

## Will There Be Malaysia Spring? A Comparative Assessment on Social Movements

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### ABSTRACT

Arab Spring was within the premonition because the Middle-east had been a place of contestation since the birth of Judaism and Christianity. Arab Spring caught the attention of the world when the mass movements trumpeting the voice calling for equal rights led to the downfall of dictators in several countries. These countries are labelled as Muslim countries which include Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Syria, Yemen, Bahrain, Morocco, Jordan and Oman. Some of them experienced less volatile changes. The question is does Malaysia that labelled as a Muslim country will experience such surged by the masses like the Arab spring or will there be Malaysia spring? This paper examines this possibility through several factors such as socio-economic position, the role of the state, history and social structure, and the media in influencing the political awareness of the masses. Although neighbouring countries such as Indonesia, the Philippines and Thailand appear to have similar uprising, the results of mass movement in those countries have brought about different results. The concept of hegemony and political awareness are explained in this study. The findings indicate that there is a slim possibility of Malaysia spring due to the aforementioned factors. This study is descriptive and interpretive in nature and only the secondary data are used for the conceptual analysis.

**Keywords:** *Social movement, democracy, multi-ethnic, development, hegemony*

### INTRODUCTION

This article attempts to discuss reasons for Malaysia which composes of significant influence of Islamic value, sizeable number of Muslim population, and a competing multiethnic society has been able to avoid a few possible uprising mass movements that could lead to regime change in a chaotic manner. Comparing the Arab Spring to the possibility of Malaysia Spring is unlikely at par, but the attempt is more of academic discourses rise from a few conferences questioning the possibility of Malaysian society turning into Arab Spring. The Middle-East can never be compared to Malaysia in terms of society, value, culture, development, believes, etc. This article emphasizes that factors such as social structure and mobility, economic development, state authorities and enforcement, media power and hegemonic superstructure, and external influence deter the possibility of Malaysia Spring. Although democracy in principle is assumed to be the answer for many authoritarian

regimes, the contestation towards the practice of democracy in the Third World validates the influence of local contexts that simply shapes democracy in its own form, be it in Malaysia or the Middle-east.

Democracy is contested for its popular power rotation or sharing, people's participation, champion of freedom and market liberalism. Democracy is being challenged in a different context of society and political realm. Democracy has been mocked to export nationalism and ethnic hatred around the world through market liberalism that endorses minority's prosperity and wealth, while the majority indigenous suffered of such market control and monopoly (Chua, 2003). Democracy has been questioned of its election element that allows people's participation, yet it creates a path for regime to maintain its status quo through gerrymandering, postal votes, phantom voters, etc. (Keane, 2011). Additionally, democracy that encourages globalization and market liberalization further enriches the advanced countries while the third world countries suffer from over utilization of resources and laborers (O'Brien et al., 2000; Kartini, 2014).

Fukuyama (2014) argues that a connection exists between prosperity and democracy, but he does not agree that one leads automatically to the other. He argues that a successful liberal democracy requires a combination of three essential elements such as the state, rule of law, and accountability. The central authorities must be able to cross exam, check and balance as to ensure as the system is transparent by the will of the people. Balance among these elements are crucial, but too many check and balance will paralyze the system. Fukuyama further highlights that the timing factor is also important. For example, in the United States of America (USA), it experienced democracy before it had a modern state, resulting in a power vacuum at the top, which allowed patronage and corruption to thrive. In fact, in the USA, the institutions became powerful and captured by private interests that created difficulty for democratic majorities to assert their control.

Acemoglu and Robinson (2012) argue that the reasons for poor countries like Egypt, Tunisia, and Zimbabwe remain poor despite the revolution they had experienced as compared to France, England, and the United States are due to reproduction of irresponsible government. In other words, the interpretation of poverty and the fail of a nation are due to the pattern of reproduction of ill elites that govern the nation. The poor countries remain poor because their citizens overthrew the elites who controlled power and replaced them with other new elites that are disinterested in achieving prosperity for the citizens, thus the basic structure of society fail to change and make the nation remain poor. Although these failed nations did experience revolution or reformation, such changes were unable to transform the fundamental structure of society. The new elites that come to power are more interested in using their power to create as well as to accumulate great wealth for their own possession and status quo.

Furthermore, the results of economic development over the years managed to create a new middle class in the Middle-east with a large number of university graduates that are critical and motivated to improve their living conditions through employment, yet they are facing regime corruption and deprivation. As the beneficiary of the country, they have higher expectation than their parents' generation, thus the Arab Spring is an inevitable product of economic development, political awareness, and social media influences. However, such conditions vary towards Malaysia although the report from the corruption index of 2015 ranked Malaysia at number fifty four out of one hundred sixty eight countries in the world (Corruption Perception Index, 2015).

