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# Malaysian Labour and the Theory of Interdependent Power

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## ABSTRACT

We reflect upon Malaysian labour's efforts in advocating reform, and analyse its actions to focus political attention on labour issues at the 2013 general election. Although the election presented a rare opportunity for labour to bring workers' issues to centre stage, it did not do so. Piven's theory of "interdependent" power provides a useful lens through which labour's failure can be analysed. We show the enormous challenges preventing Malaysian labour from activating interdependent power. Critically, the state has systematically maintained artificial distinctions to divide working people from each other and to fragment them as a class. The use of state force to crush opposition elements and its employment of highly discriminatory industrialisation policies have additionally militated against labour's efforts to mobilise as a class to secure reform. Piven's theory is likely to have limited applicability in these authoritarian and non-liberal contexts.

## KEYWORDS

Piven; interdependent power; Malaysian labour; general election; labour reform

## Introduction

We use Frances Fox Piven's theory of "interdependent" power as a framework for an analysis of Malaysian labour's difficulties in advancing its cause. By "labour" we mean all those organisations and forces primarily interested in advancing workers' interests, including but not limited to trade unions.

The results of the 2008 election in Malaysia constituted a severe setback for Barisan Nasional, Malaysia's ruling coalition since 1957 (Mohd Sani, 2009; Ufen, 2009; Weiss, 2009), and gave labour hope. The period between the 2008 and 2013 general elections presented opportunities for labour to revitalise its strategies and build alliances with other activists, many of whom were determined to create an alternative political society. Few could forget the radical actions of *Bersih* (Coalition for Clean and Fair Elections) *Hindraf* (Hindu Rights Action Force, a coalition of thirty Hindu-based civil society organisations) and The Bar Council in 2008, demanding free and fair elections, transparent government and greater social equality. They coordinated mass mobilisations and confrontations which attracted thousands of supporters. This was repeated in the 2013 elections where, for the first time, Barisan's sixty-year reign appeared to be crumbling. It faced serious challenges from Pakatan Rakyat, the opposition political party, as well as a multitude of activists and civil society organisations, all eager for political reform. Many deliberated whether the election would herald an

alternative government (Chin, 2013; Khoo, 2013; Moniruzzaman, 2013). Newer coalitions of civil society organisations protested against the government through high-profile campaigns and created a ground swell in civil society participation. They carried anti-Barisan banners and wore brightly coloured slogans. Protestors resorted to social media to connect users to a common cause and reinforce a collective identity (Mohd Sani, 2014). They mobilised thousands of supporters who occupied public spaces. Social media and public spaces both built and sustained existing network connections. Standing together with Pakatan Rakyat, these activists further undermined Barisan's legitimacy (Khoo, 2013). Potentially, they were also labour's allies in its journey to increase its impact.

Nonetheless, labour rights continued to be overlooked in the general election and labour failed to secure change. The combination of events – the prospect of Barisan's defeat, Pakatan's pledge for a fairer and more equitable society, support for labour issues from a wide range of activists – provided openings for labour to push workers' issues to centre stage. These were propitious circumstances. Yet labour failed to advance workers' rights. Why was this?

To understand labour's condition, we draw on social movement theory, which focuses on how groups mobilise to challenge inequalities. We suggest that Piven's theory of interdependent power provides a useful explanatory lens. The ways in which labour has attempted to influence politics in Malaysia has attracted little attention, and much literature focuses on state strategies to contain and manipulate it, presenting a unilateral view of the relationship. In this paper we focus on labour's side of the interaction, analysing the obstacles which obstruct its progress.

We draw from Malaysia's rich historiography to illustrate, firstly, the ways in which colonial and post-colonial governments utilised ethnic-based policies to secure their hegemony, extinguishing formations of identity along other dimensions, including class. Secondly, and relatedly, a strong and repressive state has since independence systematically crushed collective attempts to challenge its rule. Enabling conditions for the emergence of strong protest movements have consequently been unable to develop. Finally, within labour itself, divisions arose which prevented internal solidarity. Workers have become separated along the lines of ethnicity, gender and nationality, due to strategies promoted by state and capital. Unions have been unable to bridge these divisions and in some cases even contributed to them, obstructing class identifications. We show how each of these factors contributed to labour's invisibility as a movement and its failure to achieve reform.

