

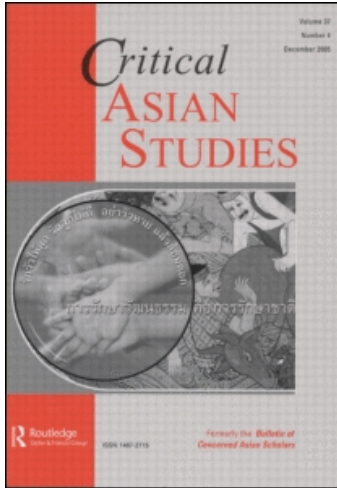
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# INTELLECTUAL CONTAINMENT

## The Muting of Students in Semidemocratic Southeast Asia

Meredith L. Weiss

**ABSTRACT:** Postcolonial, developmental states recognize the need for higher education to generate both ideas and skilled human resources. Many seek too, though, a level of state control incompatible with ideals of academic freedom. This dilemma is all the more keen for semidemocratic states such as Malaysia and Singapore, which can neither curb protest as coercively as their more authoritarian neighbors do nor accept free-wheeling criticism as more politically liberal ones do. Presumed morally “pure” and entitled to speak, students across Southeast Asia are heir to a tradition of political engagement, based largely on their identity as students. Despite crackdowns, students have been central to political change across the region. They remain so in much of Asia — but not, for instance, in Malaysia. The muting of student protest there may be traced in large part to a post-1969 process of *intellectual containment*, or normative delegitimation and historical erasure of student activism, with far-reaching implications.

Academic attention to student movements has ricocheted between neglect and exaggeration. The greatest scholarly attention to student activism was in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Scholars then homed in on the most dramatic examples of “student revolt”: such exemplars as the Zengakuren in Japan, Students for a Democratic Society in the United States, and the students of Prague Spring in Czechoslovakia, the Left Bank in Paris, or the “Tlatelolco Massacre” in Mexico City. These studies generally *overemphasized* the distinctiveness of a phenomenon whose singularity would subsequently be excessively flattened by social movement theorists in search of overarching categories and parsimonious explanations. From being explained by way of unspecific “breakdown” theories<sup>1</sup>

or trivialized as just crazy kids acting out, student activism has been analytically domesticated now as merely another part of civil society.<sup>2</sup> And yet a quick survey of major contentious episodes even just across East and Southeast Asia offers startling evidence of the pivotal role of university students in the pursuit of goals from mundane policy change to dramatic political transformation, from the early twentieth century until at least the 1980s–90s: Burma in the 1920s, 1960s, and 1980s; China in 1919 and again seventy years later; Indonesia in the 1960s and 1990s; Thailand in the 1930s, 1970s, and intermittently since; and the list goes on and on. Even when student protest cycles in the advanced industrial democracies were at a low ebb, students kept their edge in much of Asia. Table 1 lists only some of the key such incidents.

**Table 1. Students and political protest: Selected incidents**

Burma	1920s (anticolonial), 1962 and 1988 (antimilitary)
China	1919 (nationalist), 1956 (anticommunist), 1989 (democratic)
Indonesia	1965 (against Sukarno), 1998 (against Suharto)
Iran	1979 (against the Shah)
Japan	1950s–60s (radical left Zengakuren)
Malaysia	1968–74 (against Tunku Abdul Rahman, antipoverty)
Pakistan	1969 (against Ayub Khan)
South Korea	1960 (against Syngman Rhee), 1964 and 1980s (antimilitary)
South Vietnam	1963 (against Ngo Dinh Diem)
Taiwan	1990 (for free elections)
Thailand	1932 (republican), 1973 (antimilitary), 2006 (against Thaksin Shinawatra)
Turkey	1960 (against Adnan Menderes)

Students do not constitute a class in a Marxist sense, notwithstanding their common concern for their own education and prospects,<sup>3</sup> nor is this category congenital or ascriptive, as with ethnic, religious, or gender-based identities. While student movements are status-based, students' claims are not (generally) in terms of their personal interests or grievances; the status claims at stake are for presumed legitimacy to speak for others, by dint of being in a specific stage of life and institutional setting. Namhee Lee, for instance, describes a "discourse of moral privilege" in South Korea, rooted in a history of social criticism and intellectuals' engagement, that validates university students' claims to speak for the nation.<sup>4</sup> It is on the basis of students' identity, not their proximity to or privileged grasp of the issues, that the protests we consider here occur.<sup>5</sup> (Tertiary) student status is by definition temporary, earned, voluntary, bound to an institu-

1. These theories propose that violent or unruly collective action results "when the mechanisms of social control lose their restraining power" (Useem 1998, 215). Useem notes the salience of these theories in explaining collective action; I argue, though, that the temporal and spatial ubiquity of activism in the name of a collective identity as students indicates that social dislocation, or breakdown, is only sometimes (and never exclusively) a key catalyst.
2. Thanks to Don Emmerson for this formulation.
3. Their resemblance to a "class" is strongest where students have a strong, centralized, national-level organization to maintain coherence (Weinberg and Walker 1969, 82).
4. Lee 2007, 143, 160.

tion, and readily defined in functional terms as merely those who are enrolled in higher studies, at least substantially for instrumental ends. While students may mobilize around university, international, or concerns on other levels, and like fellow citizens, may organize in terms of different identities, I am primarily concerned with national-level political engagement under the collective identity, “students.”

Student activism falls within a larger tradition of mobilization, especially of movements that generate alternative or counter-hegemonic discourses, beyond issue-specific advocacy.<sup>6</sup> Even the identity category at stake is broadly analytically comparable to others. A student identity fits a general definition of collective identity: “an individual’s cognitive, moral, and emotional connection with a broader community, category, practice, or institution... a perception of a shared status or relation... [which] is distinct from personal identities, although it may form part of a personal identity.”<sup>7</sup> The “pleasures and obligations” of collective identity may offer sufficient incentive for students to mobilize, and their sense both of who they are and of how their identity will be read by the public influences student activists’ strategic choices.<sup>8</sup> Yet unlike for many identity-based movements, the *collective* identity “student” (though not the functional definition of the term itself) commonly bears a presumption of activism: the default in this case is for students, organized as such, to mobilize; it becomes analytically interesting when students fail to embrace so readily enabling and validating a collective identity.<sup>9</sup> The distinctiveness of student activism — perhaps nowhere else so evident as across Asia — makes a clear and obvious case for taking seriously the specific sorts of identities and institutions involved in social movements. Taking this uniqueness as a starting assumption, I focus here on how the constituents, sites, and social position of a given movement structure opportunities for its suppression or containment.

Moderately illiberal — semidemocratic or competitive electoral authoritarian — regimes are equally wary of freewheeling activism and too-overt coercion. Political legitimacy is based significantly on “democracy” and yet Malaysia and Singapore, for instance, differentiate explicitly and often between “Western,” individualistic democracy and a more harmonious, less cacophonous variant deemed more appropriate to their own societies.<sup>10</sup> Government and media

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5. By way of contrast, see Bernstein 2005 for a cogent overview of the use and understandings of “identity politics” in the broader literature.