## METHODOLOGY AND OBJECTIVE

This article is an exploratory research and only secondary data is used to build comprehensive arguments. A few examples are highlighted to connect the reasons and factors for a country with different history, multiethnic society, unique social structure and system may lead to a different form of democracy in practice. Furthermore, factors such as social structure and ethnicity, poverty, social mobility, state authorities and enforcement, media and hegemony, and external influence induce variation to the way Malaysians' respond to social movement or uprising. Malaysia has shown a feasible example of a country who practices authoritative democracy that helps the country to improve its social cohesion while maintaining its unity in diversity.

## COMPARATIVE DISCUSSIONS

### *The Middle-East: Regime and Social Distress*

The mass movement in the middle-east started in Tunisia with the tragedy of a young man named Bouazizi who burnt himself as a protest over his cart being confiscated by the local authority. The cart was his life and he was depending on the cart to sell fruits and local foods. His suicide attempt was fatal, he suffered severe burns and died the following day. Such incident spread like wild fire and struck societies in the Middle-east as a wakeup call to mirror their insufficiency. People started to gather and rally on the street chanting for regime changed and such mass movement turned into revolution in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Syria. One by one the old regime was replaced including, Sultan Zainal Abidin of Tunisia, Hosni Mubarak in Egypt, Muammar Gaddafi in Libya, and Syria is still facing a violent civil war. The impact is profound to most middle-east countries and the hope for a new beginning blooms.

Many western observers viewed this positive change as a good sign for democracy in middle-east. The Arab world with a strong traditional society and Islam as the religion raise the question whether or not such combination can host democracy. The traditional rule combined with authoritarian regime (king, emir, sultan) and severe poverty scattered in the middle east are the worst instances for democracy. The mass movements demanded for freedom, democracy, election, human rights, and justice was robust and coined the term Arab Spring to address this positive change. The Arab Spring boosts a meaning of blossoming flowers in Spring season after a long blistering cold winter. The colorful and mesmerizing Spring is used to depict the situation in the Arabian nations that are bitter, dried, and awkward, which are absent of all democratic values. The good progress in the Middle-east is a new hope for many democratic practices to see the region is finally able to embrace a peaceful democratic government that promotes better living conditions for all. Democracy means peace, modern, and progressive development in both dimensions of economy and politics.

In the history of world revolution, the transition from feudalism to democracy has never been easy or pain free. The French Revolution, Russian, Iran, China, and the United States -- each mapped a long marched of misery, struggles and deaths. The suffering stages did not end abruptly, but the society endured many years of downturn before they were fully transformed into either democratic or communist society. These two ideologies further stretched the world into an era of cold war. However, the capitalist societies are relatively developed and showed a better living conditions than the communist society. Moore (1966)

and Lappe (2006) argue that democracy comes with a high price, and the revolution to achieve democracy is absolutely painful.

### *World transformation and the Southeast Asia*

The Islamic civilization was far ahead in terms of science and development when the whole Europe was still in the dark ages before the renaissance began. The enlightenment period through secularization process wheeled the West into modern states but most countries in the Middle-east were stuck with the feudal system for centuries. The world renowned revolution was common to cite the French revolution in 1789 as the game changer to the feudal system in the West that shook France to the core. The descriptions of guillotine marked the end of the feudal system though aristocrats retained their influence in a subtle manner. It took more than another century for the famous Bolshevik revolution to emerge in 1917. Huntington (1995) in the Third Wave reminded us that in the late twentieth century, the first wave was the downfall of the monarch system in most part of the world wheeled by the masses. However, when the West was moving ahead with new changes to their system of government and governance, the Middle-east became stagnant and was left behind in many contexts. The feudal regimes in Middle-east turned into dictators including Saddam Hussein, Muammar Gaddafi, and Hosni Mubarak.

The second wave further witnessed the masses movements to fight the colonials in the era of 1940s and 1950s including Indonesia against Holland, India with the Satyagraha approach against the British, Cambodia against France. While Malaya faced the same colonial power, the bargaining and negotiation method allowed Malaya to declare its independence without a bloody war. The rise of peoples' power to fight for independence did not end here. After the colonials were gone, some countries in the 1980s faced other struggles of removing dictators such as Marcos in the Philippines. The peoples' power led by Corazon Aquino were able to overthrow Marcos's twenty years administration. Marcos, known for his close allied to the USA government was no longer immune from the peoples' power. The same ill-fated conditions spread to East Europe that suffered from economic recession especially the removal of Nicolae Ceausescu in Romania 1989, the cracked down of the Berlin wall in 1989 - a symbol that divided democracy and communism, and the collapsed of the Soviet Union in 1990s was the climax of weakening communism. The communist's power was nailed down by the peoples' power that demanded for democracy – a demand for a better life.

