

# Intellectual Discourse

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# *Intellectual Discourse*

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## Transliteration Table: Consonants

Arabic	Roman		Arabic	Roman
ب	b		ط	ṭ
ت	t		ظ	ẓ
ث	th		ع	‘
ج	j		غ	gh
ح	ḥ		ف	f
خ	kh		ق	q
د	d		ك	k
ذ	dh		ل	l
ر	r		م	m
ز	z		ن	n
س	s		ه	h
ش	sh		و	w
ص	ṣ		ء	’
ض	ḍ		ي	y

## Transliteration Table: Vowels and Diphthongs

Arabic	Roman		Arabic	Roman
اَ	a		اَ، اِيَّ	an
اُ	u		اُو	un
اِ	i		اِي	in
اَ، اِ، اِيَّ	ā		اَو	aw
اُو	ū		اَي	ay
اِي	ī		اُو	uww, ū (in final position)
			اَي	iyy, ī (in final position)

*Source: ROTAS Transliteration Kit: <http://rotas.iium.edu.my>*





# The Challenges of Civil Society Organisations: NGO-isation of Resistance in Malaysia?

Sharifah Nursyahidah Syed Annuar\*  
Muhamad Takiyudin Ismail\*\*

**Abstract:** Numerous academic studies asserted the positive contribution of Malaysian civil society organisations in national policymaking and democratisation. Nonetheless, several issues have recently posed significant challenges to civil society organisations, including NGOs. These include, for instance, reported sexual harassment incidents and controversies of purported democratic aid or funding to the NGOs. Meanwhile, the phrase “uncivil society” and the relevant definition are ambiguously applied to the existing Malaysian NGOs, as past scholarly works solely concentrated on investigating civil society. The current study aims to explore the concept of “uncivil society” in Malaysia and its relevance to the NGO-isation of resistance. Specifically, this study reviews literature on the existing concepts of civil-uncivil society, the NGO-isation of resistance, and the development of CSOs and NGOs. This study revealed different experiences of individuals, who collaborated with four different NGO types, namely human rights, women, education, and the environment. Resultantly, three main concerns regarding “uncivil society” and NGO-isation of resistance are identified. The three identified concerns, namely undemocratic work culture, the NGO establishment motive, and ineffective resistance, could occur in Malaysia.

**Keywords:** Malaysia; civil society; uncivil society; resistance; NGO; democracy assistance

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**Abstrak:** Terdapat banyak kajian akademik yang menegaskan sumbangan tinggi organisasi masyarakat sivil Malaysia dalam penggubalan dasar dan pendemokrasian. Namun, beberapa isu baru-baru ini telah menimbulkan cabaran yang signifikan kepada organisasi masyarakat sivil, termasuk NGO. Sebagai contoh, insiden gangguan seksual yang dilaporkan dan kontroversi tentang bantuan demokrasi atau pendanaan kepada NGO. Sementara itu, frasa “masyarakat tidak sivil” dan definisi yang relevan digunakan secara samar-samar kepada NGO Malaysia yang sedia ada. Hal ini kerana sarjana-sarjana terdahulu hanya menumpukan penyelidikan tentang masyarakat sivil. Justeru, kajian ini bertujuan untuk meneroka konsep “masyarakat tidak sivil” di Malaysia dan kaitannya dengan pen-NGO-an perlawanan. Secara khusus, kajian literatur telah dilakukan ke atas konsep masyarakat sivil-tidak sivil yang sedia ada, pen-NGO-an perlawanan, dan perkembangan organisasi masyarakat sivil dan NGO. Kajian ini mendedahkan pengalaman individu-individu yang pernah bekerja atau bekerjasama dengan empat jenis NGO berlainan, iaitu hak asasi manusia, wanita, pendidikan dan alam sekitar. Hasilnya, tiga kebimbangan utama mengenai “masyarakat tidak sivil” dan pen-NGO-an perlawanan telah dikenal pasti. Tiga kebimbangan yang dikenal pasti, iaitu budaya kerja tidak demokratik, motif penubuhan NGO dan perlawanan yang tidak berkesan, dapat terjadi di Malaysia.

**Kata kunci:** Malaysia; masyarakat sivil; masyarakat tidak sivil; perlawanan; NGO; bantuan demokrasi

## Introduction

Discourses on democracy often include the concept of civil society, which comprises third-sector organisations beyond the government (first sector) and the market (second sector). Civil society is considered to play a role in the democratisation process, as in Indonesia, the Philippines, Thailand, and South Korea. In those countries, civil society exerted political pressure to demand reforms to the political and economic systems, thereby successfully assisting the overthrow of dictatorial regimes (Alagappa, 2004). Although the term “civil society” refers to various actors, the connotation of the term is, in reality, synonymous with NGOs. The term interchangeability reflects the prominence and importance of NGOs in civil society (Ishkanian, 2007).