6. For instance, on human rights movements, see Weiss 2004, especially 277–80.

7. Polletta and Jasper 2001, 285.

8. *Ibid.*, 284.

9. Polletta and Jasper draw a parallel between students and churchgoers in the early years of the American civil rights movement, likewise seemingly obligated to be activists (*Ibid.*, 290). Indeed, the closest parallel to a student collective identity as I use it here would be that of religious leaders (Burmese monks or Filipino priests, for instance), who deploy that identity not to secure gains for their coreligionists per se (i.e., special rights for Buddhists or Catholics), but because their status grants a veneer of respectability such that *any* political demands they make are authoritative and persuasive. Unlike students, though, religious leaders can be assumed to be in that position long term and to base their preferences on particular theological knowledge, moral acuity, or specialized training.

10. For instance, Sim 2006.

discourse reinforces the trope of “conservative” citizens who really are not inclined to cause a ruckus: they participate by voting. Here, the very concept of student activism invokes a contradiction. A 1993 forum in Singapore captured its crux. Government minister and former university vice chancellor Toh Chin Chye insisted, “The university has no political role as an institution. It exists by act of Parliament with its role clearly defined as a teaching institution.”<sup>11</sup> Sociologist Kwok Kian Woon countered:

If we all conceptualize the political as party politics, and if the university cannot be a place of political discourse, then we are in a bind. But why shouldn't the university be a place for public discourse, for thinking hard through public issues and problems which concern all of us?<sup>12</sup>

What Toh proposes and Kwok resists embodies what I term *intellectual containment*, or the semidemocratic state's delegitimation and strategic suppression of university-based protest. Intellectual containment entails undercutting the symbolic resources and ideational tools for mobilization. It applies equally well to university staff as students, but it is students who have ready access otherwise to a catalyzing collective identity and have thus been more significant and ubiquitous a political force. Merely containing student and staff protest physically — restricting student marches and other tactics to within campus borders or arresting student leaders, for instance — curbs political activism, but the effects of such efforts are less enduring than a more Gramscian strategy of disrupting the intellectual legacy, presumption of authority, and generation of ideas so critical to mobilization in the first place.<sup>13</sup> One approach targets concrete, structural aspects; the other, more normative ones. Campus ecology, the environment in which student movements develop, combines these dimensions. The clever or cautious state addresses both, especially when unhindered public criticism and unfettered state coercion are equally untenable, even in the short term. While intellectual containment as conscious state policy cannot fully explain shifts in the nature or extent of student protest, the evidence suggests that these tactics help to carve a path at critical junctures, by way of both policies and discourse.

I use an extended case study of Malaysia and Singapore, taken in the context of late colonial and postcolonial Southeast Asia, to explore the dynamics of student movements outside the liberal democracies and crass autocracies best known in the literature.<sup>14</sup> My methods are qualitative: I draw on archives, decades' worth of student publications and media accounts, interviews with scores of present and former student activists, and a host of secondary texts on student activism as well as on mobilization and repression more broadly.<sup>15</sup> The diminution of protest on the Malaysian campus — indeed, of activism or even open political debate there at all — has been apparent over the past three de-

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11. Commentary 1993, 51.

12. *Ibid.*, 61.

13. Sim 2006, 147–48.

14. For the full history, see Weiss [forthcoming].

15. In the interest of brevity, many of these sources feature more implicitly than explicitly here.



Engineering students, University of Malaya, 2003. "The diminution of protest on the Malaysian campus — indeed, of activism or even open political debate there at all — has been apparent over the past three decades; what is less clear is how the discourse surrounding students has changed, how students' self-understanding has changed, how styles or targets of engagement have changed, and why rules against student activism appear so much more debilitating in Malaysia and Singapore than in, for instance, Indonesia or Burma." (Photo credit: [www.cuti.com.my](http://www.cuti.com.my))

acades; what is less clear is how the discourse surrounding students has changed, how students' self-understanding has changed, how styles or targets of engagement have changed, and why rules against student activism appear so much more debilitating in Malaysia and Singapore than in, for instance, Indonesia or Burma.

Malaysia presents an intriguing regional outlier (see table 2, below). In the past, students in Malaysia and Singapore (a single polity until 1965) were mobilized and politically significant, energized by both domestic and international issues. Something changed there starting in the 1970s, unlike in Indonesia, Thailand, Burma, or the Philippines, or a bit farther afield, China, Taiwan, or South Korea. Hence, a puzzle: Why are Malaysians, and especially Malaysian students, so much less engaged than their counterparts across the region? The answer is not a simple one. The perception of congenital apathy among Malaysians is partly justified, but partly an artifact of shaky historical knowledge, as contentious episodes peppering even the recent past are surprisingly little known. In the past, Malaysian students *were* known and even lauded for their principled engagement. Blazing the trail in the 1930s were "a handful of young Malayan activists who put down their schoolbooks and turned to the world of radical politics instead," proving themselves "able and willing to question the circumstances around them even when it seemed as if all hope was lost."<sup>16</sup> That spirit peaked in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Now, however, not only are students less prone to protest, but politicians, the public, and students themselves hardly recognize that legacy: contemporary youth, especially students, "are reminded to keep their heads in the books and let the older generation run the country," as though such disengagement were "natural."<sup>17</sup> Younger Malaysians and Singaporeans have limited grasp of the more raucous or critical aspects of their history, including of student protest, and have internalized and accepted the trope of complacency to a remarkable extent.<sup>18</sup> Their lack of awareness is an

16. Farish 2002, 64, 69.

17. *Ibid.*, 63.

indicator for intellectual containment, and specifically for the virtual erasure of activist, especially left-wing, histories.

**Table 2. Malaysian student campaigns in context**

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**Malaysia/Singapore**

- 1950s–early 1970s: nationalism, anti-imperialism → largely tolerated and respected if contained to campus
- 1967–1970: Malay rights → changes to preferential and language policies
- 1967–1974: poverty, land rights → arrests (most short-term), campus reorganization, delegitimation
- 1998–present: *Reformasi* issues (primarily on campus elections, student rights) → arrests/expulsions, calling parents, loyalty oaths, derision

**Indonesia**

- 1930s–1950s: nationalism and democracy → largely tolerated and respected
- 1965: anti-Sukarno → tolerated and successful
- 1970s–1980s: anti-imperialism, anticorruption → repressed (disappearances, arrests, laws, physical containment on campus)
- 1998: *Reformasi* → brutal repression, then success

**Burma**

- 1920s–1950s: nationalism, anti-imperialism → respected
- 1962: against Ne Win → brutal suppression
- 1988: democracy → brutal suppression, closure of universities, and obstruction of any organization on/off campus
- 1988–present: “8888 Generation” students continue to oppose junta, as “students”

*Summation:* Greater physical containment and coercion in authoritarian Burma and Indonesia, but more persistent student activism there than in less-coercive, semidemocratic Malaysia.