The peoples' power became contagious, spreading the wind of change uncontrollably. The Soviet Union claimed to be the world superpower was unable to contain the dissolution of its states including countries that declared independence from Soviet such as Estonia, Lithuania, Armenia, Georgia, Ukraine, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan, etc. The world was astonished to hear new countries' name and profile that were missing from the world map. Similar to Czechoslovakia that separated from Czech Republic and Slovakia, Yugoslavia was at its worst, the ethnic cleansing cum genocide ways of approaching separation later produced Serbia, Bosnia Herzegovina, Croatia, Macedonia, Montenegro, and Kosovo. The end of cold war and the downfall of communist blocs were the Third wave that led the globe to the new world order sensitive to human rights and environmentalism.

In Southeast Asia, the wind of change was a bit calm. Although the downfall of Marcos in the Philippines 1986 was due to a strong demand from the people to unravel Marcos's corruptions, Indonesia experienced reformation slightly over a decade later. The

reformation movements by the people were intense in 1997-1998. The financial crisis that hit Southeast Asia further aggravated into massive demonstrations especially when the value of Indonesian's Rupiah exchange rate to the US dollar decreased severely. Additionally, issues on poverty, unemployment, huge income gap, and poor health care provision accelerated the unrest feelings amongst people. During the chaotic transformation, cases such as looting, physical abusing, and arson were rampant and Chinese-Indonesians were victimized by indigenous communities, blaming them for their advantages and fortune gained during the Suharto's era. The tenacity of the people forced the high rank military General Prabowo to urge President Suharto to step down and he did. In May 1998, marked a political transition that ended Suharto's thirty two years of reign in Indonesia.

Meanwhile, in the case of Thailand, the Thai monarch was removed from absolute power to constitutional power bearing just the symbol of Thai people. The revolution in 1932 made Thailand vulnerable to military coup de tat to any political conflict until the present. Thailand's political legitimization is still dependent on a strong military power to endorse balance among competing politicians. The monarch has always been in favor of the military. Along the year of 2000s, the peoples' movements through yellow shirt demonstrators were tenacious to remove Thaksin as the Prime Minister. The yellow shirt groups marched with an attempt to withdraw Thaksin from office. The military supported the yellow shirt groups and took Thaksin's office while he was abroad. On the contrary the massive yellow shirt protestors were opposed by the group of red shirts supporters. The latter were Thaksin's supporters urging the former to allow Thaksin to return to Thailand and continue to serve as the Prime Minister. Despite the scandal hovering Thaksin Shinawatra, his sister Yingluck Shinawatra was able to win the election and held the office from year 2011-2014 (The Diplomat, 2015). The Shinawatras were running out of luck and faced possible detention for embezzlement. Thailand at present is ruled by Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha, a retired army officer from the military political party. Such moving scenarios of protest from the masses in the Philippines, Indonesia and Thailand show that political consciousness is growing in Southeast Asia. Even in Myanmar and Cambodia, they are not excluded from such political conscious.

#### MALAYSIA SPRING?

With all the wave and transformation, does Malaysia immune from such contagious political mass movement? The world has changed, the neighboring countries like Thailand, Indonesia, and the Philippines also have shown their cards, but Malaysia is still displaying the same political scenario. Historically, the people movement existed way back in 1946 when the British decided to introduce the Malayan Union which jeopardized the Malay monarchs and indigenous rights. A massive protest from the indigenous community was held against the British and finally urged the British to withdraw the idea of Malayan Union. Fernando (2012) argues that after Malayan Union (MU) was resolved following the massive protest, the 1948 Federation of Malaya Agreement was designed to replace it. The AMCJA responded with disconsolate reaction and held a demonstration to showcase the lack of consultation with the non-Malay communities in the negotiation of constitutional changes. The dissatisfaction continued to flame and the Japanese occupation further challenged the inter-communal relations. The immediate post war approach to reduce the racial tension introduced by Senior British Administrators particularly the Commissioner-General for

Southeast Asia, Malcolm MacDonald was to create confidential discussions to resolve outstanding issues congenially and to improve the tension relations among communities.

