

# **Interethnic Relations in Malaysian Campuses: A Historical Review**

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## **Abstract**

This paper attempts to reconstruct the dynamics of interethnic relations of university students in Malaysian public campuses from the 1960s to 2005. Based on a synthesis and review of existing literature, the subject is examined at two levels. The first is the evolution of interethnic relations among student leaders in the context of campus student activism and politics, and the other is a synthesis of the state of day-to-day interethnic interaction in the student milieu over the decades.

Ethnic dynamics in campus politics could be broadly divided into two phases. Between 1967 and the early 1970s, the two key protagonists were the multiethnic Socialist Club and the Malay-based Malay Language Society in the University of Malaya. From 1974 onwards, it was Islamist activism and intra-Malay rivalry that defined the campus dynamics. Selective interethnic cooperation persisted in campus politics till today, especially when non-Malay students constitute a significant proportion of the student population, but it was carried out in varied forms under different circumstances.

Discussions of interethnic relations often refer to the “golden age” of ethnic relations in the past. This paper contends that if the university campus is seen as the contemporary, microcosmic reflection of the wider society, then it is clear that such historical memory is at best partial if not inaccurate. The tendency of university students to confine their social interaction within their own ethnic groups had been observed at least since the 1960s, and was even prevalent among those who had gone through English-medium education. In effect, it appears that the pattern of interethnic interaction had not really evolved in any substantial way since at least the mid-1960s. There were arguably even more incidents of serious interethnic tension during the sixties than in current situation.

**Key words:** Interethnic relations, interethnic interaction, campus politics, student activism, racial polarization

## **Introduction**

Media reports on the “seriousness” of interethnic polarization in Malaysian public campuses are commonplace. Frequently, the observation that campus students interact mainly along ethnic line is highlighted as the basis to substantiate such an evaluation. While the factual observation is seldom disputed, normative evaluation and the interpretation of the phenomenon of ethnic segregation is more contentious.

In 2003, the assessment of an ongoing survey conducted in Universiti Sains Malaysia

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(USM) on interethnic relations stimulated polemical discussions among some academics. The survey interpreted the formation of ethnic cliques in studying, socializing and eating out as a transient phenomenon and as manifestation of a coping mechanism to facilitate settling into a new social setting for first year students. This had led to energetic rebuttal from a USM lecturer, Rohana Ariffin, who asserted that the problem of racial polarization in the university was serious. Attributing the problem to entrenched mutual prejudice, she chided Chinese students for being insensitive and exclusive when they converse in their mother tongue. Perceiving Indian students as the most alienated and discriminated, she claimed that some of them resorted to gangsterism to gain a sense of belonging. Rohana also alleged that race-based biases of government policies had contributed to the problems (*Malaysiakini*, 7 July 2003).

On the other hand, the alarmist conclusions drawn from a survey on ethnic relations conducted in 1999 by Sheela J. Abraham of the Faculty of Education, University of Malaya (UM), also stirred up a flurry of reactions and concern in the media. Based on the 200 responses<sup>1</sup> to her questionnaires, supplemented with the discussions and selective interviews done by her, she concluded that even though she found some positive features favouring national unity,<sup>2</sup> “ethnic divisions and linguistic loyalties based on primordial ties were strongly felt, which manifests itself in highly visible ethnic polarisation” (Abraham, 1999: 10).

The conclusion of Sheela Abraham that ethnic polarization was serious was based on three arguments. Firstly, she found that the majority of the respondents identified themselves first by ethnicity before nationality. Secondly, through her findings on the pattern of language use by respondents in campus, she concluded that despite the fact that the majority of the respondents were fluent in Malay and used it in formal situations, the Chinese and Indian communities “hold on to their own languages and are very sensitive to any attempts, perceived or real, to curb their development and use” (Abraham, 1999: 7). Noting that “great emphasis has been placed by the policy-makers on the Malay language as an instrument of unity”, she deduced that this attachment to respective ethnic language was “interfering” with the formation of national identity (Abraham, 1999: 7). Lastly, she found that in informal settings, her respondents interacted almost exclusively within their own ethnic groups. She concluded that, “this is definitely a worrying trend and needs to be addressed immediately” (Abraham, 1999: 8).

The doom-seer conclusions reached in the paper of Sheela Abraham did not convince everybody, including the Vice-Chancellor of the university, Professor Ungku Aziz, who cautioned that her research was methodologically flawed on several accounts. Another critic questioned the representativeness of her sample and the objectivity of her research questions. She also pointed out that when Abraham concluded that “the sense of ethnicity was strongest

among the Chinese students, and lowest among the Indians”, she did it based on a numerical difference of only *two* respondents between the Chinese and Indian respondents (out of a total of 50 of each of them) (Chia, 2002: 58-9). Another lecturer, Hou Kok Chung, felt that there was no latent problem of racial polarization among the students. It was more because racial issues had been raised repeatedly, and over time, it became a problem (*Nanyang Siang Pau*, 6 January 2001).

The two examples cited above illustrate, besides the challenge of adopting a more universally acceptable methodological approach in researching the issue, the difficulties involved in the interpretation of a social phenomenon, and the lack of an academic consensus over what constitutes the “problem of racial polarization”. The root causes of ethnic tension are in fact complex and multi-dimensional: structural, historical, and political. The fluid and multi-dimensional nature of ethnic relations is also notoriously difficult to ascertain and apprehend. Commonsensical assumptions about interethnic interaction and ethnic polarization are often not empirically verified. Theoretically informed studies of ethnic relations would contribute to a more nuanced and out-of-the-box perspective in assessing interethnic dynamics than commonly made.

This paper does not intend to examine interethnic relations based on an interpretation of interethnic interaction *per se*. As we have seen, assessment of the same phenomenon may arrive at different conclusions, simply because people do not talk at the same wavelength and share the same premises. The aim of this paper is more fundamental: to reconstruct as best as the availability of documentation allows, the interethnic dynamics of students in campus, from the 1960s till around 2005. We have often come across as-a-matter-of-fact and casual references to the “golden age” of ethnic relations in the past when discussing interethnic relations. This paper contends that if we take university campus as the contemporary, microcosmic reflection of the wider society, then it is clear that such historical memory is at best partial if not inaccurate. It will also be shown that the tendency of university students to confine their social interaction within their own ethnic groups had been observed at least since the 1960s, and was even prevalent among those who had gone through English-medium education.

## The Setting

In order to get some historical perspectives on the evolving ethnic dynamics on campus, we will examine the issue from two complementary angles. We will first examine the historical evolution of interethnic interaction at the level of student leaders in the context of campus student activism and politics. This overview of the situation among the more politicized and socially conscious student activist minority will be followed by a description of the

undercurrent dynamics of day-to-day interethnic relations on campus in the student milieu.

To begin with, it is necessary to take note of the changing ethnic composition of the university student body and the mutation of the overall socio-academic background of the students.