*Note:* Malaysian activists are well aware of the brutal repression in Indonesia, Burma, and elsewhere, i.e., Thailand (1973), Philippines (1970s–80s), South Africa (1970s), China (1989).

A combination of controls on media, circumscription of curricula, politicization of academic appointments, expulsion of designated “sensitive issues” from the public sphere, endless reminders of students’ gullibility and immaturity, and self-censorship born of uncertain parameters obscure alternative narratives. This less tangible onslaught compounds the effects of physical containment: of erecting fences, banishing campuses from cities, limiting central meeting areas, precluding new clubs and associations, channeling activism toward closely managed elections and petitions, and co-option of students into political party machines. Lacking evidence to the contrary, and with real disincentives for students to explore further, the conventional wisdom of apathy becomes real. Students’ understanding of their position in history and the polity is part of their reading of campus ecology: if they read the campus as isolated and pro-

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18. For example, Junaidi Abu Bakar found that a clear majority of student survey respondents at the National University of Malaysia (UKM) approved of the tightly controlling Universities and University Colleges Act (UUCA), taking its strictures for granted (Junaidi 1993, 108–11). My interviews with current students and recent graduates, too, found even more activist-inclined students to have limited historical knowledge.

tected from things political, and know little of the repertoires and past experience of student activism — if there is no May 4<sup>th</sup> movement, or Generation of '66, or October 14<sup>th</sup> uprising as in China, Indonesia, or Thailand to invoke in reinvigorating a collective identity — the mobilizational advantages of their setting are diminished. Intellectual activism trades in ideas as well as policy demands and rests on a collective identity as opinion leaders. Its repression must thus be understood not just in terms of curbs on strategies and actors, but on ideological and creative resources, as well.

Implicit in processes of intellectual containment are academic freedom and institutional autonomy. Students and academic staff not only claim intrinsic authority as analysts and advocates based on their presumed intelligence and capacities for insight and articulation, but also are the ones to reproduce the histories and ideas in question through studying, teaching, and writing. Without the liberty to perform these functions freely, safe from personal or institutional reprisals, processes of intellectual reproduction conducive to critical engagement and activism across society may not happen. Suppression of activism on campuses is thus doubly damning: students themselves are less likely to engage and others are unlikely to have the information and validation with which to contest numbing narratives of politics as confined to unfair, unfree elections.

### Student Activism in Malaysia

Three brief examples from different periods in Malaysia's past offer a sense of how these processes play out. A quick bit of background will help to set the stage. After World War II and Japanese occupation, the British gradually and relatively peaceably backed out of the Malay States and Straits Settlements. The peninsula was renamed the Federation of Malaya and granted independence in 1957, while Singapore remained a separate, increasingly self-governing crown colony. "Malaysia" per se was established only in 1963, when Singapore as well Sabah and Sarawak, states on the island of Borneo, merged with peninsular Malaya. Singapore exited two years later, becoming an independent state in 1965. The Malaysian government since independence has been a coalition of largely racially defined, or "communal," parties. Malaysia makes no claims to liberal democracy; it is at best semidemocratic, with all the ambiguity that imprecise label implies.

Malaysia has long been and remains a famously plural society. While the balance between Malays and Chinese used to be nearly equal, the population now is almost two-thirds *bumiputera* (Malay and indigenous peoples<sup>19</sup>), just over a quarter ethnic Chinese, and most of the rest, ethnic Indian. Historically, most Malays have been rural, poor, and educated only in Malay; Chinese have been more heavily urban and educated in Chinese or English. Preferential policies

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19. In peninsular Malaysia, *bumiputera* is nearly coterminous with "Malay," less so when the country is taken as a whole. Malays, constitutionally all Muslim, constitute about half the total population. The *orang asli*, or indigenous peoples of the peninsula, total less than 1 percent; the indigenous peoples of Sabah and Sarawak (*orang asal*) are more numerous, comprising a majority of the population in those (less densely populated) states.

since the colonial period, but especially since 1970, have worked to increase ethnic Malays' (but far less other bumiputera's) access to employment, wealth, and, importantly, higher education.

University education in Malaysia dates only to 1949, when King Edward VII College of Medicine and Raffles College, established in Singapore in 1905 and 1929 respectively, merged in the English-medium University of Malaya (UM). A campus opened in Kuala Lumpur in the late 1950s, then the two branches split entirely a few years later, the branch in Kuala Lumpur keeping the name University of Malaya (later restyled more consistently as Universiti Malaya). Fewer than 10 percent of university students were Malay up through the 1950s, well below their population percentage. That proportion was still just around one-quarter in 1965, but soared to 70 percent within just a decade, after major changes in affirmative action and language policies.<sup>20</sup> Meanwhile, Malaysia embarked on a massive expansion of the university system, setting up new public universities, then legalizing private ones in the mid-1990s; now, there are dozens scattered throughout peninsular Malaysia, Sabah, and Sarawak. As of 1991, 9 percent of the Malaysian population had postsecondary education; a mere ten years later, already 16 percent.<sup>21</sup> The goal is 40 percent by the year 2020. Along the way, as Malaysia's political status and economic position shifted, campus ecology and the dynamics of student mobilization changed in tandem.

In the early years of the university in Malaysia — the 1950s and 1960s — the select few undergraduates were held in high regard. While students had a real incentive just to play by the rules and graduate into secure, establishment careers, students across the region were encouraged also in a very lofty sense of their position. Many, especially on the Left, moved easily from bonding with like-minded classmates to wider consciousness-raising and mobilization. While the student union and its newspaper were powerful, UM's Socialist Club dominated campus politics in the 1950s. Its English-language journal, *Fajar* (Dawn), commanded a substantial readership both on campus and off<sup>22</sup> — even though literacy rates, especially in English, were still very low.<sup>23</sup> The cover article of a May 1954 issue, which contested British and American policy in Vietnam and the rest of Southeast Asia, set off a serious test of university autonomy and academic freedom.<sup>24</sup> After sharp debate among colonial officials, eight members of the journal's editorial board were arrested and charged with sedition.

20. Like Malaysia, Burma switched university education from English to Burmese in the 1960s, in connection with a heavy-handed program of suppression of student protest. However well justified in nationalist terms, the standard of university education in Burma then declined even more precipitously.

21. Government of Malaysia 2002.

22. One thousand copies each of the two issues prior to the one in question were sold on campus, to outside organizations, and in bookshops. Savingram No. 801 from Gov of Singapore to SS, 8 June 1954, TNA:PRO CO1030/361.

23. Harper 1999, 277.

24. Somewhat perversely, perusing that issue reveals just how much leeway the students were allowed. Other articles discuss local socialist and labor parties, international socialism, a seamen's strike, Indonesian nationalism, the limits to debate in the university, and the oxymoronic character of the "national" service policy (*Fajar* 7, 10 May 1954). This last item launched violent confrontations between Chinese students and police that same week.

# FAJAR

ORGAN OF THE UNIVERSITY SOCIALIST CLUB.