This effort led to the establishment of the Communities Liaison Committee (CLC) in early 1949. The CLC was a potent attempt by the British to promote inter-elite cooperation that ramified into multiracial political alliance in Malayan politics. The deliberation of CLC was a mean to achieve national consensus and national building. Although CLC was an informal body, many agreements reached at CLC meetings were adopted by the government. Furthermore, CLC's records indicated that the body also served as a useful platform for the colonial administration as a trial platform to test new ideas and potential policies (Fernando, 2012). On a broader dimension, the CLC handed over a pragmatic framework for elite politics inter-ethnic bargaining and negotiating in private that influenced the emergence of consociation politics in Malaysia. Such formation of alliance could be a fundamental formula for diverse political parties in multiethnic society in Malaysia (Kartini et al. 2013).

A diverse ethnic composition was created by the British from the beginning of the nineteenth century (1800s). The British were responsible for bringing in immigrants from China and India to work in the mines and plantations (Kartini et al. 2012). The gradual influx of immigrants was accepted by the Malays with welcome, but the interactions among the groups only occurred when they met at the markets for trading purposes; generally the groups did not intermingle socially. Consequently, segmented groups formed around ethnic lines. For instance, the Malays were likely to work as peasants that lived mostly in the rural areas; the Chinese were businessmen, traders, and miners that populated the urban areas; the Indians were laborers, supervisors, as well as professionals that occupied both rural and urban areas.

These divisional activities along ethnic lines led to ethnic riot in 1969. Such riot was intense in Kuala Lumpur, but also scattered in other states. Jomo (1986) argues that this riot was the result of unprogressive and unequal economic distribution among ethnic groups. The tragedy happened in Kuala Lumpur and nearby areas, resulting in 409 injuries and 196 deaths (Milne and Mauzy, 1986). This ethnic riot left a dark scar on Malaysian history. As a result, efforts are now consistently designed to improve the delicate relationship among ethnic groups through national integration policy within politics, social and economy contexts.

Although the social movement in Malaysia began in 1946 after a massive protest on the proposal of Malayan Union, the violence ethnic riot took place in 1969, in a different era of post independent that was due to disappointment on economic achievement along the division of ethnic lines. These two events were separated by gaps of years, contexts, and differed in reasons and factors. Other mass protests occurred in the 1990s and 2000s, both were big in scale but they were relatively benign. In the late 1990s the world witnessed demands for reformation led by Anwar Ibrahim and numbers of activists. Series of demonstration were held demanding for a transparent and just government, and the alternative medias showing people chanting and fought through enforcement authorities for their relentless support for Anwar Ibrahim. The support and rally were intense that showcases in a few general elections' results of 2008 and 2013. However, the movements were getting exhausted after Anwar Ibrahim was sentenced for five years in prison for his sodomy conviction after his appeal for royal pardon was rejected in 2015 (BBC News, 2015).

Another mass demonstration occurred on English Language issue applied in Mathematics and Science education (PPSMI). The wave of mass demonstration was

becoming a trend in Malaysia and other huge mass protest in most rural areas and big cities were held after the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> general election. Thus, there is a question here, why the social movement in the form of mass protests in Malaysia are not resulted in a regime change as her neighboring countries had experienced including Thailand, Indonesia, and the Philippines?

If we compared the elements that formed the social movements in Thailand, Indonesia and the Philippines, then the similarities included the people, size, consecutive series of demonstration, strategic locations for demonstration, issues of corruption, demand for integrity and accountability, blocks of human shield fought with enforcement authority for good governance, and they suffered from the gush of water cannon, lachrymator gas or tear gas, got beaten up, etc. However, none of these form of street demonstrations in Malaysia successfully changed the regime. Unlike Thailand, Indonesia and the Philippines, such demonstrations reached the climax with a regime changed. Reasons for such anti-climax to mass demonstration in Malaysia are social structure and ethnicity, the poverty rate, social mobility, law enforcement authorities, media hegemony, and external influence.

#### FACTORS and REASONS

##### i. *Social Structure and Ethnicity*

Primordial sentiment and ethnic division is the core element in Malaysia's socio-political contexts. A plural society automatically divides its social context into multi culture, multilingual, and multi religious. It is a clear cut differences. The history of immigrants and the colonial language that categorized the ethnics are still the bitter factors that divide the society even farther. The indigenous are still growling on this matter and such sentiment creates a difficult challenge for the state to manage integrity. Although many refer to Malaysia as being successful in managing its ethnic diversity, an ethnic identification remains intact (Shamsul 2009; Kartini et al. 2013).

The authority defined appears on individual identification card (MyKad), birth certificate, school registration, voters' registration, etc. proved that colonial knowledge excelled in maintaining ethnic categorization until present. Critics have called for such categorization to be improved by adding more categories to recognize other indigenous groups in Sabah and Sarawak. While other critics have called for such categorization to be removed for good as a way as to show good will, trust and equality.