The article proceeds as follows. The first part immediately following this Introduction introduces Piven's theory of interdependent power and emphasises the importance for protest movements to achieve visibility and momentum. It also outlines our method for investigating labour's role in the election. The next part provides our findings on the latter subject. In the third section we analyse the three historic origins of the failures identified. Finally, we reflect on the utility of Piven's theory as a framework for analysing protest movements in non-liberal contexts.

## **Theory and Method**

Various theoretical approaches have been utilised to analyse protest action to secure reform in Asia. Gramsci's theory of hegemony has been employed to explain why authoritarianism has persisted in Singapore (Sim, 2006), to analyse if civil society can act as an arena in which dominant values and ideologies are contested in Vietnam and Cambodia (Landau, 2008) and to investigate how far trade unions and civil society are developing in a "counter-hegemonic" direction in Malaysia (Miles and Croucher, 2013). Others have deployed theories of contentious politics to analyse

collective mobilisation against non-liberal regimes in the Philippines and Burma (Schock, 1999) and to show how changes in the political opportunity structure in Cambodia have advanced labour rights (DiCaprio, 2013). Breaking with theories emphasising open and organised contention, Scott's (1985) theory of "everyday resistance" has spawned much research about the usefulness of covert rebellion by peasants and subaltern groups in resisting authority in Asia (Li, 2012; Chang, 2013; Guo, 2015).

Within theories of contentious politics (McCarthy and Zald, 1977; Piven and Cloward, 1977; Tilly, 1978; McAdam, 1982; Tarrow, 1994), emphasis has traditionally been placed on the need for protest movements to have strong and efficient leadership and sufficient resources. Piven's theory, however, emphasises the power of disruption. She is pessimistic about the ability of formal organisations to achieve social reform, although she recognises their potential contribution. Instead, she draws attention to the many occasions, primarily in the United States, where poor peoples' and labour movements have occasionally created momentous revolts and achieved change through their power to disrupt.

Piven's theory has received little attention when analysing Asian protest movements (for an exception, see Silver and Zhang, 2009). We suggest that it nevertheless constitutes a useful lens in this context because it argues that social movements with few resources *can* mobilise constituents to achieve positive change. Moreover, a broad equivalence exists between the American context of weak trade unions from which the theory was developed and the small, embattled Malaysian unions. Both contexts exhibit states with political traditions which, compared to European settings, appear difficult for those seeking to advance labour's interests. We show that the theory has some positive and even more negative application in the Malaysian context.

Piven's works focus on how protest movements can be critical forces for change. She argues that many gains made by poor peoples' movements are the results of concessions wrung from the powerful in response to widespread, intense and, at times, "spontaneous" disruptions from below. She develops the concept of interdependent power, which is rooted in the social and cooperative relations in which people find themselves by virtue of group life. Social life is cooperative, and everyone who makes contributions to these systems of cooperation has potential power over others who depend on them. While workers depend on employers for jobs, employers also depend on workers because they need labour in order to produce. Landlords have power over tenants because they own the land the tenants till, but tenants have power over landlords because without their labour the fields are idle. State elites can invoke the authority of the law and the force of armed coercion, but they also depend on voting citizens. Both sides have leverage, and either can activate it (Piven, 2008: 5). Piven (2006: 20) calls the activation of interdependent power "disruption". Protest movements mobilise this disruptive power by breaking down "institutionally regulated cooperation". Strikes, for example, through their effect on production, force employers to recognise their dependence on workers and to address workers' concerns. In the United States (from which much of Piven's evidence is drawn) and beyond, the mobilisation of disruptive power by workers, pro-democracy, black freedom, anti-poverty, environmental, women's and gay liberation movements have all won certain legal concessions (Piven and Cloward, 1977, 2005; Piven, 2006, 2008).

However, Piven also emphasises that the activation of interdependent power is difficult. It depends on collective ability to withhold cooperation, and is not actionable until certain conditions are met. First, people must recognise interdependence and their potential power. This requires that they command widespread attention and communicate their issue to a wide audience including potential constituents. They must take action that illustrates their power to disrupt or threaten to do

so. Second, they must break the rules which govern the institutions in which they participate; rules are instruments of power, and rulemaking is a strategy by which dominant groups attempt to suppress interdependent power. Third, contributions to ongoing economic and political activities are typically made by many individuals, and these contributions must be coordinated. Individuals must organise and contrive ways of acting in concert. Fourth, people must endure the suspension of the cooperative relationships on which they depend, and withstand any reprisals. Fifth, those who try to mobilise interdependent power must overcome the constraints typically imposed by their multiple relations with others (Piven, 2008: 8, 2014).