No. 7

MONDAY, 10th MAY, 1954

20 cents

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## AGGRESSION IN ASIA

Looming large in Asia once again is the threat of Western aggression. The West has been the aggressor in modern history and Asia has suffered bitterly from Western barbarity. The bitterness of these memories is not easily removed. They will greatly influence Asian thinking for a long time, until the West proves itself worthy of trust and friendship. This day is yet to come and vigilance is needed to prevent any form of Western imperialism getting a foothold in Asia again. Recent events in Asia give great cause for alarm.

We see signs all over Asia that the West is still a menace. In Indo-China the French, backed by American arms, are striving to suppress

sulting Asian opinion. The time is past, however, when European nations could make decisions binding on Asia. But this is still not recognised. The South East Asian "defence" pact is the latest example of Western interference. Its immediate object is to stamp out the freedom movement in Indo-China. Its long term object is to prevent the development of any movement in Asia that will stand up against the West. Asian nations must take a firm stand now before it is too late. We must warn the West to "Hands off Asia."

Clearly Asian friendship cannot be won under such hostile conditions. Asia needs Western technical knowledge and we welcome Western

anti-communist fronts? For that is not our problem. We need peace and freedom. The solidarity of Asia is the solidarity of the suppressed. This alone is our fight and we will be dragged into no other. Our sympathies are with all people like us who are thirsting for peace and freedom. We are therefore comrades, of the African struggling for the most elementary human rights, of the Indo-Chinese fighting for his freedom. Our enemies are those who would deny us these rights.

Malaya, however, cannot be one more pimple on the face of Asia where a Colonial Power, with the help of quislings, our interests will always be sacrificed to imperial expeditions.

"The cover article of the May 1954 issue of *Fajar* (pictured here), which contested British and American policy in Vietnam and the rest of Southeast Asia, set off a serious test of university autonomy and academic freedom."

Students and staff rallied to support the *Fajar* board. Assisting in their defense was a young, local lawyer, Lee Kuan Yew; it was this trial that really launched the future prime minister's political career. In the end, the judge dismissed the charges. He argued against a broad definition of sedition, lest "legitimate criticisms may be stifled altogether," and he pointed out that the English-language articles in *Fajar* had a "very limited circulation... among the educated class of the population... [who] can think for themselves."<sup>25</sup> The colonial government was basically satisfied. The students' acquittal presented a convincing sign of British fair play and democracy (but also of the authorities' readiness to prosecute for sedition), and the trial's quick dismissal cut short political grandstanding.<sup>26</sup>

But the issue did not end there. *Fajar* fit within a politically engaged literary movement, centered at the university, that sought to develop a new national culture. As radical journalists and other cultural critics rallied to undermine

25. District Judge, F.A. Chua, 1<sup>st</sup> Criminal District Ct. Case Nos. 113 and 119 of 1954, Regina vs. Poh Soo Kai and 7 ors., "Grounds of Judgment," 16 September 1954, TNA:PRO CO 1030/361.

26. Minute by R.W. Newsam, 1 October 1954; also J.F. Nicoll, Singapore to John Martin, London, 24 September 1954; and Nicoll to A.M. MacKintosh, London, 6 November 1954, TNA:PRO CO 1030/361.

British policies segregating the Malay bureaucratic elite from the masses,<sup>27</sup> progressive students, too, recognized that even if they wrote in English, they had to think critically about the place of Western elements in a Malayan identity.<sup>28</sup> This soul-searching coincided with an upsurge of militant Chinese secondary school student activism that culminated in momentous riots in the mid-1950s.<sup>29</sup> Yet left-wing university students were not viewed with quite the same opprobrium as were Chinese high school students or other radicals. The British presented the *Fajar* incident as a test case in university autonomy and as proof of their commitment to the intellectual enterprise — as their acknowledgment that as future leaders and educated elites, university students could be expected to speak out. Their ultimate acquittal vindicated the students' claims to a right as Asians and as intellectuals to critique colonial policy, and of the sanctity of the university as a source of sociopolitical commentary.

That sense of legitimate moral purpose persisted into the early years of independence. Events of early 1969 offer perhaps the most stark example.<sup>30</sup> The UM student union threw itself into that year's general elections. At first, reviving an idea initially mooted in the late 1940s, the union leadership proposed forming a party and running a student candidate for parliament. Instead, largely to allow the union to diffuse its efforts nationwide rather than focus on just one constituency, the students drafted a progressive, nonpartisan Students' Manifesto and organized over a dozen public rallies to promote it. The rallies drew tens of thousands of spectators and won open endorsements by several parties and abundant media attention.<sup>31</sup> A subsequent government report noted approvingly, "the main rationale for participation was to show to the public that the students are an integral part of society and thus wish to make known their views on important national issues."<sup>32</sup>

At the time, the students' initiative was tremendously well received, and pundits who had previously upbraided undergraduates for drifting into complacency were reassured. Marveled student, columnist, and now historian Cheah Boon Kheng on the eve of disaster, "It was roses, roses all the way. Not a word was raised against the students — either from the Government or the Opposition parties." He concluded that their performance had "secured for the under-

27. Harper 1999, 301–2; Firdaus 1985, 63–64; Rahim 2008.

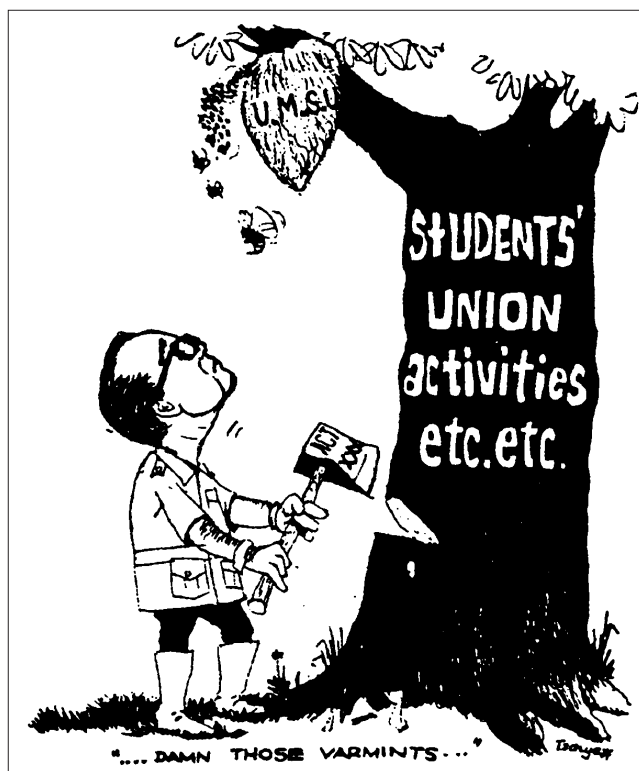
28. Harper 1999, 297–98. Such reflexivity is not uniquely postcolonial, though matters of language and literary tradition are ready spurs. Lee offers a different context: South Korean students aimed not to *represent*, but to *become* workers — even as "the underlying logic of this representation relied on, and became a subtle means of confirming, the existing social division between...the intellectual as socially conscious and ethical, and the worker as the recipient of this act of conscience" (Lee 2007, 243).