Malaysia has enjoyed her independence for more than fifty years, but the structural opposition of ethnic differentiation is hard to be removed and further the gap of national integrity mission. The nation building still retains its issues in its vicious ethnic cycle including language, religion, culture, which microscopically defined within the rights to change religion, custody battle for children of inter-racial marriage, the sound of adzan during prayers time, swine, improper location of temple, stereotype, state centric [a state concentrated perception that views other states are weak]. These factors make the social movement in Malaysia divided along ethnic profile and interests. Such diversity disunites a solid social movement to be formed and further separate the multiethnic society from its political realm.

Furthermore, the political parties and NGOs continue to manipulate the ethnic sentiment and determine to be the champion for their own ethnic at the expense of other ethnics' interest (Nidzam & Zaini, 2009). It is a zero sum games to most chauvinist groups, and in this twenty first century, the increasing growth of such groups is disturbing. Ethnic

sentiment is clinched to ethnic group and such issues catch the ethnic groups' intentions and provocative especially to community that are literally uneducated. Most political leaders play the ethnic sentiments to gauge support from voters though such shallow ideas are criticized of being racist. By far, political leaders use ethnic issues as a leverage to ensure ethnic division will enhance their chances to maintain their victory in the election. Such method seems to blend well with rural dwellers, while urban voters tend to have a different opinion towards profiling ethnicities within politics.

Similar cases can be found in a mass movement or demonstration. Issue and context determine ethnic participation in the demonstration. The Bersih 1 and 2 demonstrations proved to have a mix of all ethnics in the mass movements, however the Bersih 4 claimed to attract 90% ethnic Chinese in the mass protest against corruption and the demand for good governance. The former Bersih were geared by NGOs especially Mrs. Ambiga with a few opposition leaders and the latter was wheeled by the opposition leaders, named Marina Chin from DAP. Two different managers induced a different impact to such mass movements. Additionally, the broke up between PAS and Pakatan Rakyat discouraged the Malays to be part of the Bersih 4. Therefore, mass movements in Malaysia are also dependent on the type of cases. For instance, if the case is universal such as anti-corruption, money politics, and demands for good governance than most ethnics will voluntarily join the mass demonstration. But, if the case is specific such as language or religion, the ethnics divide. The PPSMI (Pengajaran dan Pembelajaran Sains dan Matematik Dalam Bahasa Inggeris) case was a clear example to measure ethnic division in their decision making on teaching Math and Science subjects in English over Bahasa Melayu (Kartini et al. 2013).

In another example, the New Order of 1998 in Indonesia, although Indonesia had been referred to as a successful country for nation building through assimilation, the violent anarchy simply destroyed the claim. The Chinese were victimized by the indigenous – abused, rape, homicides were rampant and targeted. The Pancasila was completely crumpled while the race sentiment emerged. Thus, ethnicities are socially constructed and could never hide the real hatred. The impact of social construction processes through assimilation are not permanent when the root is primordially distinctive. The huge economic gaps between the wealthy minority and the poor majority became a fire of hatred that incarcerated all the efforts for unity through assimilation (Najmuddin et al, 2015). In other words, economic gaps due to high poverty and unemployment rate will most likely lead to ethnic riots.

#### *ii. The Vicious Cycle of Poverty*

Relative examples of poverty and unemployment rate are relevant to develop an argument that such higher disadvantage condition appear in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Indonesia and the Philippines as compared to Japan, Switzerland and Australia. Due to such pervasive economic gap, the former countries are likely to have frequent commotions than the latter. Lipset (1959) in his *Social Requisite for Democracy* argues that the prerequisite for democracy include economic prosperity, infrastructure blooming, political literacy, and social mobility is thriving. If none of these criteria exist, the likelihood of chaos is high. Thus poverty becomes the vicious cycle that detains poor people from moving forward and as the cycle expands, the number increases, and the spark for conflict is easily heated without major effort to ignite it. This was relevant in assessing the incident in Tunisia as the source of Arab Spring.



