the notion of subaltern coined by Spivak, the theorist Sumit Sarkar in his essay entitled "The Decline of the Subaltern in Subaltern Studies" proposed to analysis the "shifting meanings of the core question of 'subaltern' and why it has been thought necessary to retain it despite a very different discursive context" (p, 300). Hence, the re-positioning of the term subaltern within the Malaysian context will help to identify and extrapolate on all counter-hegemonic practices, the derivatives of social and social non-movement, and multiformity of resistance and struggle against social and cultural exclusion to be directed in dissecting the crisis.

In this, a continuous definition of what is the Subaltern also relates to the question of who dominates the public sphere; of its cultural space, and the derivatives mode of production hence the need to build on the subaltern counterpublics to reconfigure multiple convergences of democratic strategies. In here, the ability to directly intervene and subvert the public sphere by opening up its democratic spaces where it would spread and eventually adapt itself to produce its own space of counter-hegemonic.

By destabilizing the power configuration and creating spaces for the plurality of political participation, the shifting in accommodating the subaltern discourse can be critically oriented especially in breaking the socio-cultural stagnation as a result of dependencies on conventional political structures. Of this, subaltern counterpublic spaces; through a broad range of social movements thus open up the potential to explore a different form of contact spaces through multifaceted approaches.

Through the conceptualizations of subaltern counterpublics where the practices are being derived from different trajectories and backgrounds of cultural and social positioning such as the gender and political spectrums, it does transpire diverse points of view and framework in engaging with the society at large. With the essence of providing alternative spaces with the idea to decentre from dominant theories, it thus sparks a need for a continuous process of democratisation to manifest.

By encouraging the subaltern counterpublic spaces to emerge as a reciprocal cultural transactional arena through various formulated tactics by the networks of cultural and knowledge workers. Emphasizing on self-criticality of its ever mutated praxis must be done coherently and not in isolation. The discursive field and its praxis must be directed in relation to ensuring the visibility of how we experience and observe the democratic process in its essence as our fundamental; the management of conflict and *dissensus* (further discussion by Jacques Ranciere is much needed to contextualise the term *dissensus*) must be the critical components especially in formulating a new agenda of socio-cultural paradigm. It is worth noting that through the development of this contestation of paradigm, participation through physical and digital presence is both equally important to enhance the visibility of the idea.

With the open structure of (non)-organizations in building up the pockets of subaltern counterpublics, then only we can create a democratic ecology to work with a vast network of solidarity to allow de-institutionalization production of knowledge, for examples, from the university, school, and religious authorities to be manoeuvred and subverted thus allowing the society to have the access in the process of discourses. By creating a functional dialogical space, it will allow multi-way interactions with the focus on the capabilities to produce knowledge collectively.

As an ongoing process, the challenges ahead will be the question of how not to sustain, but to continue the non-fixity dynamics of idea and praxis of the formation process of Subaltern counterpublics to transgress the democratization process within the public spaces. The ever-changing dynamics of political re-production must be understood especially in the process of interrogating the democratic spaces and its dialectical and paradoxes in confronting the moment of interregnum.

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