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Ethnicity, popular democratic movements and labour in Malaysia

Richard Croucher and Lilian Miles

Abstract

We use framing theory to examine how activists and trade unions have framed labour's political agenda in Malaysia. A polity grounded in ethnicity continues to hinder the formation of cross-ethnic collective worker identities and labour politics. However, inclusive popular democratising movements have strengthened in recent years, providing a favourable context for greater emphasis on non-ethnic political action by trade unions. The latter have shifted in this direction, adopting elements of the popular movement's 'human rights' internationalism. Thus, the democratic movement's frame

influenced that of the trade unions, with implications for framing theory.

Introduction

We draw on framing theory to evaluate efforts to re-cast Malaysian labour politics in ways that challenge government and its pro-Malay ethnic-based approach in this multi-ethnic society. We ask how unions and labour NGOs have framed labour's interests in relation to the popular democratic movement that has recently emerged. The Malaysian experience offers the prospect of an interesting study of labour and ethnicity given the centrality of the latter to the country's political discourse (Brown, 1994; Chin, 2000; Crouch, 2001; Rowley & Bhopal, 2006). Malaysia is important regionally as a relatively successful labour-importing country in South East Asia.

When workers experience collective problems in the workplace, they can overcome ethnic and other differences, even if only temporarily (McIlroy, 2012). Worker collectives required for production itself potentially foster solidarities and under the right political conditions, allow them to pursue their collective interests (Kelly, 1998). Both the Marxist and the wider industrial relations traditions fully recognise that state policies may hinder such solidarities from finding expression and thereby hinder the development and resonance of pro-labour politics (McIlroy, 2012). Historically, trade unions in different

countries have on occasion been organised by ethnicity or prioritised issues of interest to particular ethnic constituencies, thereby limiting the possibilities of developing wider sociological bases (see for example Marks and Trapido, 2014). The Malaysian unions, by contrast, are not organised on ethnic lines although their outlook has been impacted by governmental policies (Rowley and Bhopal, 2006). Labour issues in both the political and practical if not bargaining spheres are also in part the preserve of labour-oriented Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs). The aims of both types of pro-worker organisation are to some extent shared: to raise consciousness among employees of their position as workers, build awareness of their collective strength and the potential for constructive action along non-ethnic lines in order to defend their interests. An external impetus provided by the democratic movement potentially provides a context in which previous reluctance to challenge government and its ethnic divide-and-rule politics may be overcome, and a politics with a broad popular appeal built. In this way both types of labour organisation stand to gain by developing their currently small size and influence.

The Malaysian ethnic-based polity builds on colonial practices, when Chinese and Indian immigrants were recruited by the British to work in mines, plantations and cities, and were segregated geographically, economically and socially from Malays (Haque, 2003). This impeded solidarity from emerging among the ethnic groups (Stockwell, 1982).

Nonetheless, non-ethnic workers' movements have a long, tumultuous history in Malaysian politics that have described a declining trajectory since the early 1950s (Devaraj, 2009: 86). The Malaysian Communist Party (MCP), founded in 1930, embraced an anti-colonial and internationalist stance. It led strikes and demonstrations involving hundreds of thousands of workers across all ethnic groups, and in the 1940s, under MCP leadership, the labour movement attained an historic high water mark (Ahn, 2006: 38). On 20th October 1947, a nationwide strike was declared by a coalition of left organisations, political parties and trade unions opposed to British constitutional proposals. Workers, peasants, merchants, farmers and fishermen across all ethnic groups participated, halting business, administration activities and towns (Reza, 2007). The strike failed to change British constitutional policy. The British crushed subsequent protests and declared a State of Emergency in June 1948, detaining thousands. The origins of the non-Communist Malaysian Trades Union Congress (MTUC) lie in this period and the MTUC continues to make reference to its foundation in that context (<http://www.mtuc.org.my/about-us/>).