Bouazizi was a graduate from a local university in Tunisia. Due to poor economic growth, he was one of thousand graduates who were jobless and had to find something else to support their families. He took his carriage and decided to sell local fruits and vegetables without a proper business license and collected a small cents of income. To start a proper business in the premises, he did not have the capital to do that, to register for a proper license he did not have enough money to pay for the fees, and such process needs him to know somebody in the authority to ensure the license application is fast and secure. Selling foods on his carriage was the only income he had to support his sister and an elderly mother. On December 17, 2011 his carriage was confiscated by the local authority for not having a proper license and refused to give some money to avoid penalty. Bouazizi was too disappointed with the corrupt authority and his frustration drove him to flame himself with gas and fire right in the city in front of many people. The sad tragedy fire up the communities to feel sympathy with Bouazizi. The flame was further ignited with social media calling for demonstration to express their dissatisfaction towards the corrupted government. The massive protest and demonstration was uncontrollable and the protesters chanted with anger slogan, cursing their frustration towards Tunisia President Zainal Abidin. Furthermore, the protest was supported by people of all ages, finally President Zainal Abidin had to flee the country to save himself from being executed by the people.

On the contrary, Malaysia has all prerequisite elements stated by Lipset (1959) hence comments and critiques on the progress of democracy can be contested. Poverty level in Malaysia is manageable and the government has a few intervention programs that run continuously to assist the poor from cash benefit to public services. In addition, Malaysia was ranked at number four in the International Living for best living places for retirement and ranked twenty in the world peace index of 2015. Although Malaysia has some issues pertaining to ethnic and religion, such quarrels were yet to be accumulated into ethnic conflict. The verbal arguments retain its vibrating scale up to small tremors rather than a bloody conflict. Shamsul & Anis (2011), Sirimal (2008) posit that the level of social cohesion in Malaysia is relatively stronger than Indonesia or Sri Lanka. In this case, although the peace and harmony level vary, the diversity contexts appear significantly in Malaysia, Sri Lanka and Indonesia. In fact, the human development index for Malaysia is ranked at number sixty two at High Human Development level in the world with unemployment and inflation rates are at acceptable level in many advanced countries.

Shamsul (2009), Shamsul & Anis (2011) argue that what Malaysia has achieved thus far is a condition called social cohesion and unity is yet to be achieved. The society is diverse, thus having competing interests is common. Although competing interests in a multiethnic country is complex and easily sparks into racism, hatred, prejudice, and discrimination, these tensions are stable. Of course there are moments of unity and disunity in Malaysia, but the latter does not accumulate into ethnic riots. Competing interests among multiethnic groups are managed through bargaining and negotiation formula and such channel is made available to representatives in the parliament, political parties and NGOs. The government adopts a continuous consultation method in prescribing solutions or strategies to any emergence issues including deliberative decision on the national development. Consultation includes participation from groups other than political parties that are sufficient in representing ethnic diversity. True to democracy that promotes the government of a few through election and representatives, the system is accommodative enough to allow participations from different ethnic groups.

The economic growth in Malaysia is steady and economic prosperity allows locals to fill up diverse job positions. The context of life is occupied with routines to meet the organization deadlines and to fulfill the tasks. At the end of the month, the income is used to pay bills, to support family and children, to plan for future retirement, vacations, to buy property, etc. Additionally, when the space of life is full, a human is bound to be rationale. On the contrary, if the space of life is full of devastated pressure such as no job, no income and unable to support the family, thus an individual is bound to be aggressive and easily triggered to react irrationally. Therefore, the human development index in Malaysia and the progressive economic growth has reduced the intention of social movement from becoming radical and violent. The Bersih demonstration series of 1.0 and 4.0 are evidences that reflect such assumption. None of these demonstrations have the push elements to stay for more than a week. The tidal of dissatisfaction is simply gone when the work days start. On the contrary, the mass protests in Indonesia, Thailand and the Philippines were dragged for a few weeks and ended up removing the old regime.

### iii. *Social Mobility*

Access to education as well as public universities are acceptable in Malaysia. Every citizen is able to attend 12 years of primary and secondary schools before he or she is able to enter public or private universities or colleges. Public universities are ranked below hundred in QS University World Ranking. Government spends millions of dollar for education and higher learning, and such commitments are manifested in the forms of scholarships, financial assistance, research grants, fellowships, etc. Based on UNICEF statistic report online, the total adult literacy rate in Malaysia from year 2008-2012 was 93.10%. Students from low income family or chronic poor in both rural and urban areas are able to further their studies with government financial assistance or scholarship. The gap between classes or between poor and rich has been reduced since independence of 1957. Government through the New Economic Policy of 1970 until present has put a lot of efforts through agencies such as Majlis Amanah Rakyat (MARA), TEKUN Nasional, Amanah Ikhtiar, Jabatan Perkhidmatan Awam (JPA), Yayasan Negeri, etc. to realize the objective of this policy including to ameliorate poverty and to restructure the society. Such access to education and training has helped the restructuring process to work well and more children from low income families are able to mobilize their disadvantages and turn their lives into a better position in terms of knowledge, skills, social class, and job.