In recent years, the euphoria of the General Election (GE-12) in 2008 and GE-13 in 2013 spurred a surge of civil society organisations (CSOs) in Malaysia. In fact, the Barisan Nasional (BN) government

lost power in several states including Selangor and Penang where many civil society organisations such as NGOs are concentrated (Rodan, 2014). The BN was finally defeated in the historic GE-14 in 2018 after 60 years of rule. In this context, the development of NGOs in Malaysia is increasingly gaining the attention of international bodies. Many funders realise that they need to work with local NGOs to achieve their goals. Apparently, many multinational NGOs have their regional or global headquarters in Malaysia. For example, Consumers International Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific (CI ROAP), Pesticide Action Network Asia and the Pacific (PANAP), and Wetlands International Malaysia (Weiss, 2004). Accordingly, progressive NGOs and those fighting for freedom, transparency, human rights, and democracy are seen to display the civic and democratic values that are typically present in civil society (Cohen & Arato, 1992). For example, in Malaysia, NGOs include the Coalition for Clean and Fair Elections (BERSIH), Voice of the Malaysian People (SUARAM), and All Women's Action Society (AWAM). Meanwhile, NGOs that are based on race, or that are nationalist or populist, are classified as uncivil society organisations (Ruzza, 2009). Uncivil organisations are criticised for obstructing democratisation and creating conflict in society. This perspective then leads to a dichotomy where civil society appears to be the “good guy” and non-civil society the “bad guy.”

However, while it is true that civil society organisations such as NGOs contribute to the democratisation and improvement of communities through advocacy work (Clarke, 1998), several issues that have recently plagued CSOs in Malaysia have received much criticism. Among them are cases of sexual harassment in the Islamic Renaissance Front (IRF) and controversy over democratic aid and funding to NGOs in the country (Muhamad Takiyuddin, 2019). These examples can give the impression that CSOs are not free from weaknesses or are constrained by funding. Their philosophy, ideology, intellectuality, and struggle raise question marks. Thus, even though civil society is a righteous idea that cannot be disputed, are civil society organisations in the form of NGOs that often speak out about human rights and the environment, better than uncivil organisations? Who do CSOs represent – funders, staff, or marginalised groups?

This article aims to challenge the mainstream idea presented in much academic writing by offering an alternative narrative on the civility of

CSOs, particularly NGOs in Malaysia. While the lack of transparency, internal accounting, and achievement of CSOs are not new, so is the position of NGOs in an authoritarian context. Nevertheless, this article intends to define the connection between the shortcomings of CSOs and the questions of NGO-isation of resistance that may well happen in Malaysia. It also serves as a study in this country that provides a critique from a civil-uncivil perspective and complements the existing studies on civil society.

Therefore, the article begins by examining the concepts of civil society, uncivil society, and NGO-isation of resistance. Although there are differences between CSOs and NGOs, the two terms are used interchangeably in this article to refer to the same unit of analysis: civil society organisations in the form of NGOs. Moreover, NGOs are perceived as a popular and well-established type of existing CSOs. Thus, the article focuses on NGOs as an important part of civil society. Next, the article briefly discusses the development of CSOs and NGOs in Malaysia. Then, this article explores the experiences of four individuals who have worked or collaborated with CSOs. Three main issues, namely undemocratic work culture, the NGO establishment motive, and ineffective resistance, were subsequently analysed as the challenges encountered by CSOs, which might be perceived as the NGO-isation of resistance.

### **The Other Side of Civil Society**

The existence of CSOs has become an important sign of democracy, and in fact was noted as the most important idea at the end of the 20th century (Sunil, 2001). The four characteristics that are usually present in CSOs are that they act voluntarily, they are independent from government and political parties, they possess civility, and they put the public interest first. They can operate simultaneously as an operating organisation and an advocacy organisation. In this context, CSOs such as NGOs seek to achieve small-scale change through the programmes they organise as well as large-scale change by influencing policymaking (Willets, 2011).

Furthermore, CSOs are ethical entities, the core of democracy, and agents that can help to shape good governance. Thus, CSOs are placed alongside the public and private sectors as a check and balance mechanism (Etzkowitz, 2008). There are four dimensions of CSOs, namely: (1) organisational structure, (2) operating space,

(3) the values they promote, and (4) the effects of their activities on policymaking (Anheier, 2004). They also possess the ability to carry out political agendas at the national and international levels, influence political discourse, and criticise undemocratic parties. Therefore, CSOs have become an important part of implementing, developing, and strengthening democracy (Ishkanian, 2007). Consequently, they have to deal with varying policies, political conflicts, and extortions in authoritarian governments that can affect their advocacy role.

Importantly, the definition and history of CSOs may differ between Western societies and Eastern societies. Although Western society has always been presented as a role model for civility, the current situation of the West cannot necessarily be applied directly to the whole of the Eastern society. There are differences in terms of sociopolitics, culture, economy, and religion. Thus, the definition of civil society based on the experience of Western society may not be in line with the specific experience of Eastern society which tends to be parochial and emphasises tribal politics (Kamruzzaman, 2019). The homogenisation and corporatisation of NGOs also means that such CSOs serve to strengthen Western hegemony. Marginalised groups do not have the opportunity to provide their ideas from their local context and environment because the programmes start from the top and are all based on a similar format. Moreover, the development of the middle class in most Eastern countries did not start from the bottom and did not mature. In Malaysia, the development of the middle class occurred abruptly due to the implementation of certain policies – for example, the New Economic Policy (Rahimah, 2012). Therefore, they may not always be passionate about democracy and democratisation. On the one hand, this difference has been used by the government to stigmatise the NGOs relationship with foreign partners so that the government can use it to gain support for its political agendas. They exploited the defiance of the NGOs to highlight the pernicious effect of Western culture or to bring to the fore the danger of Western interference in the country (Walton, 2015).