Prior to 1969, UM was the only public university in Malaysia. The student population then was predominantly non-Malay but declined progressively to around 60 per cent in 1970. Most of the undergraduates, Malays and non-Malays, were from English-medium, urban educational background.<sup>3</sup>

The first batch of students educated fully in Malay-medium entered the university in 1965.<sup>4</sup> From then on, their proportion continued to increase, though concentrating initially in the Arts faculty. By 1970, about 1,050 out of the 7,777 undergraduates in UM were from the Malay-medium stream (Abdul Majid, 1971: 48). Lacking English proficiency, many of them gravitated towards the Malay Language Society (Persatuan Bahasa Malaysia Universiti Malaya, PBMUM) and the UM Muslim Undergraduate Society (Persatuan Mahasiswa Islam Universiti Malaya, PMIUM). For two decades or so till the 1980s, a sizeable proportion of the Malay students were mature students who were teachers, college lecturers and Islamic scholars (Muhammad, 1973: 45, Khoo, K. K., 2009: 97). The 1970s also saw more and more Malay-medium Malay students from the rural areas joining the public universities and began to dominate the residential colleges and some of the student organizations.

### **Ethnic Dynamics in Campus Politics**

Ethnic dynamics in campus politics could be broadly divided into two distinct phases. Until early 1970s, the two key protagonists were the multiethnic UM Socialist Club (whose leaders helmed the UM Student Union, UMSU) and the Malay-based PBMUM. From 1974 onwards, it was Islamist activism and intra-Malay rivalry which defined the nature of the campus dynamics.

#### **Multiethnic Socialist Club versus Malay-based PBMUM (1967-1974)**

The emergence of issues on campus viewed by one group or another as “ethnic cause” dated as far back as the 1960s. Certain issues were seen to be communalist due to its inherently divisive nature along ethnic line. Chandra Muzaffar (1984: 371) described UMSU as exhibiting, “once in a while”, “non-Malay orientation on national affairs” in particular during the controversies against the constitutional Malay special position. In 1968, the UMSU elections were decried by the Chinese-based Democratic Action Party as being stalked by “racialism”, “as it stalks in the Malaysian society” (Weiss, 2005: 323).

During the 1960s, even though non-Malay representation in the UMSU council was

sizeable, they maintained, as a whole, a non-partisan and non-communal approach in their perspective and the cause they fought for (Silcock, 1964: 193; Chandra, 1984: 371; Hassan, 1984: 16). It was also noted that the university hostels which accommodated 40 per cent of the students were “racially integrated” and provided “an important means for students to learn at first hand about their peers from other racial communities” (Silverstein, 1970: 14).

The thriving of the multiethnic UM Socialist Club<sup>5</sup> leadership from 1967 until its disbandment in 1974 provided an important non-communalist platform for university student activism and had a far-reaching influence on the UMSU council leadership during this period. These leaders managed to maintain a cordial interethnic partnership and foster a non-communalist perspective on the ongoing social dynamics and national politics (Junaidi, 1993: 22; Muhammad, 1973: 101). Many of these Malay undergraduate leaders during the 1960s were supporters of the socialist-inclined Parti Rakyat in political issues (Silverstein, 1976: 200). These Malay leaders from the Socialist Club occupied influential positions in the UMSU council. Syed Hamid Ali, for instance, was the general secretary of UMSU in 1967 and its president in 1969. The multiethnic orientation and the dynamism of its leaders during this period articulated an ethnically reconciliatory and socially progressive voice in campus politics.

The PBMUM, on the other hand, was regarded as the *de facto* spokesperson for the Malay university students, playing the role as a “Malay student union” in the face of UMSU. The latter was perceived by the former as a “non-Malay student union”, articulating “non-Malay views” (Bass, 1971: 980), notwithstanding the fact that some Malay students held key positions on the UMSU executive committee then. The *Majid Report* described PBMUM as “more a Malay society than a language society, ...a Malay quasi-political group... representing Malay interests which it regards as national interests. The society in fact reflects Malay political consciousness of a particular kind” (Abdul Majid, 1971: 50).

In effect, some leaders of the Socialist Club attempted to introduce leftist orientation into PBMUM when Sanusi Osman became the president of PBMUM in 1967. A symposium was organized on the problems faced by rural communities, a departure from its previous narrow focus on Malay language and culture. Together with UMSU, the PBMUM was also directly involved in highlighting the Teluk Gong landless squatter struggle in 1967. Solidarity with Teluk Gong landless squatters was the first time a public stand on a current issue in favour of the poor and marginalized was taken by the university students (Hassan, 1984: 2-3). This had incurred suspicion among some members of PBMUM as to whether they were “infiltrated” and manipulated for political purposes. An Extraordinary General Assembly was called to discuss a motion of no confidence towards its president and his working committee members. Sanusi survived the no confidence vote (Muhammad, 1973: 63-4).

A central issue which was the source of sustained bitter contention and interethnic hostility was the use of the Malay language in UM. Initially raised in 1966, the PBMUM leaders came to a serious clash over the issue with those of the UMSU council in 1970. The status of the Malay language as the national language was never questioned. The point of contention was rather the extent to which and the speed with which its usage should be generalized and reinforced in the university. The official position adopted by the National Union of Malaysian Students (Persatuan Kebangsaan Pelajar-pelajar Malaysia or PKPM)<sup>6</sup> was to affirm its support of the Malay language and demanded the student unions help all students to study it so that it might become “an essential instrument for promoting inter-racial harmony” (Silverstein, 1970: 15).<sup>7</sup> The PBMUM, on the other hand, made a vigorous push for a speedy and the fullest implementation of the use of Malay language throughout the national education system (Nagata, 1980: 407). Confronted with acute language problem in the pursuit of their university studies, the Malay-educated students were suspicious of the sincerity of the governing elites to do so (Muhammad 1973:45, 49).

In the aftermath of the racial riots in 1969, a campaign was launched by the university students, particularly the Malay students, calling for the resignation of Tunku Abdul Rahman, the Malaysian Prime Minister. A letter criticizing the Tunku penned by Dr Mahathir, a radical young Turk in the Tunku’s Malay party, the United Malay National Organisation (UMNO) then, was widely distributed by the Malay students, who hand-copied as well as duplicated it for distribution.<sup>8</sup> In his letter, Dr Mahathir accused the Tunku of giving the Chinese “everything they ask for” in the name of “give and take” policy, a reason for which “the Chinese and the Indians behaved outrageously toward the Malays”, causing the latter to run amok (von Vorys, 1976: 373).<sup>9</sup> Mass demonstrations were organized with the participation of students from UM, MARA and Islamic College as well as the militant faction of UMNO in defense of “Malay sovereignty” (Munro-Kua, 1996: 56).

Funston (1980: 225) noted that May 13 incident “both represented and contributed to heightened communal consciousness among Malays”. At the campus level, fault lines of differences in political orientation between UMSU Council and PBMUM leaderships were discernible in the differing perspectives carried by two key student leaders who spearheaded the anti-Tunku campaign. Syed Hamid Ali who was the president of UMSU then and representative of the perspective of the Socialist Club wanted the Tunku to resign because he was critical of Tunku’s political, economic and social policies which were deemed excessively pro-capitalist, hence impotent in solving the problems of poverty and redressing interethnic economic gap (Hassan, 1984: 5; Muhammad, 1973: 102-3). The critique of Anwar Ibrahim who was leading the PBMUM, on the contrary, was from an ethnic perspective rather than structural. He felt that Tunku did not try hard enough to overcome the problems of the Malay community and

advance the status of the Malay language in the implementation of the National Education Policy. Echoing the position of Mahathir, Anwar claimed that the Tunku had conceded too much to the Chinese community (Hassan, 1984: 5; Muhammad, 1973: 88).