29. Tan 1997; Spector 1956, 65; Harper 1999, 163; Short 1975, 431.

30. As elsewhere, 1967–74 marked the heyday of student mobilization in Malaysia. Still the most lucid and significant accounts of that period are by participants, among them Muhammad 1973; Velayudhan 1972; Hassan and Siti Nor 1984; and Kamarazaman 1994. I focus here only on the segment of that activism most clearly enmeshed with institutional politics.

31. *Sunday Mail*, 13 October 1968; *Straits Times*, 15 October 1968, 11–12 April and 1 May 1969; *Malay Mail*, 3 April 1969; Lee and Hermani 1972, 38–41; interviews with Khong Kim Hoong, 9 March 2006 and 23 August 2007, Kuala Lumpur.

32. Abdul Majid 1971, 26.



Electoral activity by Malaysian university students in 1969 and the early 1970s led to their being “rebuked as meddling puppets of communist and opposition forces.” Stringent new legislation was enacted in 1971, the University and University Colleges Act (UUCA), and campus and political authorities warned students to stay out of politics from that point on. (Credit: *Mahasiswa Negara* 10 [5]: 3 December 1971)

graduate an important right — the right to take part in politics.”<sup>33</sup> And yet the elections turned out badly for the ruling Alliance coalition, after which racial tensions erupted in riots in Kuala Lumpur and parliamentary government gave way to nearly two years’ emergency rule. Practically overnight, the tide turned for student activists: now rebuked as meddling puppets of communist and opposition forces, they were slapped with stringent new legislation, 1971’s University and University Colleges Act (UUCA), bolstered by vehement warnings by campus and political authorities to stay out of politics from that point on. Waves of tear gas, arrests, and Special Branch and police intimidation over the next few years, then amendments to the UUCA in 1974, all reinforced the government’s point.

We jump ahead to the 1990s,<sup>34</sup> when electoral politics was in a rut and the ruling Barisan Nasional (National Front, BN) coalition seemed unshakable. Along the margins, though, alongside eternally hopeful opposition parties, new forms of political life had been blossoming since the 1970s and 1980s: massive Islamist and smaller Catholic organizations, and advocacy and service-oriented nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). The campus, however, appeared politically moribund, despite socially engaged religious (especially Muslim and Catholic) activism through the 1980s and the expansion of generally conserva-

33. Cheah 1969.

34. See Weiss [forthcoming] for more on developments in between these episodes.

tive Muslim *dakwah* groups across campuses.<sup>35</sup> Students tended to associate only with co-ethnics, whether in class, hostels, or organizations; independent student media had been silenced (apart from the occasional renegade broadsheet); and posted rules for proper dress and comportment had replaced more provocative campus signage. Although Islamist “green” and pro-government “blue” factions battled it out in shallow campus elections, any victory was pyrrhic and manipulated, given the strength of the administration’s grip. Students readily recited the mantra of their own unsuitability for public voice: they were told, and most believed, that they were gullible, naïve, and should stay focused on their studies and be grateful for their places — especially Malay beneficiaries of affirmative action. (Perhaps not surprisingly, Chinese and Indian students figured disproportionately among those students who *were* engaged, especially beyond particularistic religious organizations.) UM student council president Mohd. Efendi Omar later encapsulated this position perfectly, chiding classmates impatient with the Internal Security Act (ISA): “We are just students for three or four years. Why do you want to get involved in politics outside campus?”<sup>36</sup> In the late 1990s, most students had heard of the massive rallies against poverty and the Vietnam War two decades earlier, and they knew of old-time student leaders like Anwar Ibrahim, by then high in the government ranks, and filmmaker-in-exile Hishammuddin Rais. But all that was in the past, at a time when student protest in the West proved contagious, it was said; students now were different, and could act appropriately Malaysian.

And then in 1998, Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim, former student leader and Islamist NGO activist, was ousted, on trumped-up charges of sodomy and corruption. Under Anwar’s charismatic lead, and then in his name as he fumed in jail, a broad-based movement united NGOs and opposition parties in demands for legal and political reform. Something similar was happening in Indonesia at the same time: spurred by economic crisis and political desperation, the Reformasi movement (a name Malaysians borrowed) forced out Suharto and his corrupt New Order regime. Under the New Order, mass organizations had been strictly controlled, and by far more coercive means than those used in Malaysia. Students were barred from the streets and constrained even on campus, but less so than were other citizens. Largely because the campus was more free than society outside, when Reformasi broke, it was Indonesian students, fueled by a legacy of past kingship and convinced of their own “moral purity” who barged through the university gates to carry it forward.<sup>37</sup>

35. An Arabic term meaning to call or invite, *dakwah* in the Malaysian context refers less to missionary efforts than to efforts to make Muslims better Muslims and Malaysian culture and politics more clearly Islamic (Funston 1985).

36. *Sun*, 19 September 2006. It was famously outspoken prime minister Mahathir Mohamad (1981–2003) who sang this refrain the loudest. For example: “Those who could not make it to university are more appreciative of what the government provides” (*Sun*, 19 February 1999); “Not all students are against the government, but it takes only one bad apple for other apples to go bad if we mix them together” (*Sun*, 15 September 1999); and “What is the purpose of us spending a lot of money if they do not want to study?” (*New Straits Times*, 9 July 2001).

37. Aspinall 2005, 116–45, 221–34; McRae 2001.

Not so in Malaysia. As Reformasi developed there, a vocal subset of students took part in NGO and party-led protests, and pro-opposition student groups surged in campus elections. Muslim students and secular counterparts found common cause — as off campus — in calls for social justice and democracy, including a revived campaign against the UUCA. All the same, by that time, students hardly saw themselves as different. Those undergraduates involved in Reformasi activism — or in prodemocratic, rights-oriented activism subsequently — were as likely to be involved with outside NGOs as with student organizations, and student organizations were at least as keen to find allies off campus as on.<sup>38</sup>

The UUCA and supplementary campus-specific restrictions left students with fewer civil liberties than others: unlike other youths, students could not legally support political parties, join outside organizations, or make statements to the media. Merely attending a political rally was and is enough to get a student suspended under campus disciplinary rules, and some such violations carry criminal penalties. Even the language used to refer to students had changed: for official purposes, they were generally no longer called *mabasiswa*, “undergraduates,” but *pelajar*, just “students,” as in secondary school. When they did take a public stand, students were roundly castigated for ingratitude to the government and society that granted them opportunities and subsidized their studies — as *kacang lupakan kulit*, peas that forget their pod — and derided as clearly too childlike for politics. Not all students believed that discourse; some engaged earnestly, and even spoke in lofty terms of their responsibility as students to take a stand and help the nation. Yet still more engaged not in terms of a collective identity as students, but as, for instance, Muslims aligned with a society-wide dakwah movement. Hence, their mobilization so frequently in conjunction with human rights groups, religious bodies, and opposition parties, and their heavy reliance on the same mild-mannered means as activists in those organizations: petitions to the weak Human Rights Commission or the even weaker king, delegations to the minister of education, lawsuits, complaints about irregularities in campus elections. “Student” as a collective identity had lost its punch.