The trajectory of Malaysian politics increasingly emphasised ethnic politics both before and after independence in 1957. In the 1950s and 1960s, the Socialist Front (an amalgamation of the predominantly urban and Chinese Labour Party and the Malay-based People's Party) was formed as a non-communal socialist alternative. It faced

significant persecution from the government, with hundreds of leaders and members being detained under the Internal Security Act (Weiss, 2006: 92-99). Repression undermined its effectiveness and internal divisions led to its dissolution in 1966. The Labour Party's persecution and its dissolution in 1972 further limited working class political representation (Rodan, 2012: 324). Left-leaning civil society organisations emerged in the 1970s but had almost vanished by the late 1980s. The suppression of left movements created a vacuum within the opposition which enabled ethnic and religious parties to grow (Devaraj, 2009: 88). More recently, this has changed albeit to a limited extent. The Parti Socialis Malaysia (<http://partisosialis.org/en>) is currently the only pro-labour political party according centrality to a non-ethnic labour politics. Established in 1998, it claims to represent plantation workers, the urban poor, industrial workers and peasants across all ethnic groups. It is not a mainstream political party and has a relatively low profile. In the thirteenth general election, it retained the single federal parliamentary seat it won in 2008. As a small party, it works with other civil society organisations and opposition political parties (Vinod, 2011).

The Malaysian context creates severe challenges comparable to, but in some respects more marked than those facing labour activists in neighbouring countries. The national polity-ethnicity-labour political nexus appears differently in Malaysia in comparison to its labour-importing close neighbour Singapore. Malaysia's polity has been

characterised as ‘authoritarian patriarchalism’ which has used ethnicity to divide labour; by contrast, Singapore’s has been dubbed ‘enforceable benevolence’ and labour has been co-opted in non-ethnic ways (Woodiwiss, 1998). The secular development of Malaysian national governance has created a weak labour movement which has been progressively largely excluded from dialogue with government over the developmental process (Wad, 2012; Jomo, 2014). It has also been managed in part by an emphasis on ethnicity as a defining social characteristic, an ideology which clearly weakens labour’s situation. In Singapore, the state moved quickly post-independence to strengthen its position vis-a-vis labour via a weak form of tripartism and simultaneously pursued a broader policy which downplayed ethnicity in favour of a meritocratic rhetoric. Labour occupied a subordinate, enabling role in relation to the state, securing a limited niche through state support (Sheldon et al, 2015). Indonesia supplies a good deal of Malaysia’s migrant labour and displays a third, rather different national context. In that case, labour has shown more tendency to mobilise vigorously in sporadic but persistent defence of its interests than in either Malaysia or Singapore. The recently-liberalised political environment has brought the proliferation of unions and labour non-governmental organisations. Scholars of Indonesian labour have investigated how both kinds of organisation have advanced labour rights. Ford’s works on the Indonesian labour movement document the innovative ways in which they have attempted to advance worker rights, from building worker capacity to

engaging directly in politics (Ford, 2009; 2012; 2014). Mietzner (2013) documents how labour has promoted its cause by playing an active role in formal politics.

Recent labour mobilisations across Indonesia lend support to the argument that strong worker collective identities and elements of class consciousness are in evidence (Juliawan, 2011; Aspinall, 2013; ITUC, 2013; 2015). Ethnicity has played an ambiguous role in Indonesian labour politics. Local identities have provided a basis for mobilizing workers, but have simultaneously limited the social reach of their mobilisations. As Elmhirst (2004) demonstrates, young women internal migrant workers are much influenced by local loyalties. She shows how these acted both to assist and limit on their capacity to conduct mobilisations in relation to employers.

Nevertheless, significant movements from below have been in evidence in Indonesia as elites have moved away from earlier emphases on national and ethnic discourses. Thus, given low levels of state support and support from below, Malaysia represents a distinctive, and in some ways difficult, case for labour activists in terms of the national polity-ethnicity-labour nexus' configuration.

Much literature typically attributes the lack of workers' rights in Malaysia to its repressive political environment (Jomo & Todd, 1994; Anantaraman, 1997; Todd & Peetz, 2001). Yet collective action has

secured reform even in similarly difficult environments. Across the Middle East, social movements united disparate elements within a collective action frame to pursue democratic freedoms. Thus, repression only partly explains labour's condition. Agency also counts, in terms of labour's willingness to challenge governmental orthodoxies. Views differ as to how far Malaysian state policies have been and are likely to be contested by Malaysian labour. Rowley & Bhopal (2006) argued that the Malaysian state has subjected labour to various strategies as the political, social and economic contexts evolved; it has successfully sought labour's cooperation, incorporated it in order to control autonomous action, and fragmented and divided it. These strategies were implemented in ways which ensured its legitimacy and support in a political structure dominated by an ethnic discourse, which itself is constructed as fundamental to regime legitimacy (p.108). Wad (2012) on the other hand, publishing six years later, suggests that the Malaysian trade union movement showed some signs of improving its fortunes, while advocating increased political activity to realise this potential. He also warned of the movement's limitations, suggesting that 'its socio-political potential as a class has been diverted into ethno-political partisan politics' (Wad, 2012, p. 506). Thus, these researchers all stress the way that the trade unions had themselves been affected by governmental ethnic discourses although Wad (2012) placed more stress on their potential. Change had occurred between the two publications, as in the interim a considerable popular democratising