The subsequent retirement from politics of the Tunku in September 1970 was preceded by the hasty launch of the progressive conversion of English-medium primary schools into Malay-medium primary schools. The establishment of a full fledged Malay-medium National University, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) was regarded largely as a gesture affirming the sovereignty of the Malay language. It was also the fulfillment of one of the key demands on the PBMUM wish list (Muhammad, 1973: 74-6).

Determined to set the language policy in UM “in order”, the PBMUM asserted its position on national language even more forcefully through organizing demonstrations, symposia and dialogue session with the Vice-Chancellor. On 5 October 1970, about 500 PBMUM members, during a demonstration against the delay in using Malay as the medium of instruction in university, tore down and burnt English-medium posters at the Speaker’s Corner, and went on to splash red and black paint over signs and notices in English on campus. Disapproving the unruly approach, the UMSU council members issued statement condemning the incident. The clash between UMSU and PBMUM<sup>10</sup> led to the latter initiating a vote of no confidence against the 13<sup>th</sup> UMSU Council leadership (Weiss 2005: 303, Hassan 1984: 6, Bass 1971: 980-81).<sup>11</sup> The situation in the campus was said to “come close to a racial (sic) riot” (Chai, 1977: 54; Muhammad, 1973: 118-120). This tension between the UMSU and PBMUM exposed the fault line between those English-educated students on the one hand and the Malay-educated Malay students on the other. The incidents led the National Operations Council to appoint a committee chaired by Dr. Haji Abdul Majid bin Ismail to investigate campus life of students in UM. The *Majid Report* described the national language policy as carrying with it “the ominous prospect of racial violence erupting for the first time in the Campus” (Abdul Majid, 1971: 97).<sup>12</sup>

The tension put enormous pressure on the university authorities to hasten the implementation of the Malay language as the medium of teaching in the university. Though it was recognized that drastic change was not possible, each faculty and department was required to draw up a language policy implementation programme for approval by the university Senate and the University Council (Chai, 1977: 54). The PBMUM successfully lobbied the university administration to adopt a new rule in 1974 that required science students, who were mostly Chinese, to pass their Malay language examination in the first year and not at a year of the student’s choice, as was previously the case (Silverstein, 1976: 200). This triggered a boycott of lectures launched by the Science Society calling for a more systematic language programme (Hassan, 1984: 36-7).



In effect, from the point of view of the non-Malay students, they felt unfairly victimized given the fact that the majority of them had gone through their entire schooling in the English language. The Malay language course was not even offered during the two years of their sixth form prior to university entry due to the lack of qualified teachers (Abdul Majid, 1971: 100). Many lecturers also shared the sentiment of the non-Malay undergraduates that hasty implementation of the Malay language in the universities through various measures posed a major discriminatory burden on non-Malay students, especially at a time when all lectures were still conducted in English.

The way in which the use of Malay language was implemented in public universities created a backlash among the non-Malay students towards the language.<sup>13</sup> Rather than seeing the Malay language as a tool for national unity, the prevalent sentiment among the non-Malays was that “*they* were trying to impose *their* language so that they could do better than *us*”.<sup>14</sup> As a consequence, the Chinese students perceived the Malay language as a burden and an instrument of discrimination which imposes unfair and unnecessary disadvantage on them. The reaction of the Malay students was generally unsympathetic. One commonly held attitude was illustrated by this response, “When I failed English I didn’t complain. Why should the Chinese always complain when they do poorly in Malay?” (Basham, 1983: 71-3).

In June 1972, the UMSU student council under the leadership of a Chinese student, Sim Kim Chiew, was toppled following conflicts between the council and the editorial board of the UMSU newspaper (Muhammad, 1973: 174-6). This was regarded by Hassan Karim, a contemporary student leader who later became the secretary-general of the Socialist Party, PSRM (Parti Sosialis Rakyat Malaysia; which was previously called Parti Rakyat), as a defeat of the student Left as many of the council members were from the Socialist Club. Those who were opposed to the council managed to garner support through the use of communalist discourse (Hassan, 1984: 8). In his evaluation of the weaknesses of the pre-1975 student movement, Hassan noted that the “race problem”, among others, had been an important factor which weakened the student movement. This dynamic was particularly visible in the more multiethnic student population of UM (Hassan, 1984: 16).<sup>15</sup> Muhammad Abu Bakar who examined student politics during this period commented that communal polarization among the university students was just a reflection and extension of what was happening in the larger society (Muhammad, 1973: 124)

Hassan (1984) also noted how the government and university authorities resorted to communalist approach to weaken the cohesiveness of the multiethnic front of the student leaders. This tactic was especially salient in the way government and university administrations handled a series of massive student protests in 1974 which marked the peak of university student activism.



The agitation began with the Tasik Utara incident which occurred in September 1974. A group of 134 predominantly Malay squatter families in Tasik Utara outside Johor Bahru solicited the assistance of the university student leaders when their appeal to the government to annul their eviction order was ignored. They were especially indignant that the ruling coalition, the National Front, had reneged on their electoral pledge to protect their homes. The students collected financial donations in solidarity with the squatters. Massive demonstrations were organized by the students which were met with brutal police confrontation. In the face of police repression, the UMSU student council subsequently decided to occupy the UM administrative premises so as to put pressure on the government to accede to the demands of the squatters.

Non-Malay student leaders were supportive of these student actions under the leadership of UMSU. Hassan (1984: 12) noted that besides student unions of all the five universities (as well as the student union of the University of Singapore), the Socialist Club and the Chinese Language Society (CLS) of UM also released press statements in support of the Malay squatters in Tasik Utara. The majority of the UM student population, including non-Malay students, were also firmly behind UMSU when the latter's attempt to take over the university administration was sabotaged by a rival group of Malay students who called themselves "nationalists".<sup>16</sup> A joint statement in support of UMSU and the squatters were issued in the name of various student bodies representing the residents in the hostels and outside, the Chinese and Tamil language societies, as well as the academic societies of various faculties. The students on campus also responded to the call by UMSU to boycott lectures except those from the Arts Faculty (Hassan, 1984: 36), who presumably were under the influence of the "nationalist" group. Hassan alleged that the Special Branch infiltrated the top leadership of the PBMUM and PMIUM (which were behind the "nationalist" group) to counteract the influence of UMSU by carrying out sabotage work with a racist and religious discourse (Hassan, 1984: 41, 43-4).<sup>17</sup> He also criticized the Vice-Chancellor of UM for playing up racial issues against UMSU during the crisis of the occupation of the UM administration (Hassan, 1984: 13). A few days after the event, UMSU was suspended.