Piven's theory can be interpreted as comprising stages. Protest movements must (i) be visible and possess a degree of impetus or momentum before they can (ii) exert pressure or leverage on those in power. Conditions 1 to 3 in her theory (above) are associated with protest movements building *visibility* and *momentum*. Conditions 4 and 5 require them to have the capacity to endure and persist, both of which are crucial to their potential to disrupt the normal functions of society. Inherent in Piven's theory is that those in power take notice of protest movements because they are visible and possess a degree of impetus or momentum. Until they cross this "threshold", they are unable to exercise disruptive power. Thus, visibility and momentum are crucial preconditions for forming a movement based on disruptive power. For more than six decades, Malaysian labour has suffered from low visibility and poor momentum. This has impeded its potential to secure reform. This feature was very evident at the thirteenth general election, where it failed to push labour issues to centre stage. Labour issues continued to be ignored.

Our methods for analysing labour's role in relation to Piven's theory prior to and during the election included a focus on activism in Kuala Lumpur, the centre of political activity. We relied partly on publicly available documents to uncover the actions of unions and other rights-based organisations in demanding improved labour rights. National newspaper reports provided a chronological framework of events and official discourses. However, these sources are closely controlled by government, and we therefore also critically used union and NGO websites and blogs to discern broad trends of discussion in these organisations. To obtain a deeper understanding of labour's visibility and momentum, ten interviews were conducted between 2011 and 2013 with unions and civil society organisations to understand their efforts to push for labour reform. The academic positions of the interviewer were made clear, as were the main research issues under investigation. Three paid union officials were interviewed; other respondents came from pro-human-rights and worker NGOs. All respondents were politically active and were well-known to the authorities. All respondents were assured of their anonymity, to encourage them to express their views freely. All interviews were conducted using the "mining" approach advocated by Kvale (1996) for use in such theory-testing situations. This method seeks to avoid leading questions and remains open to thematically-relevant responses. Interviews were recorded and transcribed. They were analysed by using thematic coding in line with the article's research themes. Author codings were checked and agreed with the help of a third party familiar with the Malaysian situation.

To supplement these perspectives, interviews were initiated with ten factory workers contacted through NGOs. They were interviewed on the outskirts of Kuala Lumpur in November 2012, six months immediately prior to the general election. These workers were initially asked about their lives and biographies, to get interviews under way in a constructive manner. They were asked about their aspirations under the Barisan government, and whether they thought their situation would change for the better under a different government. They were also asked about their relationships with their

leaders, and what they thought workers could do collectively to secure change and improve working conditions. Where necessary, respondents were contacted after the interviews to clarify issues and/or to provide further explanation. These interviews were all treated in the ways described above.

For the second stage of our analysis of labour's lack of visibility and momentum and its failure to achieve change, we draw on a wide range of historical and sociological accounts.

## **Labour and the Election: Findings**

Public statements, details from organisations' websites and newspaper reports suggested that unions and other civil society organisations worked hard to draw attention to labour concerns at the general election. The Malaysian Trades Union Congress (MTUC, 2013) and civil society organisations such as *Suaram* (Voice of the Malaysian People), *Sababat Wanita* (Friends of Women) and *CWI Malaysia* (Committee for Workers International Malaysia) all drew attention to the need to improve workers' rights in Malaysia. They highlighted the plight of women and migrant workers, and workers employed under casual contracts. They urged respect for workers' rights, social security protection and a progressive guaranteed minimum wage. Some went so far as to call for international solidarity with workers and the oppressed and for a socialist-planned economy as the alternative to the free-market economy (CWI, 2013).

The momentum to keep labour's concerns on the political agenda increased as the election date drew near. A coalition of organisations promoting workers' rights, Malaysian Workers Network, launched its election manifesto in January 2013. It demanded the guarantee of a minimum basic monthly wage of RM1,500, the recognition of workers' rights, the protection of workers' social security, worker health and safety, and welfare and worker well-being (Sani, 2013). The RM1,500 threshold was rejected by Pakatan, prompting criticisms from the civil society organisation Jerit (Oppressed People's Network). The National Union of Banking Employees (NUBE) planned various demonstrations to protest the exploitation and discrimination against workers. It blamed the Human Resource Ministry for supporting the banks (Malaysian Digest, 2013a). On 1 May 2013, four days before the general election, 700 workers from twenty-one unions participated in a rally to push for labour reform. The MTUC condemned worker exploitation, and stressed that many labour issues remained unresolved. It highlighted two issues – employers postponing the implementation of a minimum wage policy, and the use of cheap migrant labour – which have denied employment opportunities to local workers (Malaysian Digest, 2013b).