movement gained strength. Alternatively, it is also possible despite these changes that Rowley and Bhopal (2006) correctly identified long-term continuities that persist down to the present. We therefore pose the question: how have unions and labour NGOs framed labour's interests in relation to the recent democratising movement?

The paper proceeds as follows. The following Section 1 outlines our method while Section 2 introduces the main concepts of framing theory. Section 3 analyses elite ethnic politics and the emergence of a multi-ethnic reform movement, discussing the nature of its oppositional frame. Section 4 analyses the ways that labour politics have been re-framed and is followed by our conclusion (Section 5) in which we point to synergies and tensions between the frames used by the democratic and labour movements.

1: Method

A considerable literature exists on the Malaysian situation and we rely heavily on these contributions. Since our research question concerns the framing of issues by the democratic movement and, in particular, by labour NGOs and trade unions, we have also used public primary sources that allow us to approach it at the level of labour politics nationally. We have consulted newspapers and the web-sites of labour-based NGOs, individual trade unions and the Malaysia TUC. We make most use of the latter since it is the over-arching union body in the country and in common with other such 'peak' organisations is

more concerned with political action than individual unions, which have more industrial concerns. In addition, we conducted ten interviews with individuals holding positions of responsibility in labour-based NGOs, individual trade unions and the MTUC, carried out in Malaysia between 2011 and 2013. All were transcribed and analysed by manual coding in relation to our theme. They are used as a control on the literature we use throughout and have constituted a central source for the construction of sections 3 and 4. All respondents' details and affiliations have been anonymised to implement our agreements with them.

2: Framing Theory

The notion of framing has a long sociological pedigree (Goffman, 1974). It has been utilised by social movement theorists to clarify how movements select issues to draw attention to, interpret grievances, generate consensus on the need to take action to remedy these grievances and legitimise their actions. Framing is a dynamic, ongoing process, conditioned by the political and social structures within which people live (Benford & Snow, 2000: 628; 629). It has been applied to trade unions, which also require the capacity to mobilise, often in collaboration with other organisations (Kelly, 1998). Social movements' framing processes are key to mobilising collective action, because it is only through first recognising that

particular situations are unjust that action can be taken to change them.

Benford and Snow (2000) identify three core framing tasks:

diagnostic, prognostic and motivational framing (pp.615-617).

Diagnostic framing refers to the identification of a problem as a reason for mobilisation. It pinpoints the “sources of causality, blame and/or culpable agents” (p616). Prognostic framing involves the articulation of a proposed solution to the problem and strategies for carrying it out (p.616). It can include refuting opponents’ frames to minimise their impact (counter-framing). Finally, motivational framing is a “call to arms” (p.617) and gives individuals a reason, a rationale, for engaging in collective action. Collective action frames play an important part in social movement mobilisation. They simplify and condense aspects of the world in ways intended to gather support, mobilise action and demobilise opponents (Snow & Benford, 1988: 198; 2000: 614). Social movements deploy collective action frames to bring individuals together to pursue an objective. These frames interpret a situation as unjust, but they also provide a conviction to individuals that they are able to remedy the situation through collective action.

Collective action frames connect individual identities to collective identities, linking them to a collective cause. Collective identity has been defined as “a shared sense of one-ness or we-ness anchored in