Another wave of student agitation occurred in December of the same year in solidarity with poor peasants in Baling. These peasants had demonstrated in late November against falling rubber prices and rising inflation. The government responded by another round of arrests. At one point, more than 1,000 students were arrested (Hassan 1984:15). Subsequently, the government released a White Paper accusing the CLS of UM as the instigator of the series of social actions by the university students, ranging from their support for the Tasik Utara landless Malay squatters, the takeover of the UM administration building in September, as well as the student demonstrations urging the government to look into the plight of Malay peasants

in Baling. The government alleged that the Malayan Communist Party had succeeded in infiltrating the leadership of the CLS, which in turn exerted its influence over the Socialist Club members in the student council to create social disruptions and campus unrest (Government of Malaysia, 1974). The allegations of the government appeared to contemporary observers as an attempt to use the racial card to distract the people from the real problems highlighted by the students. It was noted that the Tasik Utara and Baling issues concerned principally the Malay community and that it was especially the Malay students, not only from UM but also from other universities who had turned up massively in the demonstrations (Silverstein, 1976: 201).<sup>18</sup> As noted by a journalist, “protest about Baling was...a gut reaction from the (rural Malay) students’ own experience of rural misery” (Peiris, 1984). It was generally agreed that the main thrust behind the student agitation on the plight of the Baling peasants were actually Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia (ABIM) or the Islamic Youth Movement), Persatuan Kebangsaan Pelajar-pelajar Islam Malaysia (PKPIM) or National Union of Muslim Students of Malaysia, and the left-wing Parti Rakyat (Peiris, 1984; Silverstein, 1976: 202). 1974 marked the ascendant influence of ABIM on campus, as well as the Islamic revivalist programmes spearheaded by it. Its plausible competitor as embodied in the Socialist Club was banned and decimated in 1974 following the arrest and forced exile of its key student leaders. At least four lecturers, one of whom was an active member of Parti Rakyat, were also arrested.<sup>19</sup> In May 1975, drastic amendments were introduced by Dr. Mahathir, the Education Minister then, to the 1971 Universities and University Colleges Act (UUCA)<sup>20</sup> which further downgraded the rights and status of university student council and prohibited the students from getting involved in politics or being associated with any “unauthorized” group. Provisions which empower the university board to suspend or dissolve the student union or the representative council deemed “detrimental or prejudicial to the well-being or reputation of the University” were also incorporated into the university constitution (LRB, 2002: 50).

### **Islamist Activism**

The vacuum left by the disintegration of political activism was replaced by religious activism by different groups of Islamic missionary (*dakwah*) movements which flourished from the 1970s. Dakwah groups on campus differed in orientation from those focusing exclusively on the spiritual aspect to others who tried to link Islam with social concerns. Regardless of their differences in theological positions or organizational approach, there was a general emphasis towards Islamic orthodoxy, the infallibility of the *Syariah* and Islam as a comprehensive system of life (*ad deen*) (Mohamad, 1981: 1044). Its ideal was to work towards the total Islamization of the entire Malaysian society. It was estimated that by 1980, about 15 per cent of the undergraduates and graduates of local universities “worked for the

purification of Islam” through their respective Muslim student societies or Persatuan Islam (Mohamad, 1981: 1041).<sup>21</sup> Those who took to this idea of the reconstruction of Malaysian society along religious fundamentalist lines, though limited in number, formed the hardcore of the various Islamist organizations. By mid-1980s, Zainah Anwar (1987: 33) estimated that “at least 60 to 70%” of the Malay students were involved in Islamist movements.

In comparison with the pre-NEP period, it is obvious that non-Malay students became increasingly marginalized from the campus-level student leadership from the mid-1970s. The Malay-dominated campus politics evolved into intra-Malay rivalry among various dakwah groups centered on Islam and campus issues, as well as between the so-called “Malay nationalists” linked to the UMNO-controlled Gabungan Pelajar Mahasiswa Semenanjung (GPMS) or Federation of Peninsular Malay Students and the more anti-establishment Islamic elements affiliated to PKPIM and influenced by ABIM (Jomo and Ahmad, 1992: 88). Mohd. Shuhaimi (1995: 50) noted that political pattern of campus student politics during the 1980s was a reflection of the dynamics among various Malay (Islamist and non-Islamist) groups in the society, as the latter covertly and overtly extended their influence on university students. On the other hand, he also noted that in UM, UKM and USM where the Chinese students were more sizeable, the latter would form their own platform and cooperate with a group which was deemed friendly or more accommodative to their interests. From time to time, they were able to influence the winning chance of one group or another and play the role of “king-maker” (Mohd. Shuhaimi, 1995: 60-1, 89, 101).

Zainah (1987) distinguished the dakwah movement on campus into two different phases. She described the first period under the dominant influence of ABIM as a moderate phase.<sup>22</sup> The “nationalist” group, despite overt blessings from the government, steadily lost student support in the late 1970s and early 1982 to the Islamic group supported by ABIM who provided ideological guidance and leadership. The influence of ABIM in campus politics declined when Anwar Ibrahim, the president of ABIM, joined UMNO in 1982, which rendered ABIM much less critical of the government and less vocal on social issues.

In UM, the anti-establishment role of ABIM was taken over by an Islamist group known to the university authorities as the Islamic Republic Group, which took control of the most influential Islamic organization on campus, the PMIUM. The Islamic Republic group propagated an ultra-conservative perspective of the Islamic Representative Council which originated in the United Kingdom, which tended to “relate narrowly to Islam and campus issues, occasionally overlapping with Malay concerns” (Jomo, Hassan and Ahmad, 1989: 154; Weiss, 2005: 314; Zainah, 1987). This heralded the apogee of the second wave of Islamic resurgence on campus for Zainah (1987). She noted that the group believed in establishing an Islamic Republic in Malaysia after Iran. Arguing that the existing secular government

in Malaysia is “illegitimate” and “infidel” as it is based on a man-made constitution, their struggle was to replace the system with an Islamic Republic with the Quran and *sunnah* as its Constitution (Zainah, 1987: 35). On cultural issues, echoing the contemporary public discourse of PAS (Parti Islam Semalaysia), they were preoccupied with condemning behaviour deemed “morally decadent” such as women wearing immodest clothing, public display of affections or the staging of campus activities purely for entertainment purposes (Weiss, 2005: 315; Zainah, 1990: 34).<sup>23</sup> The administrations in various public universities made a concerted effort to rein in the influence of the pro-PAS Islamist groups of Malay students by imposing academic conditions for electoral candidates or modify electoral regulations to curb the hegemonic influence of Islamist activists in student hostel committees (Zainah, 1990: 32-4).

During the 1980s, Sanusi (1989: 247) lamented that campus elections at times turned into interethnic rivalry. According to his observation, election campaigns often turned racial and at times created tensions among the students. Many of the issues raised by the students also appeared to him to be “communal issues”.

Chinese-Malay tension flared up in UKM in 1986 during the *Tanglung* (lantern) Festival held by the UKM Chinese students. During the gathering, two Chinese student leaders spoke publicly against the speech of UMNO president delivered at the UMNO General Assembly and a procession was held as a gesture of protest against the speech. Feeling upset, Malay student leaders of the “nationalist” leaning or pro-government group asked the gathering to be dispersed. When their wishes were not granted, they started tearing up the lanterns and both sides were up in arms. The incident led to a massive boycott of the following campus election by Chinese students. Others voted for the rival Islamic student group, and feelings of anger lingered on for some time (Mohd. Shuhaimi, 1995: 102-3).