### Disentangling Student (De)mobilization

As social movements, student movements may be analyzed in much the same way as cognate phenomena. Indeed, part of the canonical literature on social movements grew out of studies of student activism, particularly in the United States of the 1960s–1970s. And yet the specific mechanisms of student activism should not be presumed generalizable, however germane the lessons they of-

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38. In contrast, Chinese and Taiwanese students, for instance, were debilitated by their hesitation to ally with outside groups, fearful either of being sullied by association or of infiltration by less intimately known allies (Wright 2001). Indonesian students faced similar conundrums (for instance, Hadiz 1999, 111–12), though at other times, like South Korean students (Lee 2005), they claimed legitimacy by aligning purposefully with workers and the rural poor (Aspinall 2005, 140–3).

fer. The factors that most clearly set student movements apart are linked with the broader campus ecology — the environment that makes mobilization among students and university staff easier than among other communities. First, central to universities' stature in the public sphere is their function as "free spaces" marked by a degree of latitude from physical and ideological control, sense of internal community but links with the larger public, distance from both formal politics and insular roots, and norms of inclusivity and debate. Shielded by traditions of institutional autonomy and academic freedom, such spaces offer inimitable possibilities for self-definition, development of civic and leadership skills, and mapping new connections across individuals and groups.<sup>39</sup>

Basic structural conditions also matter, for instance the length and quality of time students spend on campus and the scope for autonomous organization. So, for instance, the Malaysian government cut short the standard course of study in the 1990s, from four years to three,<sup>40</sup> and encouraged a nose-to-the-grindstone ethic, both justified in terms of churning out human resources as fast as possible, but with the not-incidental effect of obstructing mobilization. (After studies documented a decline in students' academic performance, as well, under the new system, the change was largely reversed.<sup>41</sup>) And a central part of the crackdown in the early 1970s was the dissolution of all student organizations; the replacements that followed enjoyed far less autonomy.

Seen from another perspective, broader regime and societal characteristics offer subtle but specific indications for when student activism can have an impact, including by triggering follow-on reformist impulses. For instance, a recent exposé on Africa's declining universities laments, "In the 1960s, universities were seen as the incubator of the vanguard that would drive development in the young nations of newly liberated Africa." Since then, "As idealistic postcolonial governments gave way to more cynical and authoritarian ones, universities, with their academic freedoms, democratic tendencies and elitist airs, became a nuisance." Higher education no longer commands the same attention and resources as before — yet to curb admissions would be "political suicide."<sup>42</sup>

Developmental states, whether in Africa, Asia, or elsewhere, are held hostage, to some extent, to the expectations they themselves created. A regime that bases its political legitimacy in large part on economic progress cannot simply shutter the universities, as in Burma, or purge academics, as in Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge. Even just "disappearing" selected unruly students to frighten the rest into quiescence, as in New Order Indonesia, belies developmentalist rhetoric of the nation's forward march, and of the place of these most respected of youths in speeding the nation onward and upward. Meanwhile, semidemocracies in particular risk losing legitimacy either through brute coercion or through excessive tolerance of critical voices. These regimes cannot acknowl-

39. Evans and Boyte 1992.

40. Loh 2005.

41. *Utusan Malaysia*, 24 May, 29 July 1999.

42. Polgreen 2007.

edge a “right” to speak out — and yet that is precisely what the academic ideal claims. Especially those regimes falling in both these categories — developmental and semidemocratic — will search out creative means to suppress collective action that might otherwise impede or impugn state programs. Universities and students are obvious targets. Meanwhile, any assumption of a link between students and activism is premised upon a conception of the former as a *collective* identity as a group steeped in political ideals and predisposed to activism, apart from students’ social or role identity: as people who study. Interrupting or reframing collective identity-building processes may have a real dampening effect — yet at least once the pace of “progress” steps up and higher education becomes normalized, such reframing becomes to some extent merely an artifact of economic development rather than an especially clever state tactic.

The massification of higher education now in train the world over necessarily broadens and diffuses the identity category “student,” as does the increasing assumption that an undergraduate education is merely skills development for the modern economy. In a hegemonically neoliberal era, it is for outcomes, not ideas, that states look to higher education, and higher education is itself a commodity, increasingly privatized and traded in a global market. These trends are most apparent and transformative in the postcolonial, developing world. As Seymour Lipset noted even as student mobilization reached unprecedented levels across the West in the mid-1960s:

Because of the small size of the educated middle class, students in certain underdeveloped countries make up a disproportionately large section of the bearers of public opinion; their various affinities of education, class, and kinship with the actual elites give them an audience which students in more developed countries can seldom attain.<sup>43</sup>

Even though in Thailand as in Malaysia, for example, it was as the number and heterogeneity of universities and their students soared in the 1960s and 1970s that student activism crested,<sup>44</sup> the ranks of the educated were still quite small. Yet especially with the benefit of greater hindsight, postcolonial students’ status seems inherently tenuous, as the process of nation-building introduces inevitable revaluations of the currency of cultural capital.<sup>45</sup> Shifts in language of instruction in Malaysia, for instance, from English to Malay, as well as nationalization of curricula, accompanied the broader elevation of local, then specifically ethnic Malay and Muslim, culture in society. Intellectuals may have ceded status as arbiters of “taste” and cultural production to politicians in the process, though the latter helped speed matters along.

Politicians in such states who themselves awakened happily to politics as impassioned students can now rather plausibly argue that students today are dif-

43. Lipset 1967b, 6.

44. In the period 1961–72, Thailand launched four new universities (one, Ramakhamhaeng, the country’s first “open university”), two graduate schools, and an enlarged technical institute. University enrollment more than doubled just between 1965 and 1974. The number of vocational and technical students in Thailand likewise doubled between 1965 and 1970, while secondary enrollment tripled across Thailand between 1965 and 1975 (Griffiths 1996, 84–85).

45. In particular, Bourdieu 1984.

ferent: less select a group, and with less a sense of their own elite stature and voice. The pervasive, infantilizing rhetoric surrounding contemporary students is just a particularly crass reinforcement of the changing relationship of students to society. Rather than being legitimated by an exalted identity, undergraduates as a whole are presumed by their elders in government and society, ever more of whom are at least equally well educated, to lack the credentials or experience to speak as adults. In contrast, the attempted hermetic insulation of students from society — for instance, in New Order Indonesia or China of the late 1980s, as in Malaysia in earlier years — may perversely reinforce the elevated position of the campus: students and lecturers have access to texts, concepts, and international perspectives with which the general public is not trusted. The confinement of their engagement to within campus grounds acknowledges how dangerous those ideas and opinions could be if allowed to run rampant. In other words, none of these processes is fully automatic: specific policy choices directly affect the pace and direction of shifts in students' self-understanding and stature.