real or imagined shared attributes and experiences among those who comprise the collectivity” (Snow, 2001) and “an individual’s cognitive, moral, and emotional connections with a broader community, category, practice, or institution...a perception of a shared status or relation” (Jasper & Polletta, 2001: 284). Gamson (1991: 27) argues that “any movement that seeks to sustain commitment over a period of time must make the construction of collective identity one of its most central tasks”. The more people identify with a group, the more likely they are to protest on its behalf; in other words, collective identity stimulates protest participation (Klandermans, 2004). Taylor and Whittier (1992) propose three tools for understanding how collective identity is constructed: boundaries, consciousness and negotiation. Boundaries are drawn between a challenging and a dominant group which can serve to “heighten awareness of a group’s commonalities and frame interaction between members of the in-group and the out-group” (Taylor and Whittier, 1992; 111). Consciousness means “the interpretive frameworks that emerge out of a challenging group’s struggle to define and realise its interests” (ibid). Finally, negotiation refers to the ways activists work to “resist negative social definitions and demand the others value and treat oppositional groups differently” (Taylor and Whittier, 1992; 118). Social movements seeking to “resist or restructure existing systems of domination” (ibid. p111) often develop a “political” or “oppositional” consciousness against them (Hunt & Benford, 2005; 442).

In drawing boundaries, activists employ an oppositional “us versus them” paradigm (Gamson, 1997; Benford, 2002; Ghose, et. al, 2008) but many also use a more inclusive, distinction-muting logic of “us and them” to build bridges toward, rather than draw distinctions between, the opposing group and dominant order (Ghaziani, 2011). Boundaries promote a heightened awareness of a group’s commonalities and frame its relationship with the outside world (Taylor and Whittier, 1992; 111). In the Malaysian case, one challenge in boundary drawing would be to help workers build cross-ethnic identification to reject institutions and societal processes outside of the group which segregate society according to ethnic identity.

In constructing consciousness, activists identify members’ common interests in opposition to the dominant order. They establish new expectations regarding how they should be treated (Taylor and Whittier, 1992; 114). They do this through engaging in e.g. identity talk (Hunt and Benford, 1994), using narratives, memories or stories (Gongaware, 2001; Nepstad, 2001; in Hunt & Benford, 2004) and utilising emotions such as moral outrage, indignation and fear (e.g. Kane, 2001; Young, 2001) to raise or transform consciousness. They require micro-environments in which these processes can occur. For labour in Malaysia, this would entail creating spaces in which workers from all ethnic groups come together, to develop shared meanings, experiences and make a connection to collective efforts. A

challenge would be to build a shared narrative not only among workers within and across the different ethnic groups but also between local and migrant workers.

In negotiating collective identity, activists seek to challenge the social order which they oppose and regard as dominant. They may engage in counter-framing strategies to rebut dominant discourses which malign or ridicule them (Einwohner, 2002; Benford & Hunt, 2003). They may seek to change how power relations were historically structured between opposing groups (e.g. race or class barriers), and develop new ways of relating to each other (Pelak, 2005). Many also invoke social media to negotiate the meaning of their identity with each other as well as with the public (Smith, 2013).

Political environments influence, in divergent ways, how social movements frame issues. Further, just as the political structure constrains or facilitates frames and framing activities, so too does the cultural context in which movement activity takes place (Jasper, 1997; Goodwin & Jasper, 1999). The current stock of meanings, beliefs, ideologies, practices, values, myths and narratives all constitute the cultural resource base from which new frames may be fashioned (Benford & Snow, 2000: 629).

It has been argued that little progress has been made in applying social movement theory to industrial relations scholarship despite its

potential for the field (Gahan & Pekarek, 2012; pp.767; 771). There is an absence of attempts to explore the processes of framing and mobilisation at individual, social movement and social action field levels within a social system (ibid). We use framing theory to explore how unions have framed labour's political agenda in Malaysia. Importantly, we consider how the frames of the broader popular movement may have impacted on those of trade unions.

3: Elite ethnic policies and popular reform movements

The political environment has impacted Malaysian social movements' and trade unions' framing of labour issues. To advance national economic development and industrialisation, successive governments have subordinated the employment sphere, labour's bargaining power and union participation in policy making to neo-liberal and market-oriented agendas designed to improve Foreign Direct Investment (Ahn, 2006; Gomez, 2012). Labour rights internationally recognised as fundamental were not merely suppressed, they were also denounced as detrimental to economic growth (Ibid.) Shatsari & Hassan (2006) show that legal mechanisms to facilitate collective bargaining in Malaysia fail to meet ILO standards. Collective bargaining is not available to significant segments of workers. The law imposes numerous onerous requirements on union formation processes, resulting in many small, fragmented and regional unions. Employers frequently delay union recognition applications, victimise worker activists and encourage company-sponsored in-house unions

(Ramasamy & Rowley, 2008; Raduan, Kumar & Ramasamy, 2008).