However, Bouazizi in Tunisia, the new order in Indonesia, and protests in the Philippines especially during Ferdinand Marcos era shared the same story of struggles of being poor and immobilize to change their living conditions. Their government was corrupt, the elite was conquering every corner of country wealth and resources, the poor remained poor and getting worst each day. On the other hand, in Malaysia social mobility through education and other intervention programs are able to reduce the class and economic gap significantly. Thus, these factors differ Malaysia from Tunisia or Indonesia or Philippines. The social mobility is better in Malaysia and the opportunity to change the social life and class is doable and achievable in Malaysia. Thus, social mobility becomes another factor that determines whether or not the mass protest is able to remove an authoritarian regime.

### iv. *Law Enforcement Authorities*

State authorities including police, FRU (Federal Reserved Force unit) and special branch are well trained to trail any suspicious acts in the society. Their camouflage is blend well into the

society and such deceptions have been fatal in shutting down any mass gatherings that are deemed dangerous or a threat to national security. The surveillance units of the Police Force are precise and full equipped with advanced devices. They are also on the move and such a proactive measure has managed to control and to curb a few mass protests or demonstrations.

Furthermore, these units are strengthened with the legal support such as Internal Security Act of 1960. A motion to repeal this law was profound in the 1990s and it was finally repealed in year 2011. The previous law was replaced with the Security Offenses (Special Measures) Act of 2012. Although the special measures are inclined to the United Nations human rights declaration, a similar decisive measure to anything deems as a threat to national security and it is still coercive in its content. This approach is to ensure peace and harmony coexist among multiethnic society. Moreover, other legal tools such as the Official Secret Act of 1972, Sedition Act of 1948, Societies Act of 1966 and Printing Presses and Publications Act of 1984 are enforced cohesively. These rules and regulations are detrimental to freedom of speech in Malaysia. Political leaders that had been detained or prosecuted under any of these laws, refused to be a repeat offender except a few hardcore political activists.

On the contrary, in the wake of Arab Spring, the authorities were coercive physically to face the protesters, but weak in surveillance and investigation at the bottom layers of society. Such coercive measures must be enforced consistently and continuously as routine as could be. It can work as an alert sprinkler to detect suspicious activities, installs a preventive measure and avoid a massive protest. If the detection measure is weak, then the damage control will be too late to be countered. It may sound realistically feasible putting measure and control and it could sound like approving the iron claws to society, but the real deal is how societies manage their dissatisfaction and disagreement in a civilized way without causing damage to life and property.

#### *v. Media and Hegemony*

Arab Spring was not the first attempt at mobilization by the masses against dictators nor was the first attempt to use digital media to alert public sentiments (Fatimah & Ali, 2015; Hatem, 2014). However, Arab Spring exhibits that technology innovation such as digital media may have been the successful efforts to rally public support. Howard and Muzammil (2013) argue that in the cascading democracy movements that began in Tunisia, later spread across North Africa and the Middle East, thanks to advanced digital media that shared grievances to mobilize strategies against dictators. In fact, these regions have consistently experienced economic liberalization and adoption of new information infrastructure which have expedite the global societal interactions in this world. The civil society online offers self-generating or self-supporting community of people that share cultural activities that are independent from the state affairs. Internet for contemporary Arab civil society is vital because it provides virtual spaces for political communication. In fact, other forms of political communication such as television, radio, newspapers are controlled by the state censorship.

In tandem with the state law and regulation that limits freedom of speech, printing presses and publication, media in Malaysia has been used as a super structure to strengthen the governing regime. Hoare and Smith (1971) in *The Selection from the Prison Notebook* argue that superstructure in hegemony through incentive of carrot and stick would be able

to create false consciousness. This is the critic that highlights the reason for capitalism to be supported by many people. In other words, false consciousness allow the people to believe that the capitalist will enshrine their wellbeing without realizing that their hard work is being exploited. Resistance is controlled by negotiating and bargaining thus conflict can be avoided if the terms and conditions are reciprocally accepted.

Media is an effective approach of hegemonic control over the populists' mind. Media has been used as a platform to send a positive symbol, images and actions of government in assisting the society to achieve harmony. The government continues to spend big for infrastructure, health care, education, and community development despite nepotism that could control the overall economy. The images of government being accepted and supported by the people especially for launching a development project or ceremonial events are exploited, such crowds could be paid to attend such events in order to create a perfect picture for a populist leader. As a result, a regime continues to maintain its status quo with a strong dependency feeling towards the government that is now believed to be the guardian of the nation while the regime could be questioned for harvesting the nation's wealth for their own interest.