Interviews suggested that labour adopted elements of the wider reform movement's ideology of inclusive politics, human rights and democratic freedoms. Unions saw workers' struggles as part of a wider struggle to secure a better political system. A respondent from a banking union was adamant: "Employers and even institutions of the government are against trade unions and workers, seeking to protect the interest of the minority who own the means of capital" (B, Interview, 21 April 2011). Another, from the drinks manufacturing industry, stressed the irreconcilable differences between capital and workers and signalled the importance of unions going on the offensive to challenge employers' avoidance of legal obligations (D, Interview, 16 June 2011). Unions also believed in working with allies to achieve a better politics. An MTUC official recounted how the Congress had worked successfully with civil society organisations to oppose tax increases, and privatisation of health care services and the utilities, all of which affected workers and their families. He felt that workers' rights could not be viewed in isolation, and that unions must join with other

organisations to advance workers' needs beyond the workplace (MTUC, Interview, 1 April 2011). Some civil society organisations similarly recognised the benefits of drawing on union membership in campaigns to promote their own causes (X, Interview, 25 April 2011).

Interviews also revealed the many challenges to union and civil society coalition-building, which reduced prospects of creating disruptive power. Despite acknowledging the benefits of coalitions, there was reticence on the part of many unions and civil society organisations to trust each other. One civil society organisation remarked that they could not depend on unions; unions were not interested in advancing workers' rights in factories even where unions were recognised (MO, Interview, 8 November 2012). Another preferred to work with workers without the involvement of unions because unions were disinterested in women and migrant workers (AG, Interview, 27 March 2012). A third welcomed opportunities to work with unions but felt that unions did not want to "rock the boat" (SV, Interview, 6 November 2012). Collaborations typically meant endorsing each other's statements or signing up for membership of the same coalitions. Coalitions were formed around issues, rather than on the basis of ideology or geographical location (AN, Interview, 27 April 2011). Issue-based coalitions often disbanded after issues were resolved. There was little indication that unions and civil society organisations built deep and long-lasting relationships with each other. Indeed, the same MTUC official referred to above hinted at this problem: "We need to strengthen the collaboration between CSOs [Civil Society Organisations] and trade unions and not avoid each other. We need each other to make an impact... In the current climate that is the only way to go..." (MTUC, Interview, 1 April 2011).

Conversations with workers themselves revealed a disconnect between the rank and file and their leaders. They did not think that unions, or any other organisation, were strong enough or cared enough to achieve reform. The following response was very typical: "My union is like a dead body; it does not care" (X, Interview, 8 November 2012). None of them associated the general election with opportunities to campaign for labour reform. They did not think change was likely: "What for I hope? This is my life now. What can anyone do for me?" (Y, Interview, 8 November 2012). Notwithstanding the more positive dynamics between some unions and civil society actors, mass worker mobilisation to focus attention on labour issues at the general election were not organised. Workers themselves were disinterested in such possibilities (Z: "Cannot come, too busy", Interview, 8 November 2012). There was a sense of resignation among the workers interviewed that they should simply accept their predicament.

In sum, despite changed rhetoric around worker rights, labour visibility and momentum remained low. Campaigns and demonstrations to reform workers' rights were led by coalitions of unions and other civil society actors but their relationships were superficial. Labour could have, but did not, harness the energy behind the broad-based, militant and rebellious political movement to push labour issues to centre stage. Mass worker mobilisation at grassroots level did not take place, and union leaders did not capitalise on the militancy, power and disruption such mobilisation could generate. On the contrary, a marked disconnect between protest organisations and the rank and file was very apparent.

## **The Origins of Labour's Failure**

We now discuss the influence on labour of a politics based on ethnicity, heavy-handed state repression which has militated against the formation of collective capacity for struggle, and the

pursuit of industrialisation policies by the state and employers which have fragmented labour internally. Our analysis shows that labour has been unable to bridge these gulfs, and indeed in some cases has contributed to them. These factors have, in combination, inhibited the activation of interdependent power, and explain labour's invisibility as a protest movement.