During his premiership (1981-2003), Mahathir Mohamed promoted a vision of national corporatism which created potential openings for labour, but this was limited to promoting company-level corporatism by encouraging in-house unions and improving government-business relations. National-level organised labour was largely excluded. A series of laws was passed to curb its capacity to interfere with development projects (Jomo, 2014).

Simultaneously, ethnic identities have been consistently promoted by the political elite, shaping and constraining economic, social and political outcomes and this has been facilitated by continuity within the elite. The governing Barisan coalition, led by the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), has been in power since independence in 1957. It has preserved its rule through political arrangements designed to favour the Barisan coalition and ensure Malay paramouncy. Its consociational model of governance provided that despite sharing power with the Malaysian Chinese Association and Malaysian Indian Congress, that UMNO would enjoy a major share of the candidate slate and that its members would occupy leading posts in government. This has enabled UMNO to dominate Malaysia's government, sealing the interests of the ethnic Malays (Arakaki, 2009).

The proscription of many left-leaning political parties and activists presented workers with few alternatives but to support communalist

opposition forces (Devaraj, 2009). Chua (2007) showed how state promotion of “cultural citizenship” (a concept based on ethnicity) was liable to mobilise political conflict along ethnic lines, excluding other forms of conflict, such as class-based forms of collective representation. Brown (1994) observed more than twenty years ago that class interests were expressed through ethnicity in Malaysian society. This remains a persistent feature, and was evident in the Hindraf demonstrations in 2007, when thousands of Indians protested against their economic and political marginalisation (Pillay, 2007).

Recently, a vibrant multi-ethnic reform movement has developed, with one goal in mind – to challenge the Barisan coalition and secure political reform. Many civil society organisations and opposition political parties are constituents of this movement. At the 2008 and 2013 general elections, activist organisations helped the opposition political party (Pakatan)¹ gain electoral success, and expanded the boundaries for political contention against the Barisan coalition. We now focus on the antecedents and efforts of this movement, exploring how it constructed a collective identity among participants and the extent to which it succeeded in achieving its objective. We examine labour’s efforts to surface labour issues at the general election and its part in this wider movement.²

¹ Pakatan, led by Anwar Ibrahim, consists of the multi-ethnic Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR), the Chinese-based Democratic Action Party (DAP) and Malay-based Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS).

² We distinguish between the multi-ethnic reform movement and worker activists. Although they joined forces to oppose the Barisan

Opportunities for dissidents to demand political change have traditionally been few, a result of authoritarian rule and a fragile civil society (Crouch, 1996; Case, 2001; Verma, 2002). The first crack in Barisan's rule can be traced back to the Reformasi movement. Reformasi was initiated by Anwar Ibrahim and his supporters shortly after he was dismissed as Deputy Prime Minister in 1998. Reformasi crossed ethnic divides, connecting civil society organisations with opposition political parties and helping overcome fragmented efforts to achieve political change by both groups in the past (Giersdorf & Croissant, 2011). It conducted several mass demonstrations and rallies against Barisan, which continued until Anwar was arrested and jailed in 1998, whereupon it slowly subsided. Close relationships between civil society organisations and opposition political parties resurfaced in subsequent general elections, solidifying into the current reform movement. Two of the movement's distinctive characteristics are its multi-ethnic character and an orientation toward improving governance, controlling corruption, strengthening the rule of law and bringing about more equitable development (Welsh, 2013; Khoo, 2013). From a framing theoretical perspective, the momentum created by Reformasi over the years, even in a politically repressive regime, emboldened ordinary citizens to believe there was an alternative to

regime, they had distinct objectives. The former focused on political reform, the latter on labour rights.

Barisan, and allowed a new frame to be generated (Benford & Snow, 2000; 628; 629).

The reform movement employed an oppositional frame (Mansbridge, 2001) in the thirteenth general election to build a non-ethnic collective identity among its adherents. Its message was clear and embedded in its collective action frame: “Barisan is the enemy and must be defeated”. It drew clear boundaries between itself (“we”) and the dominant order (“Barisan”), projecting Barisan as the target of blame (Taylor & Whittier, 1992; Ghose, et. al, 2008). The movement propagated an inclusive conception of society, rejecting ethnic-based politics. It used code words such as ABU (Anyone but UMNO), Ini Kalilah (this is it) and UBAH (change), in its framing of Pakatan as a credible ruling party. It sought to neutralise Barisan’s counter-frame that only it could ensure national development, economic prosperity and political stability (Pakatan Rakyat Manifesto, 2013; Malaysiakini, 2013; Free Malaysia Today, 2013a). Many different civil society organisations united to demand electoral reform, different economic policies and justice for marginalised communities (Khoo, 2013).