In UM towards late 1980s, the pro-UMNO nationalist group co-opted Chinese students to form a multiethnic front to contest against the anti-establishment coalition of Islamic groups led by pro-PAS faction. The victorious multiethnic Barisan Mahasiswa Bersatu (BMB) or Students United Front projected themselves as “liberal, multi-racial and nationalist”. That this projection is more for the ears of non-Malays could be gauged by the fact that the multiethnic front still claimed Islam as “the basis of its struggle”. The competing PMIUM who lost the leadership control of the Student Council dismissed the victory as the rejection of the Malay students of their orientation, but merely “a victory for the Chinese and Indian students” (Zainah, 1990: 32-4).

An incident that occurred during the 1989/90 academic session illustrates the communalist mentality of the UM student representatives affiliated with BMB. Che Mohammad Che Dollah, the Secretary-General of the UM student council, formed a working committee to impeach the Vice-Chancellor, accusing him of appointing his non-Malay friendly colleagues

to strategic positions in the university. The issue was raised in the Malaysian parliament. Nonetheless, his deputy secretary, Tan Ah Kaw, took an opposing stand. Crisis arose when Che Mohammad was unable to continue his studies and his position was vacated. Tan Ah Kaw as his deputy laid claim to succeed him but it was resisted by his Malay colleagues in BMB. The latter only managed to appoint a new Malay Secretary-General after several unsuccessful attempts due to lack of quorum (Mohd Shuhaimi, 1995: 86).

In the aftermath of the Anwar crisis and in the face of the increased rebellious streak among the Malay students, pro-establishment factions in a few universities made big efforts to persuade more Chinese students into standing as candidates (《东方日报》/*Oriental Daily*, 31 August 2003). In UM, the pro-establishment camps tried to project a multiethnic image by having two Chinese Lions dancing to the Malay drum beat and Indian flute music in leading their candidate nomination procession (《东方日报》/*Oriental Daily*, 31 August 2003). In UKM where the newly established CLS sided with the pro-establishment faction, they resorted to distributing 2,000 mooncakes to woo the goodwill of potential voters on campus, taking advantage of the conjunction with the Chinese Mooncake Festival (《南洋商报》/*Nanyang Siang Pau*, 5 September 2003). As during the previous decades, from time to time, the rival pro-PAS group also collaborated with non-Malay students dissatisfied with the university establishment to form a multiethnic electoral front.

Despite the projection of this façade of “interethnic cooperation”, interethnic barriers remained. In effect, the need to artificially constitute a multiethnic front was based on the pragmatic necessity of mobilizing support from an ethnic group with a candidate from the same group. The extent of ethnic segmentation in student associative dynamic was strikingly illustrated by the fact that the student activism following the Reformasi movement after the arrest of Anwar Ibrahim in 1998 was organized based on coalition and collaboration of student bodies organized along ethnic lines. The Malaysian Youth and Student Democratic Movement established in 1998, for instance, though intending to be multiethnic and to rally students around the issue of student rights, democracy and human rights, ended up organizing mainly Chinese students. Another national level organization which was active during this period, GAMIS (Gabungan Mahasiswa Islam Semenanjung or Peninsular Muslim Undergraduates Coalition), regroups the PMIs in various campuses and hence was evidently an exclusively Muslim organization. Members of the “Universiti Bangsar Utama” (UBU) group initiated by a veteran student activist, Hishamuddin Rais, in 1998 and organized on a non-religious basis were predominantly Malay. Indian students were organized under a group called Jawatankuasa Mahasiswa Ladang (JKML) or Working Committee of Plantation Undergraduates).

### **Situation of Interethnic Interaction in Campus**

The earliest campus survey on interethnic relations was carried out around 1966/67 by Alvin Rabushka using mailed questionnaires sent to a random sample of around 200 undergraduates in UM. It was found that only about a third of the Malay and Chinese undergraduates mixed with students from other ethnic groups. Other ethnic groups, being in the minority (altogether less than 15 per cent) on campus, were largely “mixers”, to use Rabushka’s term (1969: 59-60). Hence he concluded that the majority of the Chinese and Malay students were “clearly ‘communal’ or ethnically inclined in their interaction patterns”. He also found that 3 per cent among the Chinese mixer respondents and 11 per cent of Chinese non-mixers thought that their own cultural way of life was the best. This rate was comparatively higher among the Malay respondents: 13 per cent of the mixers and 28 per cent of the non-mixers. These rates of “ethnocentricity” were probably lower than the later generations of undergraduates. However, when it came to the issue of intermarriage, he found that only a third of the Chinese mixer respondents were willing to marry with Malays though almost half of them did not mind marrying with Indians. Curiously, despite the higher proportion of Malay respondents who preferred their own culture, 73 per cent of the Malay mixers professed that they were willing to marry Chinese while 60 per cent of them were willing to marry Indians. These rates were correspondingly lower for the non-mixer respondents for both ethnic groups (Rabushka, 1969: 62).

It should be noted that this generation of undergraduates was quite different from the subsequent ones as the majority of them would have received their education in English-medium schools.<sup>24</sup> It is likely that most of them were from the more anglophile background (perhaps also correspondingly, more “de-culturalized” from the students’ respective cultural origins) of their respective community. This might explain the relatively low rate of ethnocentricity as mentioned above, unless they were just giving what they perceived to be the “politically correct” answers. What appears to be striking was that even though many of them were probably rather exposed to interethnic interaction throughout their school days, only a third of them mixed around with other ethnic groups.

A study done by John C. Bock in the late 1960s among more than 7,000 secondary school students shed an interesting light on the attitude of this generation of students. He found that students studying in English-medium schools with a heterogeneous ethnic mix, particularly those studying in the Arts Stream, had the greatest sense of ethnic distrust (Chai, 1977: 60). This sentiment of anxiety and alienation was especially due to the intensity of the sense of competition in the face of the impending public O-level Malaysian Certificate of Education examinations which would determine their educational mobility. That this anxiety and alienation was translated into ethnic terms was due to the heightened awareness in these

schools of the ongoing government efforts to nurture academically bright Malay students for further studies (Bock, 1978). In fact, almost every Malay student who was admitted into the pre-university class (Form Six) was automatically given a scholarship irrespective of family income (Takei *et al.*, 1973: 12).

The communalist tone of campus politics became more and more salient from the late 1960s onwards. The context of May 13 racial riots and the unresolved frustration and alienation confronted by the Malay-educated university students in a predominantly English-speaking campus environment had led to their radicalization as a pressure group for immediate redress to their grievances (Abdul Majid, 1971: 97), and in doing so, exacerbated interethnic antagonism. The Majid Committee that was mandated in 1970 to investigate the state of “race relations” in UM, noted that:

In general, it appears to us that race relations in the campus are as normal and, in ordinary day-to-day dealings, as cordial as they are outside. Beyond these social and superficial levels, however, we detect a mutual indifference on the part of one racial group to the feelings, concerns and problems of the other. We believe a mutual lack of comprehension and understanding exists between the different racial groups leading to polarization on serious political issues and even to hostility in times of student crises.

