

MALAYSIA

Thriving civil societies fill a vacuum from race to politics

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From student activists to electoral reformers, there are thousands of civil society organisations claiming to represent the voice of frustrated Malaysians out there. – The Malaysian Insider file pic, July 19, 2015.

Malaysia's civil society movement has seen tremendous growth in recent years, matching the country's heightened political climate and reflecting the people's growing need for their voices to be heard, said political observers and key movement leaders.

Since the liberalisation of civil societies in the past decade, Malaysians have seen the mushrooming of hundreds of new movements claiming to represent the voices of their supporters in areas ranging from civil liberties to race and religious rights.

This growth, said political observers, was a result of the growing concern among Malaysians about the issues and controversies facing the country, particularly in the area of governance.

“One of the key roles of civil society groups is that they help to generate public awareness of national or international issues, and demand action or response from the government,” said analyst and senior lecturer at Universiti Malaya Dr Khoo Ying Hooi.

“In the long run, it actually has the effect of shaping the norms of state behaviour,” she said.

Activist Tariq Ismail said the need for “voices of reason” was what led to the foundation of his non-government group, Aura Merdeka.

He said the recent rise in influences of racial and religious extremism created confusion among many citizens, adding that civil societies should come together to set common goals that could be championed based on the principles of the Federal Constitution.

“(Civil societies) need to set standards and provide the inspirations for all Malaysians, from all walks of life,” said Tariq, who is the grandson of former deputy prime minister Tun Dr Ismail Abdul Rahman.

For G25, one of the newest and most influential civil society organisations to have emerged, the dangerous and “serious trespasses of shariah laws on the country’s Federal Constitution” prompted 25 Malay former civil servants to stand up and let their voices of moderation be heard.

Fronted by former diplomat Datuk Noor Farida Ariffin, the formation of G25 in 2014 was seen as a response to the rising aggressiveness of pro-Malay supremacy NGOs, such as Perkasa and Isma, as well as rising Islamic hard-line influences in society and government.

“The rise of supremacist NGOs which accuse dissenting voices of being anti-Islam, anti-monarchy and anti-Malay, has made attempts at rational discussion and conflict resolution difficult,” Noor Farida told The Malaysian Insider in an email.

“Besides the growing Islamisation, we are concerned about the endemic corruption which involves Muslim politicians and Muslim civil servants.

“We find it ironical that with the growing Islamisation and the so-called Islamic revivalism, corruption which is condemned in the Quran as a cardinal sin, appears to be tolerated by Muslims.”

But with the mushrooming of civil society movements, observers have warned of equally many non-governmental groups formed to serve as extensions of political parties to influence society. These groups essentially cast doubts on the political impartiality of the civil society movement and “dilute” their messages.

“You need to realise that there are thousands of unregistered NGOs out there that are one-man shows, and many only surface during certain times, such as by-elections or when there is a crisis,” said political analyst Prof James Chin.

“Although they are not independent, sections of the public think they are, making them useful for political parties because sometimes you can say things as an NGO, which you cannot say as a politician,” he said.

But still, political observers agree that an energised civil society movement in Malaysia will bode well for the country’s future, as these groups will inevitably play a role in influencing voters’ sentiments.

“Feedback is important in this culture and the government can no longer do things by closing the noise from the ground,” said Noor Farida.

“Also, if there are no channels to voice out our concerns, they may go underground and this can simmer into something explosive at a later time,” she said.

Political activist Dr Wong Chin Huat said it was a case of “the more, the merrier” in the case of civil society organisations.

“Who will complain if Walmart or Coles decide to come to Malaysia and join the fray with Tesco, AEON, Giant, Mydin?

“Will we complain about having too many choices and, therefore, urge them to consolidate and merge so we have lesser choices?” he asked.

“If there is such a need for (an NGO’s) cause, then society will benefit from its endeavour.

“If there is none, then they will leave and do something else later – just like failed start-ups in the economy.” – July 19, 2015.

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