### ***Ethnic-based versus class-based politics***

Labour's weak position in Malaysia has often been attributed to successive governments' subordination of the employment sphere, labour's bargaining power and union participation in policy making to neo-liberal and market-oriented agendas. Jomo (2014) noted that although there were efforts in the 1970s to promote tripartism, this was quickly discontinued. Operating under a repressive industrial relations framework established by a government which pursued aggressive industrialisation strategies, unions faced an uphill struggle in organising workers (Ramasamy and Rowley, 2008). Labour rights internationally recognised as fundamental were denounced as detrimental to economic growth and have been systematically eroded. Strikes are lawful, but are subject to restrictions which make it almost impossible for them to take place. Rights to collective bargaining have been severely curtailed (Shatsari and Hassan, 2006). Yet, these factors only partly explain labour's inability to force labour reform. They do not fully explain its low visibility and momentum at the thirteenth general election.

To fully understand labour's condition, we need to look beyond Malaysia's existing industrial relations framework to its ethnic-based politics, which have extinguished the formation of other identity dimensions, including that of class. It has been argued in this Journal that unless we bring the notion of class, with all its complexities, back into labour's strategies, no renewal of labour is possible (Gindin, 2015). Piven (2008) argues that people must initially recognise that they have power, in that others depend on their contribution. Workers must first identify themselves as a collective, before disruption can occur.

For sixty years, the governing Barisan coalition has protected the ethnic characteristics of Malaysia's politics, shielding it from external threat. It has adopted affirmative action policies in favour of the Malay majority and acquiesced, from time to time, to the demands of minority ethnic groups. The majority ethnic Malays hold political power and enjoy special privileges in business, education and the civil service. The ethnic Chinese are economically dominant. Although a minority of Indians are prosperous, the majority of ethnic Indians have not been able to progress up the social ladder and they remain marginalised. Ethnicity is central to almost every dimension of life in Malaysia. Each ethnic group is represented by its own political parties, has its own culture, religion, education system and media. They co-exist in relative peace, but there is little interaction between them. The sense of "ethnicity" among the different groups remains paramount and determines their outlook and relations with others. Indeed, the preoccupation with ethnicity means that class dimensions have seldom been utilised when discussing Malaysian social and political reality. (For exceptions see Cham, 1975; Husin Ali, 1984; Lian and Appadurai, 2011; Nonini, 2015b.)

The formation of an ethnic-based polity and ethnicised mentality in Malaysia are a product of colonial practices, when Chinese and Indian immigrants were recruited by the British to work in mines, plantations and cities. They were segregated geographically, economically and socially from the Malays, who were kept in the agricultural sector. This ensured the separation of agricultural workers from their industrial counterparts, who internationally have readily built collective organisations. Ethnicity therefore developed in tandem with the classic industrial-agricultural worker

divide. This “divide and rule” approach prevented solidarity from emerging among the ethnic groups, heightened ethnic differences and reinforced stereotypes about each ethnic group (Hirschman, 1986).<sup>1</sup> This segregation impeded the articulation of working-class solidarities across ethnic lines and made the achievement of cross-ethnic worker unity almost impossible. The primary emphasis placed on ethnicity by colonial powers not only overshadowed other identity dimensions but also came to be used as the justificatory cause for transforming the postcolonial state and the regulation of social order (Chin, 2000). Through sustaining and fortifying a politics based on ethnicity, the Barisan government, which came into power in 1957, has enjoyed enduring political rule. Rowley and Bhopal (2006) show how the state has, over the years, adopted various strategies to control labour. Significantly, the driving force behind these strategies has been the preservation of its legitimacy in a structure dominated by an ethnic discourse. In short, ethnicity has been employed as a means of controlling trade unions.