(Abdul Majid, 1971: 29)

As the last significant multiethnic front forged by the student movement was collapsing in 1974, ethnic estrangement and discontentment among non-Malay university students in the face of the policy impacts of the government’s race-based affirmative action were already widespread and simmering. Richard Basham, an anthropologist who was lecturing during the academic year of 1973-74 in USM provided a vivid ethnographic record of the campus situation. Besides the hasty imposition of the Malay language requirements, he noted that the issue of scholarships was one subject which frequently engendered bitterness among the non-Malay students, especially those from a lower socio-economic background. They questioned why scholarships were given to wealthy or middle-class Malays whose academic performance was lower than theirs (Basham, 1983: 65).<sup>25</sup> In addition, many bright non-Malays became resentful especially as they began their job search towards the final year of their studies and found that they were being passed over for the positions they were interviewed due to the race factor (Basham, 1983: 67-8). Not only was there explicit racial quota in the hiring of people in the public service, there was also constant government pressure on big companies to hire Malays in executive positions (Basham, 1983: 63).

Such sentiment of Malay versus non-Malay antipathy appeared to be mutually reinforcing. A student of Chinese descent who was adopted by a Malay family claimed that



Malay acquaintances only warmed up to him when they realized that he was a “Malay”. Similarly, the initial acceptance of Chinese strangers turned hostile when he answered their questions posed in Chinese in Malay (Basham, 1983: 69). Malay students found the non-Malay students on the campus unfriendly and “too serious” and did not like to share room with them (p. 73). Malay lecturers who had just returned from overseas studies and took over the teaching positions also felt themselves alienated from non-Malay students and unable to establish trust with them. One Malay lecturer expressed his indignation of being perceived as racially biased when he gave a Chinese student a low grade (Basham, 1983: 66).

Malay students, on the other hand, generally expressed support for the government’s racial preferential policy. Nagata (1984: 96) noted that comments and opinions voiced at seminars on campuses revealed a “strong support for the direction of government policies and Malay rights, sometimes combined with unabashed anti-Chinese sentiments”. If there were any complaints, it was more in the line that the government did not do enough in implementing the “quota”, or that the government was not genuinely helping the poor Malays but just creating a minority of rich Malays. Many of them brushed aside the criticisms of the non-Malays as exaggerating the reality of the implementation of Malay preferences. They also tended to defend the policy as aiming to help the rural poor, the majority of whom were incidentally Malays. They appeared to ignore instances which indicated that *race* rather than poverty or area of residence was the principal criteria of discrimination (Basham, 1983: 68-9).

This difference in perception could be due to the fact that government attribution of scholarships had generally favoured far more students from higher socio-economic background than those from a lower social status. One socio-economic survey of 1983 batch of university graduates found that more than 80 per cent of all state and federal government scholarships and bursaries were accorded to Bumiputera students. While it was found that these awards benefited rich households far more than the poorer households regardless of ethnicity, intra-Malay inequality of opportunity was comparatively greater than intra-Chinese/Indian inequality of opportunity. For every chance a poor Chinese or Indian household has of being awarded a scholarship, a rich Chinese or Indian household had 13 and 10 chances respectively. The disparity between poor and rich Malay households was found to be one to 21 chances (Selvaratnam, 1988: 192). Seen in this light, the sentiments of *both* the Malay and Chinese students mentioned above, probably mostly from poorer family background, were quite justified. In addition, the expensive science boarding secondary schools<sup>26</sup> and MARA junior science colleges set up purportedly to help prepare Bumiputera students from low socio-economic and rural backgrounds in studying science-based discipline at home and overseas were in fact found to have recruited more than 60 per cent of its students from the middle and professional classes (Selvaratnam, 1988: 191). It is precisely in this way that the

NEP had failed to live up to its own promises.

In his survey of 693 students in the five public universities in 1978, Thangavelu Marimuthu concluded that “in universities where there were greater racial and social mix in the student population...there was also a strong tendency for students to group together on the basis of ethnicity...the situation of social interaction does not seem to have improved over the decade” (Marimuthu, 1984: 49).

Abdullah Taib (1984) and Agoes Salim (1986) apparently made similar observations and remarks. Agoes was quoted by Mansor (2000/1: 101-02) when referring to the campus situation as saying that,

the children who were too young to know or understand the racial clashes of 1969 are now the young men and women in the colleges and universities. These same people were brought up with very heavy doses of *Rukunegara*. They were imbued with a sense of justice and fair play; they were taught (sic) about the need of racial tolerance and understanding; they were exhorted to work together for the good of the nation. Yet these are the very people among whom there is great suspicion and cleavage. There is very little inter-racial mixing among the students in these institutions and the situation seems to get worse rather than better.

According to Mansor, both authors noted that different ethnic groups settled into their own groups when attending lectures; tended to patronize canteens operated by their respective ethnic members; that one ethnic group tended to gravitate to one particular campus activity while another preferred a different one; that Chinese students could not identify with the programmes organized by the Malay-dominated unions; that Malay students frequently made requests to transfer rooms in order to be with students from the same ethnic group (Mansor, 2000/1: 102).

The early years of 1980s were also a time when universities in the United Kingdom, Australia and New Zealand, raised their tuition fees for foreign students, which rendered it even less affordable for the middle class non-Malay parents to send their children overseas for further studies. This situation rendered admission into local universities among the non-Malays even more competitive (Loh, 2005).<sup>27</sup> From the point of view of the non-Malays, there was no lack of issues which stirred discontentment. In 1981, for instance, it was learnt that despite the acute problems of shortage of doctors in the country, UM had over the past decade limited its annual student intake of medical undergraduates to 128 even though it could train a maximum of 160 students. Among the 128 students, one third of the places were allocated to the non-Malays. The reason given for the limitation of admission was that there were not enough Malay students to fulfill the quota (Lim, 1982: 418-19).

By the end of 1980s, the situation of campus racial segregation not only did not improve, observers were raising alarm on the situation of ethnic relations in the *entire* national education system. In 1986, Kua (1990: 259) had noted that “the phenomenon of communal polarization has become alarming in the National School System itself, right from primary level to the institutions of higher learning”. This situation in fact had been detected in secondary schools even during the 1970s. A survey of several high schools around 1974 indicated that friendship between Chinese and Malay pupils was mainly intra-ethnic in nature regardless of school environment (Basham, 1983: 69). A similar trend was noted by Sanusi (1989: 246-47) for the decade of the 1980s. He noted that it was not uncommon for the undergraduates to be confronted for the first time with the need to deal with interethnic interaction in the university.

To complete this brief overview of interethnic relations in campus, we will compare the different approaches taken by two surveys which arrived at a non-alarmist interpretation of the situation. The first is a comprehensive random survey on ethnic interaction conducted by Centre for Economic Development and Ethnic Relations (CEDER) of UM in 2002.

The CEDER survey confirmed the general perception that most students speak their mother tongue with friends from the same ethnic group. Malay respondents tended to be monolingualistic, speaking the Malay language to all and were the least likely to speak English. Communication between Chinese and Indian students was conducted mainly in English (Jahara *et al.*, 2004: 18).<sup>28</sup> The feedback from discussions with student leaders in focus groups also confirmed that most of the students tended to mix with those from the same ethnic group. A student stated that he socialized less with students from other ethnic groups than he used to in secondary school.<sup>29</sup> In one residential college, the attempt to implement interethnic room sharing was scrapped due to strong opposition on religious grounds. Nevertheless, the majority of students did not think that there were any serious problems pertaining to ethnic relations on campus (Jahara *et al.*, 2004: 66-9).

