

## **The Rise and Effects of Social Movement on Ethnic Relations in Malaysia: The Bersih Movement as a Case Study**

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**Abstract :** The significance of this paper is to provide an insight on the role of social movement in building stronger ethnic relations in Malaysia. In particular, it focuses on how the BERSIH movement have been able to bring together the different ethnic groups in Malaysia to resist the present political administration that is seen to manipulate the electoral process and oppress the basic freedom of expression of Malaysians. Attention is given on how and why this group emerged and its mobilisation strategies. Malaysia which is a multi-ethnic and multi-religious society gained its independence from the British in 1957. Like many other new nations, it faces the challenges of nation building and governance. From economic issues to racial and religious tension, Malaysia is experiencing high level of corruption and income disparity among the different ethnic groups. The political parties in Malaysia are also divided along ethnic lines. BERSIH which is translated as 'clean' is a movement which seeks to reform the current electoral system in Malaysia to ensure equality, justice, free and fair elections. It was originally formed in 2007 as a joint committee that comprised leaders from political parties, civil society groups and NGOs. In April 2010, the coalition developed as an entirely civil society movement unaffiliated to any political party. BERSIH claimed that the electoral roll in Malaysia has been marred by fraud and other irregularities. In 2015, the BERSIH movement organised its biggest rally in Malaysia which also includes 38 other rallies held internationally. Supporters of BERSIH that participated in the demonstration were comprised of all the different ethnic groups in Malaysia. In this paper, two social movement theories are used: resource mobilization theory and political opportunity structure to explain the emergence and mobilization of the BERSIH movement in Malaysia. Based on these two theories, corruption which is believed to have contributed to the income disparity among Malaysians has generated the development of this movement. The rise of re-islamisation values propagated by certain groups in Malaysia and the shift in political leadership has also created political opportunities for this movement to emerge. In line with the political opportunity structure theory, the BERSIH movement will continue to create more opportunities for the empowerment of civil society and the unity of ethnic relations in Malaysia. Comparison is made on the degree of ethnic unity in the country before and after BERSIH was formed. This would include analysing the level of re-islamisation values and also the level of corruption in relation to economic income under the premiership of the former Prime Minister Mahathir and the present Prime Minister Najib Razak. The country has never seen such uprisings like BERSIH where ethnic groups which over the years have been divided by ethnic based political parties and economic disparity joined together with a common goal for equality and fair elections. As such, the BERSIH movement is a unique case where it illustrates the change of political landscape, ethnic relations and civil society in Malaysia.

**Keywords :** ethnic relations, Malaysia, political opportunity structure, resource mobilization theory and social movement

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