Regardless, student movements still differ in environmental and structural characteristics from other social movements, from the strata of political opportunities at play to the transnational character of protest cycles attributed to “students” writ large. Perhaps the most important distinction, though, rests in the more normative, intangible dimensions of student activism: its implications for the generation and circulation of ideas, its potential to counter official narratives and ideologies, its connection with intellectualism, and its catalytic power, all of which clarify why curtailment of campus protest specifically has such extraordinary ramifications. Universities — especially national or flagship universities — hold special status. They are prestige institutions, both for those attending and for the polities in which they reside. They are, or have the potential to be, truly inclusive, cutting across bounds of race, religion, geography, and even class in a way no other institution may be able. Ideally, they enjoy a tradition of autonomy: even if under the aegis of the state as public institutions, universities claim extra latitude in the name of academic freedom. Hence, regardless of the actual content of student activists' concerns, these are amplified by the social, and specifically intellectual, position of the claimants, particularly when education levels overall remain relatively low. Indeed, university affiliation confers a form of at least quasi-class status, apparent in undergraduates' interactions with students at other levels — evident, for instance, in a rift that developed between university and vocational students in Thailand in the mid-1970s,<sup>46</sup> the chasm between secondary and tertiary students in late colonial Singapore,<sup>47</sup> or the powerful novelty of Korean undergraduates' leaving school to foment revolution in factories.<sup>48</sup> It is because of this status that the discursive diminution of Malaysian undergraduates matters so much.

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46. Griffiths 1996.

47. Yet see Huang 2008, 199–203: he contests this commonly accepted binary.

48. Lee 2005.



"...in Burma, it was the regime's assault that crystallized and publicized the self-sacrificing bravery of Burmese students...." Pictured here, Burmese student demonstrators cheer as they shout antigovernment slogans on a victory ride at Victoria Point, near the Thai-Burmese border, 26 August 1988, following protests by hundreds of thousands of demonstrators in downtown Rangoon demanding democracy. (Credit: AP)

As Vince Boudreau, Teresa Wright, and others describe,<sup>49</sup> repression changes the dynamics of mobilization. Student activism in illiberal states, from moderately democratic to not at all so, is qualitatively different from elsewhere, particularly in terms of the weight of specific aspects of mobilization. Where physical organization is curtailed, symbolic mobilization — centered around ideas, images, and legacies — may be pivotal. In late-1980s' China, for instance, explains George Crane,

The tasks of interpreting political opportunities, understanding cultural codes, defining a collective identity, and plotting movement strategy had to be accomplished quickly and effectively because the micromobilizational context did not afford the organizational base or the private space necessary for deliberate contemplation.<sup>50</sup>

Unable to express themselves freely as they worked to construct a collective identity, students represented their movement's moral purity, selflessness, and sincerity through heavily laden, but concise, legible, and hard-to-suppress symbols. Repression then played into the movement's self-definition, by exaggerating the contrast between defenseless students and bullying state.<sup>51</sup> In fact, Crane argues, such a symbolic challenge allowed long-term movement mainte-

49. Boudreau 2004; Wright 2001.

50. Crane 1994, 400.

51. *Ibid.*, 401–3.

Thai student demonstrators are pictured here on 14 October 1973 in front of the area that now features a monument to those who were killed in the state violence that followed the protests. "The martyrs made in the regime's last-ditch assault are memorialized not just in a striking public monument in downtown Bangkok, but in the collective identity of student and faculty protests since." (Courtesy: Prajak Kongkirati)



nance by revealing the workings of power, ensuring that the quashed movement "left in its wake a prophecy of political possibilities."<sup>52</sup> Likewise in Burma, it was the regime's assault that crystallized and publicized the self-sacrificing bravery of Burmese students, symbolized by the trope "8888." That known history of martyrdom lends both solidarity and credence — reinvoked, for instance, with protests (again, brutally suppressed) at the twentieth anniversary of the 1988 protests.<sup>53</sup>

Where the state is less crassly brutal, official ambivalence toward suppression especially of student movements lends them unique efficacy, given the meaning with which their participants are vested and how galvanizing the very idea of a crackdown might be. For instance, Thai politics of the early 1970s, Frank Darling suggests,

was not characterized by a rigid and intense repression of students and other political opponents as in South Korea, South Vietnam, Cambodia, Indonesia, and the Philippines. And it was in this uniquely bifurcated environment of a highly centralized executive authority and a tolerance of limited overt dissension that Thai students exerted a major impact on political change.<sup>54</sup>

Apart from a spate of activism in the mid-1950s, Thai students' political mobilization only really began in 1972, starting small, but quickly escalating.<sup>55</sup> Jeffrey Race describes the tumult of October 1973, when student-led protests brought down the military regime, as "appropriately Thai: years upon years of peaceful, if cynical, toleration abruptly terminated by a few days of stunning violence."<sup>56</sup> The martyrs made in the regime's last-ditch assault are memorialized not just in a striking public monument in downtown Bangkok, but in the collective identity of student and faculty protests since. Likewise in Japan, the state's lashing out against leftist dissidents in the late 1960s re-channeled, but failed to quash,

52. Ibid., 410.

53. Consider, for instance, the language of a statement endorsed by over fifty Burmese and sympathetic organizations, circulated in advance of the latter protests: see Joint Statement 2008.

54. Darling 1974, 11.

55. Race 1974, 196–7.

56. Ibid., 197.



mobilization. Continued symbolic resistance, broadly supported appeals to civil liberties and democratic values, and aversion to the state's harsh tactics kept the movement alive, especially with the entrée of a small cohort of late arrivals more inured to aggression. In new arenas of courts and prisons, the underground, and exile, "activists were able to continue their resistance, recruit new participants, and sustain their own activity and identity based on repression long after the main New Left protest cycle had ended in the early 1970s."<sup>57</sup>

### Intellectual Containment

How a state cracks down on student protest offers real insight into dynamics of mobilization and containment. Student activists differ from others in the nature of the collective identity they adopt, especially the moral and intellectual value ascribed to it; in the breadth of issues they may champion, including matters with no obvious connection to their own interests and position; and in the location of their mobilization, which takes advantage of the spatial and communicative dimensions of the campus. It is the first of these dimensions that catalyzes the others: students are more or less generally *expected* to take a stand, and respected for doing so by dint of their status as students rather than on the basis of particular knowledge or experience.<sup>58</sup> The state may undercut those normative

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57. Zwerman and Steinhoff 2005, 95.

58. Said argues much the same status for intellectuals, with whom students are often grouped: intellectuals represent and articulate troublesome perspectives — their role "is publicly to raise

presumptions, taking steps to de-couple public forums and discussions at the university from politics and make student mobilization seem not inevitable and right, but presumptuous and ill advised. By doing so, it can effectively short-circuit student mobilization, at minimal short-term political cost. That is what the Malaysian state has done — a clear example of what I call intellectual containment. The key period for such efforts in Malaysia was the 1970s, before the memories of past contentious episodes had begun to fade, and before the proportion of students continuing to university, especially middle-class Malays, had truly soared. Eventually, a natural process of diminution of the symbolic resonance of “student” has taken root in Malaysia as elsewhere with the massification, commodification, and cheapening of university education, particularly when coupled with normalization and professionalization of a political order previously more in flux. Even so, themes of anxious dissuasion return whenever leaders have cause to fear a resurgence of angry and entitled student protest. The demobilization of students’ collective potential has sped up via generic economic processes, but as experiences in neighboring states attest, the latter forces were not initially, and are still not completely, to blame.