However, contrary to the position of Sheela Abraham, the CEDER survey concluded that interethnic interaction among undergraduates was “satisfactory”. The survey considered having five or more friends from other ethnic groups as “indicative of high level of interethnic interactions” (Jahara *et al.*, 2004: 10).<sup>30</sup> It was found that 61 per cent of the Chinese respondents had five or more Malay friends, 54 per cent of Malay respondents affirmed having five or more Chinese friends, while between 60 to 90 per cent of Indian and other Bumiputera respondents reported having five or more Chinese or Malay friends (Jahara *et al.*, 2004: 11).

The findings of the survey confirm limited or moderate interethnic interaction among university students. While it may be *a priori* desirable for a population not to be ethnically segregated in their interaction, it seems to be unwarranted to describe such a situation as

“hostile ethnic relations” or threatening racial harmony without more serious substantiation.

Another academic who defied the prevalent negative outlook and made optimistic assessment of campus ethnic relations was Mansor Mohd Noor. As a student under the supervision of Michael Banton, Mansor developed a research technique called ethnic alignment (Banton and Mansor, 1992), which investigates the responses of university students on hypothetical situations involving day-to-day practical issues such as renting out houses, child minding, shopping choices or seeking business partners. Four similar surveys were carried out consecutively from 1996 to 1999 among an accumulated 1,880 respondents in USM (Mansor, 2000/1). He concluded that there is an increasing convergence among students in USM in terms of sharing universalistic values and that students tended less and less to behave based on communal reasoning. He argued from his survey that in terms of everyday dealings, self interests in terms of pragmatic gains outweighed ethnic preference; and personal obligation overrode ethnic considerations (Mansor, 2000/1: 94-96). This new trend, for him, is a cause for optimism regarding ethnic relations in the country.

Commenting on the diametrically opposite assessment of campus situation in the 1980s by Abdullah Taib and Agoes Salim in his article, Mansor reasoned that they were looking at interethnic relations solely from the point of view of competition over educational resources and the distribution of the benefits of economic growth. He argued that while defence of ethnic privileges at the political level inevitably led to interethnic hostility, one should not overlook a parallel, emerging trend whereby the educated elite from various ethnic groups increasingly shared common universalistic norms (Mansor, 2000/1: 101-3).

Mansor’s work is interesting in pointing out that there is more to ethnic relations than just interethnic interaction. His results seemed to indicate that to a greater or lesser extent, both Malay and Chinese respondents generally expected pragmatism to override ethnic considerations in finding practical solutions to their day-to-day situations. Although in the minority, there was nevertheless a greater tendency among the Malay respondents to manifest ethnic preference (Mansor, 2000/1: 95). It is unfortunate that Mansor did not attempt to explore further other social indicators (such as the extent of the prior interethnic experience of individual respondents) which might have a bearing on these attitudes.

What appears to be missing in the innovative and interesting research of Mansor (2000/1) is a lack of examination of his assumption on the different levels of causes of ethnic polarization. In the formulation of research questions to study ethnic alignment, three sources of potential conflict were identified, namely ethnic loyalty, individual self-interest and personal obligation. Research questions were formulated in such a way as to test the relative strength of ethnic loyalty when the situation set it *against* self-interest or personal obligation (Banton and Mansor, 1992). However, the way the question was set overlooks the situation when ethnic

loyalty goes hand in hand with self-interest and/or personal obligation, which is the classic setting of the problem in the Malaysian context of ethnic preferential treatment. In addition, his argument appeared to assume that it was the cultural heterogeneity and ethnicism which were the causes of racial polarization. Once everybody shared the same universal values, he reasoned, then consensus and harmony would prevail, political tension arising from disputes over special privileges notwithstanding. Yet the political factors and the institutional effects that he did not measure, as we have seen, were arguably the main contributory causes to interethnic animosity and mistrust. The interethnic division caused by dispute over rights and privileges is not the expression of some form of primordialist, irrational thinking but could also be seen as a rational reaction based on pragmatic considerations of self-interest which coincide with and reinforces ethnic loyalty.

### Conclusions

Is the phenomenon of ethnic polarization reaching a worrying stage in the Malaysian campus? With the caveat on the non-comparability of some of the empirical findings, it appears that the pattern of interethnic interaction had not really evolved in any substantial way since at least the mid-1960s. There were arguably even more incidents of serious interethnic tension during the sixties than in the current situation. This brings to light the selective and partial way the older generation of Malaysians remember their past. The findings of Alvin Rabushka and John Bock, as well as our examination of campus politics, also challenge the common argument that English-medium education was able to foster a greater interethnic integration by bringing together students from different ethnic groups under a common roof. As noted by the Abdul Majid in his *Report* (1971: 120):

Even if the student comes from a background of multi-racialism such as an integrated school, there is a possibility that once alone in the University, he may tend to seek out the company solely of students belonging to his own race and gradually lose those values based on integration and multi-racialism.

While there was definitely a great divide between the English-educated and Malay-educated university students, it was arguably more a class difference rather than an ethnic schism. Whether it was the national language issue or the affirmative action policy, the ultimate issue of contention was arguably social and economic mobility. The division was also ideological as it could be seen that the UMSU leadership was actually multiethnic.

During the subsequent phase, as Islamist activism took hold, the much reduced number of non-Malay students effectively participated as a minority, adopting the strategy of securing a better bargain between the political options offered to them by competing Malay groups.

Selective interethnic cooperation persisted in campus politics, especially when non-Malay students constitute a significant minority, but it was carried out in different forms under modified circumstances.