Civil society organisations in the form of NGOs also compete for funding. Usually, only those that can realise the funder's agenda or that do not question the agenda will succeed. They have good skills in writing proposal papers and project reports. Hence the term "briefcase NGOs" refers to individuals who hold briefcases containing proposal

papers and get funding – but in the absence of any clear programme. These funds are obtained from various sources within and outside the country such as philanthropists, government, corporates, institutions, and other NGOs (Pallas & Nguyen, 2018). Thus, fund recipients become representatives to implement the funder’s agenda in their respective communities. In practice, this collaboration may be more of a subcontractive or co-optation than a partner relationship because of the funder’s bigger control over the NGOs (Alqatabry & Butcher, 2020). A further issue is that of separation between Northern NGOs (from developed countries) and Southern NGOs (from developing or less developed countries) (Lewis & Sobhan, 1999), reflecting a superior-inferior relationship. In countries that are poor or do not have policies that favour the marginalised, NGOs can easily get international funds from the Northern NGOs which are “easy money.” Hence, Southern NGOs depend on the Northern NGOs. It is this dependence that brings into question the legitimacy of Southern NGOs as CSOs. In fact, such dependence seems to embody the relationship of neo-colonialism. Neo-colonialism of this sort can occur not only between Northern NGOs and Southern NGOs but also when Southern NGOs place marginalised groups under their patronages (Hearn, 2007). As a result, the programmes they organise are more top-down, hence causing the “donor trap.”

Democracy assistance is no exception when it comes to accountability. Southern NGOs must report their financial statements to funders as the stakeholders. However, marginalised groups rarely receive such reports. As a result, technical matters become the focus of NGOs. Although the NGOs represent civil society, they become isolated from the daily lives of the marginalised. Moreover, NGOs also need to ensure their programmes are cost-effective if they want to continue to be funded, even though such cost savings may limit the efforts of CSOs to provide help to those who need it. Therefore, fund recipients must not only practice upward accountability, but they also need to gain trust from society by implementing downward accountability (Stecher & Kirby, 2004).

Unfortunately, civil society organisations such as NGOs may also be co-opted by neoliberalism. For instance, an NGO acts as a subcontractor in providing funds and assignments to other NGOs or works to “patch” the problems that come from capitalism. In such circumstances, NGOs can be more like consulting companies than CSOs, functioning as service

providers, professionals, and technical experts (Banks et al., 2015). Thus, their ability to carry out democratisation tasks can be affected because of the overlap with neoliberalism. In these circumstances, it is difficult for the underlying concept of civil society to materialise, given that the theories and agendas of NGOs tend to contain elements of neoliberalism, such as the idea of development and modernisation (Allen, 1997). Furthermore, NGOs are functioning within the existing market-based and competition frameworks rather than advocating for systemic transformations. The issue of competing for funds could also lead to the marketisation of services and the privatisation of public interests (Kamat, 2004). Hence, NGOs are regarded as providing a social responsibility veneer for corporations while depoliticising social issues and prioritising market-based solutions.

Moreover, most NGOs are urban in nature as they are based in major cities. Many individuals in the organisation come from the middle class and the elite. They are university graduates but lack genuine knowledge and experience in the grassroots movement. This background results in such NGOs not being able to represent or speak on behalf of the marginalised in the best possible way (White, 1999; Muhamad Takiyuddin, 2019). Furthermore, the middle class in such NGOs may be inclined towards political liberalisation. This contrasts with the marginalised, who need social and economic justice (Kasian, 2007). Thus, an NGO may not be internally democratic, either in terms of its organisational structure or its operations (Sabatini, 2002; Makumbe, 1998). For example, the membership of civil society organisations in the form of NGOs in Malaysia is not appropriately diverse as there are more non-Malays represented (Abbott, 2009; Muhamad Takiyuddin, 2019). They are also hierarchical and bureaucratic (Fadzilah, 2003). There are also times when NGOs are used as a stepping stone for a person to build a profile and gain followers before contesting elections – a previously unfamiliar phenomenon that occurred among many political activists in Malaysia leading up to GE-14.

With these complications in mind, a simplistic definition of NGOs as civil society organisations may be riskily inaccurate, and it can be quite difficult to know their true colour (Thompson, 2007). The concept of civil society often ignores the possibility that CSOs also have weaknesses manifesting clientelism and hierarchy (Portes & Landolt, 2000). Consequently, CSOs can be at odds with democracy (Schechter,

1999) and should not be blindly designated as *Deus ex Machina* (Howell & Pearce, 2001). In fact, as agents of democratisation and change, civil society organisations such as NGOs should be able to avoid actors, groups, and issues that could harm democracy or their reputation. However, they do not always act decisively when an issue or problem occurs within their organisation. Such NGOs can be said to violate the basic elements emphasised in the Guidelines for Good Policies and Practices for NGOs, which include values, transparency, legal structure, governance, management, financial management, collaboration, and networking (Ball & Dunn, 1995).