Herman and Chomsky (2002) argue that consent is manufactured by the mass media that controls every inch of information before it is delivered to the public. In this millennium, the invention of social media such as Facebook, Twitter, Whatsapp, Telegram, etc. has created a free flow of information which reduces the impact of manufactured information, because the collection of information from various sources can be challenged and debated. However, the political psephology of Malaysians has somewhere suffered from democratic transparency and political literacy. Therefore, the manufactured consent through mainstream media is still significant in most of the rural areas. Inclusive development is still a struggle between the federal and states in Sabah and Sarawak. Consequently, such 'pocket of poverty' situation in many remote areas in Borneo allows mainstream media to influence the communities and they are mesmerized by propaganda.

This is another indicator that holds the citizens of Malaysia from blatantly going 'amok' against the government. The mainstream media have tremendously defined and tailored the images of the ruling governments to look bountiful to the people and for the people. Although the alternative media exist, the competition for real news is always a challenge. On the contrary, the Arab nations did not cater to strengthen the media hegemony but they were focused on getting the independence and replacing the tyranny. Ironically, the Arabs were stuck with the bad cycle of removing the 'iron claw' tyranny but ended up replacing the tyrant with another authoritarian regime. Furthermore, movements in the 1950s were concerned with the anti-Western sentiment towards USA and Israel. Such sentiments somehow will unite the Arab nations but they remain relatively weak and divided.

#### *vi. External influence*

The wake of Arab Spring although was triggered by a local incident from a personal grievance, the huge massive mass protest was also due to poverty, bad government, corruption, recession and inflation, etc. If Bouazizi in Tunisia was alive to witness how his decision to burn himself had affected the Arab nations, he would have been shocked. However, such demand for democratic government is not something peculiar as Huntington (1993) in his Clash of Civilization argues that after the end of cold war, communist blocs are no longer a threat but the world will face a clash of civilization between secular western and

traditional Islam. The unipolar hegemon that is the USA turns its interest towards the Middle-east where the 'black gold' in the form of oil and gas is extravagant.

For instance, Hosni Mubarak of Egypt was the USA's close ally. Ironically the Uncle Sam friend was engulfed with corruptions and series of violence. America had displayed kindness and support to Hosni's authoritarian regime and referred Egypt as an important guardian to secure American interest, especially Israel. The Arab Spring has turned the course into a different game. Egyptians view the USA is a liability for them to move forward. The democratization movement championed by the USA has a reversal affect and leave many devastation implications to the nations. The force agenda of democracy is unsuitable to the Arab nation where the cultural history is strong with feudalism, tribes and *assabiyah*. Moreover, other missing elements for democracy including the middle class population, education level, and political psephology have further stretched the nations. The reformation in Libya and the chaotic war in Syria have been accused of the conspiracy theory which are commonly used in assessing these catastrophic events including the association with the USA's new world order.

On the contrary, Malaysia has a peaceful multilateral relationship with most countries at a global level. Malaysia has been recognized as a peaceful democratic country despite criticisms on a few aspects pertaining to freedom and human rights. The democratic framework can be improved and Malaysia is committed to combat terrorism at the states, regional and international levels. Malaysia has a good and steady multilateral relationships with the USA, Europe, Africa, Asia, China, Soviet, Korea, Southeast Asia, Middle-East, etc. Such cooperative relationships allow Malaysia to prosperous in its economic growth with steady increment in Foreign Direct Investment, Multi National Corporation, Business Trade, Halal Hub, etc. (The World Bank, 2015). The international influence is prominent as a push factor to expedite the removal of a regime, but in Malaysia's case, this foreign power is interested in economic cooperation and likely to maintain a peaceful relationship. Perhaps the 'black gold' is not as enormous as in the Middle-east compared to Malaysia.

#### CONCLUSION

Malaysia is experiencing both the moment of unity and disunity. Hence, the latter context has been well managed through the bargaining and negotiation (B&N) formula which permeates moderation to be installed in every aspect of consultation with public, private, non-governmental organizations, and political parties. The unity in diversity allows such accommodation to be accepted and tolerated with the trust bounded within the constitutions. Malaysia has always been an example of accommodation not assimilation as the structural framework to define the state, market and society. Thus, having positive discrimination and ethnicity profiling within these contexts are inevitable in Malaysia and any dissatisfaction is resolved through the B&N formula that has kept the country relatively at peace with stable tensions that are manageable. In sum, Malaysia will continue its moderate approach to curb any societal dissatisfaction with relentless efforts to ensure economic prosperity benefits the citizens. Although there are hiccups in politics, ensuring political stability, economic prosperity and society harmony are the ultimate objective to avoid the possibility of Malaysia Spring.

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