### Notes

- 1 The ethnic composition of the sample was 50 per cent Malay, 25 per cent Chinese and 25 per cent Indian.
- 2 Elements listed were the fact that majority of the respondents spoke Malay, the national language, fluently; supported national leaders and expressed their sense of loyalty by choosing Malaysia as their preferred country of residence.
- 3 A macro-statistical calculation revealed that a student who studied in a government-assisted English-medium school has one chance in nine of entering the pre-university sixth form classes in 1967 while the ratio was one in 176 for the Malay-medium students (Takei *et al.*, 1973: 25-6). A survey done in 1973 among almost 600 students in USM indicated that 63.3 per cent of the respondents received primary education in English (Basham, 1983: 71).
- 4 By then, a small proportion of Chinese students who received primary education in Mandarin while continuing their secondary schooling in English had also appeared. However, even in 1973, the survey done in USM only found 22.4 per cent of its student sample as coming from Chinese primary schools while 52.2 per cent of its respondents were ethnic Chinese (Basham, 1983: 72).
- 5 Prior to this, it had gone through numerous stages of initiation and re-naming from its foundation as Socialist Club in 1959. Attempts to resurrect it took the names of Pantai Forum (1964), Progressive Club (1965) and Forum Mahasiswa (1966) before it was re-launched successfully as the Socialist Club in 1967 (Muhammad, 1973: 46). One of the obstacles to its formation was the reticence of the government and the administration in approving its formation (Sanusi, 1968: 53). Non-Malay students' lukewarm reception was also said to be a contributory factor (Junaidi, 1993: 21).
- 6 The PKPM which was formed in 1958 was composed of student organizations at the teachers' training college and other specialized institutions of higher learning besides that of UM. The students from UM made up more than half of PKPM members and its headquarters was also located in the UMSU building. UMSU called the tune in the early PKPM. In fact, at least a quarter of the office-bearers of PKPM were also senior office-bearers in UMSU (Silverstein, 1970: 14). It was only from the 1970s, with the establishment of more public universities, that this monopoly of UMSU over PKPM was broken.
- 7 A resolution to that effect was passed by the fifth annual conference of PKPM held in March 1963 (Silverstein, 1970: 15).
- 8 A note was added to Dr. Mahathir's letter, stating that, "Those who say they are descendants of Malays are requested to copy this letter and circulate it widely so that it may open their eyes and know what kind of man our leader is, the man who is known as 'THE HAPPY PRIME MINISTER'" (von Vorys, 1976: 375).
- 9 Funston (1980: 224) noted that Dr. Mahathir "gained even stronger support from Malay academics and tertiary students" than UMNO party members. It was during this time that Anwar Ibrahim as a student activist established contacts with Mahathir (Khoo, B. T., 1995).
- 10 PBMUM demanded a withdrawal of the statement by UMSU which denounced the former as "perpetuating acts of vandalism and destruction". In a heated public debate on the issue between the two camps attended by more than three thousand students, three quarters of which were supporters of the PBMUM, the UMSU president subsequently agreed to withdraw the statement in its entirety "to avoid any unpleasant situation". Even then, PBMUM was not satisfied and



called for the resignation of the UMSU leadership as having lost the confidence of the student body (Bass, 1971: 980-1, Muhammad, 1973: 116-122).

- 11 The UMSU leadership was retained after the no-confidence motion was rejected by the student council by a three to one margin on 18 October (Bass, 1971: 981).
- 12 During the UMSU-PBMUM dialogue session, Anwar Ibrahim, a former PBMUM president, warned that if UMSU president, Zainal Abidin Yusuf, did not withdraw his description of the acts of PBMUM as “acts of destructions and vandalism”, PBMUM “would not leave the venue peacefully” (Muhammad, 1971: 120).
- 13 In fact, from 1970, students were required to get a minimum of a “pass” for their Malay language tests besides other previous academic requirements for them to obtain the O-level Malaysian Certificate of Education (MCE). It was reported that in 1972, for instance, half of the total candidates from English-medium schools failed to get their MCE because they failed their Bahasa Malaysia (Malay language) paper (Chai, 1977: 44).
- 14 Among the common responses of non-Malay students concerning the implementation of the Malay language were: “What good is Malay when there are almost no textbooks in it and all scientific and technical words are borrowed from English” and “The Malays only want to force us to learn Malay so they can pass us in [their command of] English” (Basham, 1983: 71).
- 15 Nagata (1984: 96) mentioned that in UM, “one of the two principal student bodies, the Gabungan Mahasiswa, is openly and militantly anti-Chinese, as opposed to the more ethnically neutral Barisan Mahasiswa, whose members the former accuse of ‘socialism’”.
- 16 Apparently, the leaders of PBMUM, PMIUM and the Silat Gayong (a Malay martial art) groups were behind the “nationalists” (Hassan, 1984: 38, 43-44; Silverstein, 1976: 200-201). The group stood for the 1974 UMSU election but won only one seat (Hassan, 1984: 40).
- 17 The “nationalist” student activists claimed that the UMSU action in the name of the squatters was merely a façade to slow down the switch from English to Malay as the medium of instruction in the university’s science faculty, in which the majority of the students were Chinese.
- 18 According to one estimate, 90 per cent of UKM and Mara Institute of Technology (ITM) students and 60 per cent of UM students took part. In UKM and ITM, an overwhelming majority of the students were Malay (Nagata, 1980: 408).
- 19 They were Syed Husin Ali, Tengku Shamsul Bahrain, Lim Mah Hui and Gurdial Nijar (Munro-Kua, 1996: 82).
- 20 The replacement of the 1961 University Act by 1971 UUCA based on the recommendations of the *Majid Report* was already decried previously as seeking to control and weaken the various student organizations (Hassan, 1984: 7).
- 21 Alternatively, Nagata (1984: 177) in her detailed study of the phenomenon gave her estimation as follows: approximately 20 per cent of UM students, 40 per cent of UKM students, 10 per cent of UTM and UPM students and “barely 10%” of USM students.
- 22 According to the argument of Zainah (1987: 24), the ABIM-dominated phase “was progressive in its appeal. It did not see Islam in the black and white manner that the later dakwah adherents did. While it was critical of the government and of government policies that it considered unjust and oppressive, it never vociferously called for the creation of an Islamic state. It believed in Islamizing the ummah first along a gradual, moderate and progressive path”.
- 23 Malay students were discouraged even from watching the television which purportedly would distract them into neglecting God. Male students who talked to girls, wore shoes or dressed up in tie and coat were reprimanded as exhibiting behaviour associated with infidels (Zainah, 1990: 32).
- 24 A small number of Malay undergraduates in the Arts faculty would have gone through their entire schooling in Malay. By then, Malay students of such background had just begun to join UM in small numbers. Comparatively, those Malay students who received their schooling in English-medium still stood a much better chance of passing their examinations and being successful in getting enrolled into the university. A study made in 1972 found that only 2.6 cent of the Malay



- students attending the better equipped English-medium primary schools failed to continue with their secondary education while the corresponding proportion of dropouts from Malay-medium primary schools were 34.7 cent. The trend was the same for Chinese and Tamil primary school pupils compared with their English-medium counterparts (Chai, 1977: 37).
- 25 For instance, a final year Chinese student whose father was a farmer shared her indignation that despite the fact that she was poor and excelled academically, she was not offered a state scholarship, while another Malay girl from middle class background who performed less well did (Basham, 1983: 65).
  - 26 Each of them absorbed five times more than the financial allocation given to a normal day school. Students in these schools were provided with free board and lodging and given stipends as pocket money plus free transportation to and from home during the three slots of school holidays every year (Takei *et al.*, 1973: 13).
  - 27 In effect, the rapid increase in the demand for local university education just could not be met fully by the number of places offered, despite continued annual augmentation of the latter. While 67 per cent of the applicants were assured of a place in the university in 1970, only 18 per cent of them could be admitted in 1986 (Selvaratnam, 1988: 187-8).
  - 28 Among Indian respondents, 79 per cent reported having spoken English to Chinese friends either frequently or very frequently (Jahara *et al.*, 2004: 19).
  - 29 This was also the current experience of the daughters of one lecturer interviewed by the author.
  - 30 We could of course take issue with the definition of “satisfaction” of interethnic interaction in the survey, which could have been defined in a variety of other ways. The definition is no doubt an arbitrary one, and having five “friends” from other ethnic groups does not say much about the nature or depth of such friendships. Nevertheless, given the subjective nature of the concept of “satisfactory interethnic relations”, this is a commendable attempt to introduce some kind of indicator which could be compared, verified or disputed.

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