Meanwhile, the typical understanding of uncivil organisations is that they consist of government NGOs (GONGOs) and pro-government NGOs that are extremist, interfere with democratic rights or human rights, and disregard laws. This causes the GONGOs to become outcasts in civil society studies (Hasmath, 2019). Some local NGOs such as the Association of Islamic Welfare and Dakwah of Malaysia (PEKIDA), Malaysian Indigenous Power Organisation (PERKASA), or Islam Defenders' Associations (PEMBELA) seem to fit into this definition. Uncivil organisations can also be associated with gangster activities (Lemièrre, 2014). These organisations were also likewise ardent backers of the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) and BN government as well as right-wing agendas (Chin, 2014).

Yet, according to Kopecky and Mudde (2010), labelling NGOs based on race, nationalism, populism, or reactionism as uncivil organisations would negate the fact that they also represent the voices of their supporters who come from the grassroots and lower classes. In addition, in terms of freedom of speech, they should arguably have the same opportunity to voice their different views. This contrasts with NGOs from civil society which seems to be relatively exclusive and consist of the middle class and elite, who created the petty bourgeoisie. Muhamad Takiyuddin and Shah Mohd (2022) in their study on PERKASA and Malaysian Muslim Solidarity (ISMA) also explained that the label of uncivil society in Malaysia is typically focused on Malay-Muslim NGOs. In contrast to the uncivil society that Western and non-Malay scholars have categorised these two organisations as, civil society may be a better classification for them. Among the arguments given is that they are not encircled by the framework of terrorism, militancy, and



weaponry, have legally registered by law, and they also bring grassroots issues.

The shortcomings of CSOs and NGOs suggest an uncivil aspect, which would subsequently result in the NGO-isation of resistance. Specifically, CSOs and NGOs might prioritise funding and donor requirements over the community needs by considering different resistance movements as isolated and technical projects instead of collective and political struggles. A hierarchical structure would be created when individuals with abundant resources and connections acquire higher degrees of power and influence on various movements. Resultantly, a CSO would forfeit relevant civil influences when being integrated into the mainstream political and economic systems while neglecting civility and democracy. Roy (2014) admonished that NGOs could diminish citizens' political consciousness and relevant democratic resistance. Particularly, NGO-isation refers to the specialisation and institutionalisation of democratic struggle or activism through incorporation into capitalistic structures and conventional jobs. Roy (2014) propounded that NGOs depoliticised resistance by emphasising negotiation instead of confrontation.

Activist engagement became a career and a division of labour compared to the actual and uncompensated citizens' democratic struggle. In addition, activists are individuals who are considered experts and more sophisticated in propelling social change. Although numerous NGOs support progressive groups when criticising certain governmental actions, capitalism and imperialism are frequently tolerated. The selective approach is comparable to ineffective elections, which sustain unfavourable circumstances. Meanwhile, several CSOs are dependent on continuous funding of certain parties, which would lead to further marginalisation of underprivileged communities and concealed support for imperialism (Petras, 1999). Chandhoke (2003) insinuated that although societies expect the existence of civil society organisations, what they get is NGOs. Accordingly, the present study sought to explore the current discourse on "uncivil society" and the relevance to the NGO-isation of resistance in Malaysia. The findings would bridge the existing gap engendered by the dearth of academic discourses in Malaysia, due to previous academicians' emphasis on "civil society." Thus, this study would contribute an alternative perspective

on the issues of uncivil society and the NGO-isation of resistance in Malaysia through a more inclusive and unbiased context.

### **Development of Civil Society Organisations and NGOs in Malaysia**

The history of the emergence of NGOs in Malaysia can be divided into two periods, namely pre-independence (before 1957) and post-independence. The first period began with the migration of many people from China and India to Malaya for trade and work. These immigrants set up their organisations to protect their welfare. In response, the British legislated the Societies Ordinance to monitor such organisations and prevent subversive activities. Vigorous associational activities then encouraged the locals, especially the Malays, to form their own organisations. In addition, the political awareness and associative awareness of the local population were on the rise when the Malayan Union 1946 plan was proposed. Thus, organisations in Malaya are also divided into two groups, political and non-political (Makmor & Robi, 2017).

After independence and the formation of Malaysia in 1963, the government introduced the Societies Act 1966 to regulate the movement of NGOs. The Act also established the Department of Registration of Societies Malaysia (ROS). Most of the organisations formed at this time were youth and social organisations. However, the developments that triggered various movements internationally also affected the CSOs in Malaysia. More NGOs are emerging to campaign and lobby the government to formulate better policies. Global issues such as human rights, feminism, consumerism, and the environment are now the focus of NGOs in Malaysia. Among such organisations are the National Consciousness Movement Society (ALIRAN), the Women's Aid Organisation (WAO), the Consumers' Association of Penang (CAP), and the Environmental Protection Society Malaysia (EPSM). Some of these NGOs have developed strained relations with the government (Weiss, 2006). At the same time, two factors influence the increase in the number of civil society organisations such as NGOs in Malaysia. First is the authoritarian attitude of the government; and the second is the growth of the urban middle class and the increase in young people obtaining education abroad (Tan & Singh, 1994).