Importantly, many civil society organisations and opposition political parties within the movement championed labour causes, including labour rights in the wider human rights discourse (see section 4 below). The movement organised rallies and demonstrations in all the major urban centres, where crowds reached 100,000 (Socialist World,

2013). They carried anti-Barisan banners and wore brightly coloured slogans to symbolise their dissent against the Barisan regime. They utilised social media to communicate their frames on line. They connected citizens to a common cause and gave them a sense that they held the key to ousting Barisan from power (e.g. Tumin & Ndoma, 2013; Khoo, 2013; Weiss, 2013). The occupation of public spaces, such as Merdeka Stadium, deepened network connections and strengthened collective identity (Bosco, 2001).

The reform movement did not ultimately succeed in winning the election but its gains were nevertheless significant. Its framing of Barisan as the enemy persuaded many voters to support the Pakatan coalition, and Barisan failed to regain its two thirds majority,³ which it had first lost in 2008. Secondly, for the first time ever, Pakatan won the popular vote in 2013, (50.87 percent compared to Barisan's 47.38 percent). It has been widely argued that the movement has transformed Malaysian politics, with the public now embracing "people power" to push for deeper democracy, government accountability and public participation in decision making (Welsh, 2013). Failure to achieve regime change has been attributed less to Pakatan's failings, and more to electoral fraud and a Westminster - style electoral system (Sithraputhran, 2013; The Economist, 2013; Crowell, 2013). Barisan's long-term deployment of electoral

³ Under the Malaysian constitution, constitutional amendments are facilitated by amending legislation which require a two-thirds majority vote of the membership of each House of Parliament (Article 159 of the Malaysian Constitution).

delineation to create unequal-sized constituencies has resulted in hugely mal-apportioned electoral districts and an over-representation of the Malay electorate, especially in rural areas (Lee, 2013).

Much speculation arose after the 2013 general election that Malaysia was witnessing an end to ethnic-based politics. Opinions were however, mixed. Hamayotsu (2013) argued that Malaysian politics remained deeply affected by ethnicity. Efforts by Malay-led political parties (UMNO and PAS) to be more “inclusive” have been rejected by the Malay community (especially by their religious and political elites), who are anxious to preserve their power and position, regarded inclusivity as a threat to the Malay position. Welsh (2013) however, argued that Pakatan’s push for inclusiveness in the thirteenth general elections reflected a new politics, which appealed not only to Chinese and Indians, but also to many younger and middle-class Malay voters (p.145). The latter were more willing to subscribe to a democratic and pluralist politics, rejecting a politics based on ethnicity. Indeed, Pakatan garnered more support across the ethnic groups and, compared to Barisan, emerged as the stronger multi-ethnic coalition. Weiss (2013) expressed confidence about the future trajectory of Malaysian politics, arguing that communalism has been substantially displaced and that economic and class-based issues are becoming more salient.

Labour has been affected by these shifts, and there have been small developments in social democratic politics, which have historically been important to unions' fortunes (Western, 1997) internationally. After the 2013 election, the Parti Socialis Malaysia, with a small number of allies (civil society organisations and political parties), engaged in talks to form a Left Coalition, in order to reintroduce class-based politics (The Star, 2014). The Coalition intends to concentrate on research on left alternatives, conduct ideological classes, oppose privatisation efforts, recruit young members and rebuild the trade union movement (fz.com, 2014). Through "identity talk" and building "shared narratives", it hopes to both raise and transform consciousness among participants (Gongaware, 2001; Young, 2001). It is, however, not yet a registered party and therefore, cannot contest elections. It is also in the very early stages of its formation. The Coalition holds promise in providing discursive spaces and for uniting workers under a collective pro-labour political identity. In these spaces, activists can help workers make sense of, and frame, their issues. All of these developments offer a more favourable context than hitherto for the development of a pro-labour politics.