Inasmuch as it is a known legacy of past activism and valor that creates and bolsters identity claims by current protesters, erasing or concealing that history complicates mobilization and validation via the shortcut of invocation. Craig Calhoun describes Chinese students in the 1980s as follows:

To be a student — an intellectual-in-the-making — was not a casually adopted role; it was a matter of basic personal identity. It had resonances with images of intellectuals going back thousands of years in Chinese history, and it was also manifest in the way people spoke, dressed, and comported themselves.<sup>59</sup>

By obscuring the history of student (and other, especially left-wing) activism, Malaysian authorities have significantly stymied mobilization: students now are told that it would be out of character for Malaysian students to engage politically. Most have no evidence to the contrary, and thus no reason not to believe and internalize that mantra — which carries over into post-graduation life, as well.

Central to this project of erasure and atomization is the general degradation of facilitating aspects of campus ecology. Explains Dingxin Zhao, “other factors being equal, the mobilizing potential of a population will be different if the same population is spatially arranged in even a slightly different way.”<sup>60</sup> Such efforts may be deliberate and obvious. Especially at public institutions, the state can readily disrupt spatial dimensions of mobilization. Sites for mingling and interaction, some of them with added symbolic or historical value, like a much-vaunted Speakers’ Corner launched at UM in the 1960s, have been obliterated, removing even visual reminders of past foibles, let alone easy nodal points for

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embarrassing questions, to confront orthodoxy and dogma (rather than produce them.” (Said 1994, 11).

59. Calhoun 1994, 111.

60. Zhao 1998, 1519.

congregation. New campuses in both Malaysia and Singapore have been designed without central gathering places, with dispersed faculties and dorms, and with sparse, even if sprawling, student centers and other facilities. Nearby Burma offers an even more stark example: General Ne Win dynamited the iconic student union building at Rangoon University (with an untold number of student activists padlocked inside) in 1962.<sup>61</sup> That once-acclaimed university is now a moribund graduate-only degree mill; undergraduates have been shunted off to remote, and equally uninspiring, institutions.

The dissolution or enervation of once-active and critical student media plays a particularly key role in the disruption both of campus ecology and of perceptions of student-hood as a global and heroic identity. Lack of such media complicates not only communications generally and transmission of local activist history, but also the spreading of stories of student movements elsewhere (however inflated). In terms of mechanisms of contentious politics,<sup>62</sup> curtailment of student media interferes with framing and brokerage: both the interpretation of the position and function of students in such a way as to stimulate identity-building and collective action and the linking together of students and their organizations to make mobilization feasible. Experience at UM exemplifies such tactics: previously lively student media, including everything from policy proposals to ideological treatises to international student news, have been substantially pared back and censored since the mid-1970s. Meanwhile, the nature of academe is such that — as Gramsci suggested — intellectuals reproduce their own erasure through their internalization of apolitical mandates and warnings against activism, and through their teaching, or at least not questioning, a sanitized version of events.<sup>63</sup> The historical narrative has not only been rewritten, but effectively transmitted to exclude the history and mythos of student activism from prevailing popular consciousness.

And yet this rewriting calls into question the place not just of students but of the universities they occupy. There is a long-term cost. The prolific public angst and hand-wringing when a nation's universities fall in the rankings — as has been the case in Malaysia<sup>64</sup> — reflects not just what that decline means in terms of training and human resources but what universities represent more broadly. Their purpose is *not* just to provide pragmatic, cost-effective teaching and practical research, but to showcase the nation's intellectual capacity and promise, and to nurture ideas and talents that help the nation progress. As Benedict Anderson wrote of Indonesian students, still in the late 1990s, "the peculiar political

61. Fischer 1963, 39; Boudreau 2004, 6.

62. McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001; Tilly and Tarrow 2007.

63. While Gramsci saw in particular intellectuals the seeds for counterhegemonic mobilization and revolution, he insisted that most, allied to the ruling class, help the latter sustain its hegemony (Baud and Rutten 2004a, 3–4). On the other hand, students are likely to be more akin to Gramscian "popular intellectuals" than are fellow "modern intellectuals," given their role as "populist activists" (Ibid., 12).

64. UM's precipitous (and repeated) plunge in the *Times Higher Education Supplement* (THES) listing of top world institutions compelled Vice Chancellor Rafiah Salim to drop the term "premier" from the university's new mission statement. *Malaysiakini*, 6 October 2006; see also Loh 2005.

power of students lies in their social position as symbols of the nation's future."<sup>65</sup> Malaysian students are asked to be mute and uncritical, and are structurally conditioned to accede. Alas, the nation looks bad on the global stage and graduates are unemployable<sup>66</sup> when academic approaches and institutions are so stifling. Realization of that dilemma has stirred calls for a return to teaching critical thinking and innovation in Singapore and Malaysia alike, but with mixed results. Market forces have helped spur pedagogical improvements (arguably especially in Singapore), and yet curricula and the broader school experience, including the possibility of full-on creativity and dissent, remain constrained.<sup>67</sup>

Changes to the intellectual — as opposed to merely physical or institutional — environment of the campus may thus have multilayered impacts. Malaysian scholar-activist Chandra Muzaffar concurs, "the decline of university autonomy and academic freedom is a much bigger problem — related to the entire social structure and the developmental process. It cannot be solved from within the campus."<sup>68</sup> Student movements, including the conditions that make them more or less likely, not only require a somewhat different analytical lens than other movements, but carry deeper implications for political development than the straightforward effects of that activism. Malaysian (and Singaporean) students have been as energetic and respected as students elsewhere in the past. How their momentum and reception fell so far and so fast against a backdrop of nation-building, political institutionalization, and economic maturation both reflects and shapes political development, with concrete implications for Malaysian politics and society. Understanding these processes — what makes student movements important, unique, and vulnerable — offers an analytical lever with which to disentangle clearly cognate, but equally murky, processes across Southeast Asia and the wider postcolonial world.

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65. Anderson 1999, 6.

66. Indeed, while graduate unemployment was hardly a new phenomenon (Haslina 2002), it has reached epidemic proportions: days after the revelation of Malaysian universities' plunge in the 2005 *THE* rankings, a government survey counted nearly 60,000 unemployed Malaysian graduates, 81 percent of them from public universities (*Malaysiakini*, 5 November 2005). Specified differently: the following July, Malaysia's Human Resources Ministry revealed that 70 percent of graduates of public institutions of higher learning were unemployed (*Sun*, 3 July 2006).

67. For instance, on Singapore: Tan and Gopinathan 2000.

68. Chandra 1986, 155.

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