Currently, there are 10,866 active NGO branches throughout Malaysia. These organisations cover a range of categories such as politics, welfare, social, recreation, mutual benefit, culture and arts, trade, profession, human rights, security, and religion (Open Data, 2020). They are registered with the ROS. However, there are also some NGOs under the auspices of non-profit companies registered under the Companies Act 2016. While they still retain their NGO character, the constraints of obtaining registration as an organisation or non-governmental organisation have forced them to register as a company. Freedom of association is still limited in the country, especially for NGOs that are vocal about human rights and have a political orientation. For instance, the 1981 amendment to the Societies Act 1965 required all NGOs to declare whether they are political in nature. NGOs that declared themselves as political were concerned about the potential for government restrictions that would prevent them from obtaining democratic aid from foreign countries. In 1983, the government withdrew this amendment after receiving many objections (Hilton, 2007).

Furthermore, civil society organisations in the form of NGOs in Malaysia strive to be independent, non-profit, and separate from the government. They have been the subject of political dissent in society for acting as critics and watchdogs. Thus, when CSOs in Malaysia play a role in humanitarian and development aspects, they emphasise human beings and seek to empower society. They also educate the public about democratic values (Korten, 1990; Taylor, 2002). This fosters the belief that civil society organisations, especially NGOs, can help transform the political culture and promote democratisation in Malaysia, including a change of government. Civil society organisations such as BERSIH and Green Assembly (*Himpunan Hijau*) are seen to have contributed to the political tsunami and the success of opposition political parties during elections in 2008, 2013, and most recently 2018 (Chan, 2018).

### **Insights from Inside**

The search for informants for this study was informed by the author's knowledge of the experiences of individuals who are familiar with or have worked for or with civil society organisations such as NGOs in Malaysia. Therefore, purposive sampling which also includes snowball sampling techniques was applied in this study. However, this article only

focuses on the experiences of four informants who were interviewed in depth. These informants discussed their respective experiences with four different categories of NGOs, namely human rights, women, education, and the environment. Their identities and those of the NGOs are not disclosed in this study. Instead, pseudonyms have been assigned to them. The codes NGO 123, NGO XYZ, NGO ABC, and NGO 789 represented the four categories. All informants were interviewed online because of the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic constraints. Open-ended questions about, for instance, organisational culture, work culture, the meaning of resistance, and the importance of NGOs in Malaysia were asked to all the informants.

### **NGO-isation of Resistance in Malaysia?**

Co-optation could assist in understanding the relationship between civil and uncivil societies and appraising the NGO-isation of resistance. Existing NGOs might depoliticise democratic resistance and reduce the capacity to challenge established power structures and advocate for systemic change. NGOs could be incorporated and co-opted by governments or corporations into the existing system resisted by citizens to diminish the ability to advocate for actual transformations (Fernandes, 2022). The situation is currently occurring in Malaysia, in which the study informants conveyed that certain NGOs, which are considered CSOs in supporting human, women's, educational, and environmental rights, possess structural weaknesses and internal organisational issues. Particularly, the incivility of Malaysian NGOs led to employee exploitation, the suspicion of the establishment motives due to the misuse of funds, and the neglect of community needs. The shortcomings manifested the NGO-isation trend of resistance in Malaysia, with the findings revealing three main issues, namely undemocratic work culture, the NGO establishment motive, and ineffective resistance.

#### **Undemocratic Work Culture**

Informants working with NGOs in this study have experienced employee exploitation. They must work overtime to cover the heavy workload. But they did not get paid overtime. The reasons given for this were lack of budget, organisational policy, and allocation only for the organisation's activities. Organisational managers also strictly control the inflow and outflow of money and direct expense savings for all their programmes. However, employee wages are still low. This overtime work is not

paid, and employee welfare is not taken into consideration. Therefore, this gives the impression that the establishment of the organisation is allegedly only to raise funds but then again ignores the interests of the employees.

One informant, Mark, described his job as being very challenging and that he was exhausted. Mark is a former clerk at NGO 123, one of the human rights NGOs in Malaysia that is synonymous with pro-opposition. He not only had to perform administrative and financial management work, but also assisted programme officers when the NGO organised events such as workshops, press conferences, and protests. As a clerk, Mark was supposed to work from 9.00 a.m. to 6.00 p.m., but most meetings were held from 8 p.m. onwards. This situation caused him to work until late at night almost every day, which was burdensome as he relied entirely on public transport (Mark, personal communication, July 24, 2021).

Furthermore, the organisation holds programmes on weekends. Employees like Mark are given meal allowances and replacement leave when required to work on Saturdays and Sundays. However, they find it difficult to take replacement leave or annual leave because the NGO is too busy. The number of employees is about five or six people and cannot accommodate a large workload. Mark also felt stressed because he was often instructed to do something right away even though office hours were over or on weekends. This pressure interfered with his privacy and time with his family. Eventually, Mark quit the organisation. He wondered why a human rights organisation could treat employees poorly in such a way.