Yet deep identifications with ethnicity did not always exist in anything like their current powerful form. Previous working-class alliances existed, transcending ethnic identity. Jomo and Todd (1994) chart the development of trade unions in Malaysia from colonial times to the early 1990s. They analyse the actions and strategies of the British, then the Malayan state, in shaping the role and nature of organised labour (see also Morgan, 1977). Socialist ideals *were* visible in Malaysian society and were in fact, very significant until the late 1960s. The Malayan Communist Party (MCP) emerged in the 1930s, and was a militant force in the struggle for independence from the British and for a Communist Malaya (Cheah, 1979). It formed alliances with a left-wing coalition of cross-ethnic organisations – the All-Malaya Council of Joint Action (AMCJA) and the Centre of People’s Power (PUTERA). Their demand for independence was rejected by the British and by the Malay rulers. The latter part of the 1940s in Malaysia was characterised by widespread labour unrest, due to unemployment, low wages and high levels of food price inflation. Japanese withdrawal from Malaysia in 1945 had left the economy disrupted, and the British were blamed for not addressing worsening economic problems. The trade union movement became increasingly aggressive, conducting a nation-wide general strike in 1947. The MCP played an active role in supporting unions and organising strikes. This corresponds to Piven’s (2008) initial stage, as the strikes demonstrated to people, irrespective of ethnicity, their capacity to disrupt. Although this was ultimately important to the nationalist movement, it also and for the same reasons drew a sharp response from the imperial power. Following a series of murders of European managers, the British declared a state of emergency which was to last twelve years, 1948–1960 (Short, 1975; Stubbs, 1989). By 1953, the MCP leadership realised that prospects for achieving power through armed struggle were poor. Negotiations between the MCP and the Malayan government to re-establish the MCP as a political party failed. Indeed, with Malaya’s independence on 31 August 1957, it lost its *raison d’être* as a champion of liberation from colonialism. In 1989, the MCP agreed to end its armed struggle and signed a peace treaty with the Malaysian government (Cheah, 2009).

The trade union movement was relatively strong in the first half of the twentieth century, supported by the militant MCP. The Pan-Malayan General Labour Union (PMGLU), a country-wide

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<sup>1</sup> “From a labour point of view, there are practically three races – the Malays (including Javanese), the Chinese and the Tamils (who are generally known as Klings). By nature, the Malay is an idler, the Chinaman is a thief and the Kling is a drunkard, yet each in his own class of work is both cheap and efficient, when properly supervised” (Hirschman, 1986: 356–357).

organisation, was formed in 1946 to bring together working-class Chinese and Indians. It even attracted Malays allied with the Malay Nationalist Party. In the first twelve months of its formation, it was a leading force of trade unionism in Malaysia, with its membership encompassing 85 per cent of individual trade unions at one point. Workers of both Chinese and Indian communities developed worker solidarity and possessed a “genuine feeling of class-consciousness” (Stenson, 1970: 110). Strikes proliferated across docks, plantations and railways (Morgan, 1977). The government retaliated by changing the laws and regulations on trade union activity, and many unionists were persecuted and imprisoned. Detentions without trial of activists were common (Gamba, 1962). The PMGLU was crushed by the British during the Malayan Emergency, which led to deregistration and persecution of its leaders, many of whom were members of the MCP. To prevent peasants, especially the Chinese, from aiding the MCP, the British commenced a relocation programme (the Briggs Plan) implemented in 1951–1952, leading to the forced relocation and segregation of half a million working people into more than 400 fortified and confined camps called New Villages (Sandhu, 1964). Consequently, without adequate food supplies, the MCP retreated to the Thai border in the north. The union movement continued to decline. To present an appearance of trade union representation for workers and to sever ties between them and the communists, the British encouraged moderate unionism (Jomo and Todd, 1994). The Malaysian Trades Union Congress was formed in 1950. Yet it is not recognised as a trade union under the law (it was registered under the Societies Act), and it does not function as a genuine independent trade union.

Last but not least, the Malayan Socialist Front was formed in 1958. It was a left-wing coalition of Malaysian socialist parties, namely the Chinese-dominated Malayan Labour Party and the Malay-dominated People’s Party. It initially grew to be a radical non-communal opposition force, even gaining seats in local and general elections. However, in the 1960s, the Internal Security Act was widely used to detain hundreds of its leaders and members. Many were accused of having ties with the MCP. Repeated repression undermined its effectiveness. Internal divergences (between its Chinese and Malay sections) also weakened its influence. It disintegrated in 1966. Neither of its constituent parties went on to make serious inroads into the country’s ethnic-based politics. The Malayan Labour Party was deregistered by the authorities in 1972 (Jomo and Todd, 1994: 124).