4. Re-framing labour politics

At the thirteenth general election, labour concerns were advanced by organisations concerned with promoting democratic politics more broadly. The civil society organisation SUARAM (Voice of the

Malaysian People) framed labour issues in universalistic human rights terms (SUARAM, 2013), a framing adopted by the trade unions themselves (below). Aliran followed a similar line and has continued to do so when defending employees against alleged breach of trade union rights at Air Malaysia (Aliran, 2014). Workers' groups called for respect for workers' rights and solidarity and emphasised the need to review labour laws so that they complied with International Labour Organisation Conventions. They also urged the promotion of the right to unionise, a progressive guaranteed minimum wage, increasing workers' ownership in their companies and allowing elected workers' representatives to participate in corporate decision-making (Free Malaysia Today, 2013b). CWI (Committee for Workers' International) Malaysia advanced demands for democratic rights, observance of workers' and union rights, building solidarity with workers and the oppressed and establishment of a socialist planned economy (CWI, 2013).

Importantly, unions and civil society organisations joined forces to campaign for labour rights reform. A coalition of 20 unions and other civil society organisations (Malaysian Workers Network) launched its election manifesto, calling on political parties to meet its demands, or risk losing workers' votes. It called for an increase in the minimum wage introduced in 2012 (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-17903906>; <http://minimumwages.mohr.gov.my/employees/what-employees-need-to-know/>), recognition of labour rights, provision of

social security protection and an improvement in workers' health and safety. It condemned contract labour, arguing that workers hired by contractors were paid low wages, enjoyed few medical and social benefits and lacked job security. Jerit (Oppressed People's Network), a constituent member, called on workers to make their voices heard and pressure the contesting political parties to fulfil their pledges. The National Union of Bank Employees (NUBE) emphasised that workers were becoming more vulnerable, that union leaders were being dismissed for their union-related activities and that employers were refusing to recognise registered unions. It charged the government with protecting the interests of multinationals at the expense of workers. The MTUC, part of the Network, stressed that workers were being treated like a commodity (fz.com, 2013). Many other civil society organisations persisted in discussions with Barisan to amend restrictive union laws, improve wages and reduce reliance on foreign labour (Free Malaysia Today, 2012). The Malaysian Trades Union Congress (MTUC) presented nine demands, ranging from urging the government to abolish outsourcing and the contract system of employment, to having clearer policies on migrant workers, to building affordable houses for low-income workers (New Straits Times, 2013).

Four days before the election, 700 workers from 21 unions participated in a peaceful rally in Kuala Lumpur to push for labour reforms. The MTUC stressed that many labour related issues remain

unresolved, not least employers' decisions to postpone the implementation of a minimum wage policy and lack of coherent policies regarding the employment of migrant workers (The Star, 2013). Yet the public events held to push these agendas were essentially small-scale and localised, concentrated mainly in urban areas such as Kuala Lumpur and Penang. Labour, as a movement, remained marginal. It occupied a strictly subordinate place within a wider oppositional, liberalising movement.

Nevertheless, union frames changed. Emboldened by the wider democratic movement, they sought to disentangle themselves from the stock of beliefs and practices which shaped their past practices (Goodwin & Jasper, 1999; Benford & Snow, 2000: 629), exchanging them for new ones. Individual unions have been locating workers' issues in universal terms. Our respondent from a bank employees' union used a rhetoric unusual within finance unions internationally when he argued that "essentially, trade unions are fighting against unbridled, unmitigated and callous capitalism...the form of capitalism which is being practiced in the world today is 'casino capitalism', which gambles on the lives and livelihood of people" (interview, 21, April, 2011). Another union respondent, from the manufacturing sector, admitted openly that one of its strategies was "demonstrating outside of Parliament", a radical approach in light of harsh government responses to overt opposition action (interview, 16, June, 2011). A respondent, from a human rights organisation (*x*), told us