Meanwhile, Nurul had the same experience too. Nurul was initially interested in working with NGO XYZ because the organisation's mission is to guarantee women's rights, fight for feminism, and create gender equality in Malaysia. Currently, the organisation has fewer than ten employees. The organisation has no plan to add more employees despite the increasing workload. She also highlighted two issues. First, employees are unable to file complaints if there is a conflict with the organisational manager. The organisational manager and human resource officer are the same person. This overlap of positions results in a conflict of interest and employees are forced to remain silent if they have a problem with the manager. Second, there are irrational

rules in the organisation. For example, employees cannot communicate with each other in the office, employees cannot eat together during lunch breaks, and employees cannot go home from work with other employees. These rules have created an unhealthy work environment and put stress on employees (Nurul, personal communication, July 1, 2021). Therefore, Nurul argues that the toxic work culture at NGO XYZ illustrates that working for the organisation is no different from working in a factory or a corporate company. Many employees would not remain working at the NGO due to constant pressure. Turnover of employees is also quite high. They struggled with a work culture that is more autocratic than democratic. A former employee of the organisation once told Nurul that NGO XYZ is an organisation that is not feminist even though it discusses women's rights: the organisation itself oppresses its employees, most of whom are women.

Besides, this study also found that small and recently founded NGOs in Malaysia tend to have a power-based culture. Individuals in these organisations must rely on their leaders. But this dependence will result in the organisation not being able to grow well. For example, NGO 789. Meanwhile, larger and long-established NGOs such as NGO XYZ emphasises role-based culture with a focus on stringent rules and procedures. As a result, the organisation can become bureaucratic and rigid (Bob, 2003). The top structure of NGOs in this country such as NGO 123, NGO XYZ, NGO ABC, and NGO 789 tends to consist of committee members, professionals, intellectuals, and activists. Some of them have the privilege of traveling, attending meetings and conferences locally and overseas, being popular, becoming icons, gaining awards or recognition, as well as scholarship opportunities, and studying abroad.

This privilege will divert them from a radical approach and make them more focused on technical or image competence. Most of them are idealistic intellectuals but have no experience in practical action. This failure resulted meetings being held many times, and employee workloads not reduced. By contrast, the number of administrative employees is small, and they are pressed with a heavy workload. Most of their backgrounds are from the lower middle class and working class, as related by the informants in this study. They have no choice but to work for the NGOs, but then again are paid inadequate salaries around RM1,500 to RM2,500 per month (USD350-USD600) which do not commensurate with their heavy workload. Employees also are not

entitled to overtime pay. They are told that their work is a sacrifice for the sake of humanity or “*perjuangan*” (struggle). However, they are not involved in decision-making.

Meanwhile, NGO leaders such as managers or chairmen of organisations get salaries or allowances close to five figures a month and have power and authority in many aspects. The position and privileges of these individuals lead to abuse of power and oppression within the organisation. Mark also argued that praise in the mass media or social media about certain NGOs is just too good to be true. He was tired of the practice of organising events in luxury hotels, which results in a waste of money. These attitudes and actions contradict the values of those who supposedly seek to oppose capitalism. Mark explained it is a bit worrisome that so many activists in the civil society movement in the country seem to be “dinosaurs.” The term “dinosaur” is often used in CSOs to describe leaders who are outdated but are still in power. So, dinosaurs can also exist in CSOs when there are a handful of individuals who can disguise or camouflage themselves in the name of human rights fighters (Mark, personal communication, July 24, 2021). Therefore, elements of democracy and collectivism do not exist because the NGOs adopt a static concept of leader and subordinate within the organisation. Hence, there are various factors why the informants do not voice or complain about the issue of employee exploitation to the authorities such as the Department of Labour. Among them are fear of the power of the organisation, fear that no one will trust them, feelings of inferiority, and indebtedness to the organisation. Some of them are only able to express themselves in non-mainstream media. This situation suggests that they may be trapped in Stockholm Syndrome.

#### *The NGO Establishment Motive*

Several NGOs in this country also failed to understand the real needs or problems in the communities. As a result, the objective to help the communities seems to turn into a competition among the NGOs to do good. Salmah quit NGO ABC, an organisation that aims to provide education and protect the city’s poor children. One of the factors that prompted her to no longer be involved was that the organisation was not trying to understand the marginalised. The organisation designs its programmes to suit the needs of funders and not the marginalised. Instead, these marginalised groups must listen and follow the tune of the

NGO (Salmah, personal communication, July 14, 2021). Therefore, civic values and democratic norms are absent. As a result, the organisation is at odds with its objectives.

Salmah's experience and observations suggested that the key constraint in the activism of CSOs in Malaysia is the influx of NGOs such as NGO ABC that are egoistic and refuse to learn from society. They do not respect the privacy or sensitivity of the communities or the marginalised. There are also NGO movers who consider welfare as an industry. Moreover, organisations like NGO ABC that want to help the urban poor rarely criticise the economic system that oppresses the people. They mostly just touch on the issues of the urban poor who do not have enough food and live on the streets. The romanticisation of such issues always happens. However, broader questions such as expensive housing and low wages stemming from capitalism are not highlighted.

In addition, suspicion arises when no agency closely monitors the activities of the NGOs, especially in the financial aspect. While they may need to submit financial reports to ROS, leakage or misuse of funds has not been fully examined. The ROS seems to focus more on registration and technical matters, rather than monitoring any misconduct of the NGOs. Hence, Adam argues that there are indeed several activists who set up environmental NGOs merely to raise funds. Adam was once involved with NGO 789, an environmental organisation while researching the problem of environmental pollution in Malaysia. Such NGOs can be said to use environmental issues in the country for their own benefit. Their direction may be different if compared to the struggle of the indigenous people who are closest and more affected by changes in the environment. This situation can also be seen in NGO 789 (Adam, personal communication, July 10, 2021).

Adam explained that there are two types of environmental NGOs in the country: big organisations that have committee members, and relatively small organisations. Big organisations may be less problematic because committee members can hold discussions before they make decisions. In small organisations, monopolies tend to prevail. The chairman of the organisation buys assets at will and monopolises the use of those assets, including for personal advantage. There was no discussion or criticism in NGO 789 about asset acquisition. This



situation illustrates that the organisation does not seem to practice internal democracy because there is no space for the employees to speak out on an issue or express their doubts. For that reason, Adam also questioned the motives of setting up environmental NGOs such as NGO 789 – whether they were fighting for the environment, just following trends, or wanting to apply for funds. In addition, NGOs in Malaysia face Third World problems rather than the First World problems encountered by NGOs in Northern countries. For example, the problems of poverty, corruption, and education gaps stem from marginalisation and power struggles by the elite. However, some NGOs are actively pursuing the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) even though the SDGs do not change the power relationship between North and South, the gap between rich and poor, and the discrimination between men and women (Esquivel & Sweetman, 2016). Meanwhile, communities living in relatively privileged and prosperous conditions in Northern countries may experience smaller or more trivial problems. Likewise, NGOs in Malaysia face various constraints in achieving the SDGs through localisation. Among these are the gaps between advocacy and implementation, non-priority of human rights, limited resources, lack of capacity among NGO employees, and lack of empowerment in the communities (Ying & Lii, 2019).

There are Northern NGOs that obtain funding from their governments. So, when these Northern NGOs provide funds to Southern NGOs such as in Malaysia, it seems unreasonable to still contend that the NGO is an organisation separate from the government or is a non-governmental organisation (Wright, 2012). Furthermore, the programmes that they hold each year usually follow specific themes and trends. For example, in recent years, stateless people have become a hot topic in Malaysia. Many new NGOs are emerging that organises a range of programmes such as discussions, forums, and alternative schools. They also regularly appear on social media, in television interviews, and in online fora. There is no denying that such actions aim to expose the issue of stateless persons, attract attention or monetary donations from the public, and augment their visibility in society.

However, such developments can also result in the NGO-isation of resistance in Malaysia. Public space can become closed and unable to grow because it is dominated by NGOs that use certain issues in the name of civil society and marginalised groups to follow trends or

merely to raise funds. This situation can be seen as more and more new NGOs appear in Malaysia. A book entitled *The Revolution Will Not Be Funded* edited by INCITE! Women of Colour Against Violence also question the credibility of NGOs in fighting for radical social justice as they receive democratic aid or funds from certain parties. Moreover, the trustworthiness of such NGOs can be assessed through the knowledge they have to manage the organisation, their ethical responsibility, and their power or political interests (Srinivas, 2009).

Most informants also agreed that the heavy workload and high administrative demands were for the sake of satisfying the funders. Organising programme is a priority to ensure the survival of the organisation and to gain the trust of funders so that they continue to provide funds in the following years. Here, such NGOs become merely service providers. The result is a neglect of civic and democratic values in the organisation. Initially, individuals in CSOs may think of changing the system from within. However, the bureaucracy of struggle and the taming of activism through NGOs has diverted public attention from the bigger picture, restrict the emergence of more critical movements, and undermine political participation.

Many of these NGOs are also non-membership-based CSOs. This type is different from the membership-based CSOs such as trade unions and professional associations that can generate their finances through membership fees or business activities. Thus, non-membership NGOs, whether large or small, rely on democratic aid or funds to carry out their activities. Research conducted by Lyons and Nivison-Smith (2008) on 492 NGOs in six Asian countries also clarified that internal hierarchy is closely linked to funding. NGO leaders are seen to be influential in organisations and respected because they can persuade and convince funders to fund their organisations (Lorch, 2017). Therefore, some individuals may establish NGOs to obtain funding or personal gain, meaning that they have no real impact on the issues they claim to address. These organisations may be viewed as dishonest, and they can harm the reputation of the broader NGO community.

### *Ineffective Resistance*

The sharing from Mark, Nurul, Salmah, and Adam on some NGOs in Malaysia also illustrates that NGOs as CSOs have become classless. The game is geared to be inter-NGO rather than a class or collective struggle.

The focus of the campaigns of all these NGOs is on one issue only. They rarely organise society consistently and seldom provide class analysis. They are now at risk of becoming co-opted by capitalism's hegemony. Furthermore, after Pakatan Harapan (PH) won the historic 14<sup>th</sup> General Election in 2018, several NGOs were co-opted into the system. They have been demobilised and failed to address the economic gap and social inequality. Additionally, they have been protesting in the same place for years. For example, outside the SOGO shopping mall, around Bukit Bintang Street, *Pasar Seni* (Central Market), or *Dataran Merdeka* (Merdeka Square) in Kuala Lumpur. There is no radical and meaningful change, especially in their strategy to push for democratisation.