that he always capitalised on opportunities to cooperate with unions to protest against Malaysia's Internal Security Acts (ISA) because unions perceived prosecution under the legislation as violating human rights. He said "In the past, a lot of unionists were arrested under ISA so we share common ground with unions. Unions already mobilise large memberships, so for us NGOs working for human rights, we can make union of union memberships to carry out campaigns on these issues" (interview, 25 April, 2011). The way that issues have been framed by the umbrella organisation MTUC has also shown significant change, moving towards a more cosmopolitan approach. An MTUC official pointed out that "workers' rights cannot be viewed in isolation: they are part of a wider rights' movement. We already have successful results in working with NGOs in all kinds of areas – opposing health care privatisation, privatisation of water, opposing increase in taxes etc. etc." (interview, 1 April, 2011). The MTUC has simultaneously shifted towards a position more openly critical of government since 2010. The same official remarked "We have to try our best, it is not easy. This is a very stubborn government and workers' rights have been sidelined for too long, so we have to plan wisely to make things improve" (interview, 1, April, 2011). Some of our labour NGO respondents also suggested that it had undergone real change in the previous five years. A second respondent from (x) recognised the shift. She reported an earlier negative experience in a collaboration with the MTUC in 2005, which she described as a 'disaster' because the MTUC 'basically didn't want us to condemn

the government.’ (interview, 30 March, 2011). Accounts by NGOs also suggested a practical and hands-on approach by unions to defend workers’ rights, a contrast to the scepticism with which unions’ capacity and confidence to challenge employers have traditionally been regarded. A clear example was provided by the first respondent cited above “we knew a worker, he was on probation, but decided to leave the job at the end of the probation period. But the employer denied full wages, cutting his pay. We linked him up to a union and finally he managed to get all his salary!” (interview, 25 April, 2011). Last but not least, a respondent from a labour-based NGO was similarly optimistic, although she was more guarded “we do try to get unions to help us organise women in factories, but not all union leaders are willing to rock the boat” (interview, 1 November, 2012).

Another important example of this change is the consistent way across recent years that it has adopted the recent trend internationally to call for the position of non-Malaysian migrant domestic and non-domestic workers to be improved (<http://www.mtuc.org.my/?s=migrant+workers>). The MTUC has taken the matter further than its Singaporean counterpart the National Trades Union Congress, which gives the subject no coverage on its website despite the large number of migrant workers in the island state. By pursuing this theme, the MTUC actively challenges ethnic interpretations of social problems, within which migrant domestic workers have been defined as of little importance, partly because of

their ethnicity and the fact that they are attracted by relatively high Malaysian living standards. In framing terms, the MTUC's presentation of the issue reflects and fits the wider democratic movement's emphasis on human rights (MTUC, 2007). It stresses that migrant workers are human beings deserving of certain minimum labour standards. It identifies a ready solution as being at hand, since the government needs to extend Malaysian labour legislation—from which they are currently excluded-- to them (MTUC, 2013). They argue that citizens need to take political action to ensure that the government reforms the law to permit unions more scope. Unions' institutional interests in the matter are recognised, but play only a minor and secondary role in the discourse.

Section 5: Conclusion

Our central question was how unions and labour NGOs have framed labour's interests in relation to the wider democratic movement.

Implicit in this is the relationship between the two.

Public discourses revolving around human rights and justice are emerging in the public sphere, and have created a more favourable environment for developing non-ethnic labour politics. This may be seen as an exercise in 'counter-framing' since it runs counter to government approaches founded on promoting Malay ethnic interests.

The position of the trade unions in the wider democratic movement

has been marginal, although NGOs have also played a role. They are part of a wider popular democratising movement which encompasses labour as one of many interests, one rooted in both industrial and political democracy. We detected signs of the Malaysian TUC adopting a more cosmopolitan approach in its embrace of the cause of migrant workers at the same time as openly campaigning against Barisan. Some limited progress is therefore being made in moving in a direction that is at least compatible with Wad's (2012) call for the unions to seek greater political influence. This suggests a degree of open-ness on the part of the trade unions to such ideas, rather than a view of them as irretrievably immured in a conservative corporatist frame.

The relationship between different oppositional movements' frames is an unusual topic within framing theory. In theoretical terms, the broad political democratising movement has framed issues in terms of a dual emphasis on civil liberties and human rights. The trade unions have shown themselves capable of responding in positive and inclusive ways to both themes. Their recent consistent advocacy of the cause of migrant labour (including in its domestic forms) marks a new development for them which has been stimulated by the democratic movement, and which also adds a significant, specific appeal related to the latter's broad themes. The relationship between the frames of the democratic movement and labour organisations is therefore both overlapping and synergetic. The development has

been facilitated by new actors in industrial relations, labour-based NGOs, which have contact with both sets of social movements and which have acted in political intermediating senses between two different if related frames. They have fulfilled a bridging role between them and this aspect is worthy of recognition within framing theory and deserving of further research.

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