At the same time, given that there are many successful civil society organisations such as NGOs that are well-established in Malaysia and able to attract attention and funding up to the international level, many new NGOs are emerging in the capital city and are now starting to enter other places – for example, in rural areas or Sabah and Sarawak (East Malaysia). These two states are also popular among NGOs not only because of the many issues that can be explored to implement various programmes, and because it will be easier to get funds and donations. These states are rich in natural beauty, making it fun to do activism compared to places that have no such attractions. As a result, too many NGOs and activists are concentrated in one place. Existing NGOs are typically used as guides or models. The new NGO will talk about human rights, democracy, and good governance.

Some of them also frequently use English in their platforms and conversations, rather than the Malay language which is more inclusive among ordinary people. What started as an organic movement for change now seems to be an NGO system that relies on democratic aid or funds. Furthermore, the NGO may later intervene and disrupt the local opposition by controlling the agenda. This situation can hamper local efforts to build a more representative engagement. Hence, the communities may not need NGOs anymore if the existence of such organisations is just to spread awareness. Almost all current issues can be known and shared quickly on social media, especially with the increase in social media influencers in Malaysia who regularly share about human rights and environmental problems with thousands of their followers (Adam, personal communication, July 10, 2021).

Therefore, the main challenge for CSOs in Malaysia is how to remain loyal and steadfast to their original objectives. The biggest dilemma that hinders the progress of any NGO is funding. No organisation will last long acting voluntarily and without funds. Thus, NGOs should not be entirely blamed if they rely on funding. NGOs should work not only to change society but also to change the corrupt system. Companies or agencies that do damage to humanity and the environment also need to be fought. In Salmah's view, not everyone who enters and joins the NGO world thinks about and clearly understands the struggle (Salmah, personal communication, July 14, 2021). Indeed, the informants' experience with several NGOs in this country illustrates that there are weaknesses among these CSOs in terms of accountability, transparency, and ability to make changes. While they are manifesting altruism, their actual nature resembles the uncivil characteristics that influence the NGO-isation of resistance. Among these traits are professionalisation, institutionalisation, depoliticisation, and demobilisation (Choudry & Kapoor, 2013). Therefore, it is reasonable to suggest that there may be negative externalities from the CSOs that could result in an uncivil element if the NGOs failed to establish sound relations, trust, and mutuality within their organisation or outside the organisation such as the communities.

Ideally, NGOs as civil society organisations are not profit-seeking people because their mission is to fight for human and environmental rights. Therefore, they should be more sensitive to the welfare of employees or their real objectives. They must focus on their original goals and not act hastily or in a reactionary way on all issues or give a response to every statement made by politicians (Mark, personal communication, July 24, 2021). However, the problems in NGO 123, NGO XYZ, NGO ABC, and NGO 789 reflect the negligence of CSOs in this country that do not practice the civic and democratic values they champion. Issues such as employee exploitation, the motive for the establishment of NGOs, and ineffective resistance present a challenge for the NGOs to ensure that the uncivil aspect or the NGO-isation of resistance does not happen in Malaysia.

## **Conclusion**

Without civil society organisations such as NGOs, diversity is unlikely to be seen in the democratic landscape in Malaysia. These

organisations remain as important actors in democratisation because they are a platform for society to speak out and demand rights. Civil society organisations in the country such as NGO 123, NGO XYZ, NGO ABC, and NGO 789 conduct advocacy aimed at law enforcement for human rights, elimination of discrimination against women, the right to education, and environmental protection. They also create a network with each other if there are strategic issues that require joint efforts. They develop collaborations at the national level to influence the policymaking process. Relationships with various NGOs in other countries are also established to gain international publicity. In this regard, there are still many people who believe in the role of NGOs and work in such organisations with dedication.

However, it is important to put these issues in perspective. The rise of civil society organisations such as NGOs in Malaysia is not a guarantee that they will be the agents of social change or democratisation. They tend to reduce the quality of resistance. Power relations also occur among NGOs, within the NGO itself, or between NGOs and the communities. Moreover, most of these NGO approaches are not localised in nature and are organised to implement a programme or project according to the allocation of funds or targeted timelines. A relatively short duration can mean that it is quite difficult to measure the effectiveness of the programme or project. Besides, the informants of this study also narrated their experiences with NGOs that are viewed as civil society organisations, but the values of civility and democracy do not seem to be applied in the organisation itself. There are issues of employee exploitation, misuse of funds, and absence of responsibility to the communities. This article, therefore, presents the critique that CSOs could exhibit weaknesses and uncivil characteristics that may be an indicator of the NGO-isation of resistance in Malaysia. The communities are meant to benefit from and be empowered through the engagement of NGOs, but some of these organisations are inclined to use negotiation, dialogue, or diplomatic approaches as opposed to radical or more real action.

The surge in growth of many NGOs in Malaysia seems ironic when the organisations themselves—such as NGO 123, NGO XYZ, NGO ABC, and NGO 789—can exploit their employees and be dishonest in financial management. Therefore, the process of institutionalisation and professionalisation tends to transform civil society organisations

such as NGOs into more hierarchical, corporate, and centralised agents that focus on organisational sustainability as opposed to trying to organise and mobilise society. They are also not able to practice democracy and good governance internally, making them uncivil. In this situation, the concept of civil-uncivil perspective and NGO-isation of resistance becomes useful to understand and examine the direction of the movement of civil society organisations such as NGOs in Malaysia.

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