Thus, over time, the state crushed leftist political organisations and solidarity among workers. Left movements failed because they could not sustain themselves in the face of state suppression. To destroy the organisational power of working-class people, the state rewrote the distinctions (e.g. ethnicity, race, regional identity) which working-class people employed to distinguish among themselves only in certain contexts into *real* separation in everyday life. *Cultural* differences became *political* distinctions which divided working people from each other, and which, over time, became accepted as the natural order (Nonini, 2015a: 340-342). Devaraj (2009: 88) commented that the proscription of left-leaning political parties and activists over the years created a vacuum within the opposition and presented workers with few alternatives but to support communalist opposition forces.

Since 2008, reform movements have demanded a more equal and inclusive politics. Class consciousness, however, remains deeply dormant. Indeed, in the 2013 elections, despite the tireless efforts of myriad civil society actors to advance a multi-ethnic politics based on fairness and inclusivity, ethnicity continued to feature strongly both in candidacy and voting patterns (Khoo, 2013; Moniruzzaman, 2013). The United Malays National Organisation (part of the Barisan coalition) enjoyed a loyal Malay following. The Pan Malaysian Islamic Organisation (part of the Pakatan

coalition), whose candidates were entirely Malay, drew support from Malay voters. The Democratic Action Party (part of Pakatan), whose candidates were majority Chinese, relied heavily on Chinese voters, as did the Malaysian Chinese Association (part of Barisan). The People's Justice Party (part of Pakatan) was the only truly multi-ethnic political party and attracted voters across ethnic groups. Thus, while there may be evidence of some re-orientation toward a more inclusive politics, it is premature to discount the influence of ethnicity on politics in Malaysia.

### **Systematic repression of opposition elements**

The use of repression to crush opposition forces continues to shape the Malaysian government's approach. The "regularised" character of authoritarianism is emphasised by scholars of Malaysia's political economy (Hewison, 1999; Rodan, 2004; Tajuddin, 2012) who show how it has adeptly responded to internal and external pressures without seriously compromising its authoritarian nature.

Civil society actors in Malaysia face enormous obstacles in carving out a space in society (Jesudasan, 1995; Verma, 2002a, 2002b; Weiss, 2005), and continue to operate under an umbrella of restrictive laws (Giersdorf and Croissant, 2011). Advocacy organisations are regarded with hostility by the government, given their ability to influence public opinion. They are regarded as an "internal other" against whom society must struggle to remain peaceful, unified and secure (Mohd Sani, 2011). Anti-government protestors have been subject to interrogations, long-term detentions without charge and imprisonment after controversial trials. Union leaders and activists were subjugated to unrelenting and repressive labour laws throughout the 1960s and 1970s (Jomo and Todd, 1994: 112–130). Under *Operasi Lalang* (1987) the Internal Security Act was used widely to detain 106 social activists, opposition politicians, environmentalists, academics and other concerned groups critical of the government. The 1971 New Economic Policy definitively advanced a discourse around ethnicity, crystallising the rights and privileges of the Malays to the exclusion of other ethnic groups. Non-Malay ethnic groups continue to be discriminated against (Chin, 2009). After the 2013 election, the government used the Sedition Act against its critics. In 2014, fifteen people were charged with sedition for activities including blogging, posting on Facebook and making comments at rallies (Freedman, 2015). The government's most formidable opponent, Anwar Ibrahim, was subject to a "sham" trial, an act which stunned international observers of Malaysian politics (The Guardian, 2015). Anwar remains in prison, where he is unable to directly influence politics. *Parti Socialis Malaysia*, a left political party in Malaysia, was only granted registration in 2008, ten years after its formation, on the grounds that it was a threat to national security. These and many other accounts of repression show that there is grave personal cost to those challenging the state. If a labour movement did become visible and develop momentum, history suggests that the state would be likely to crush it. In societies without democratic freedoms or physical spaces for deliberative interactions, where systematic violence is deployed against opposition elements, civil societies seldom deepen to an extent where they can effectively challenge the state (Balassiano and Pandi, 2013).

Piven (2008) emphasises the importance of protestors organising and contriving ways of acting in concert with others. Individuals across all walks of life – workers, villagers, parishioners or consumers – have to act in concert before the withdrawal of their contributions exerts a disruptive effect on the workplace, the church or business. She envisaged that the revival of American labour would not depend on the formal and bureaucratic structures of unions. It would be through them creating movement energy, through a "mass strike moment" by drawing on other interest groups –

social justice groups, political rights groups, militant anti-poverty groups, the youth, communities and so on – who develop shared policies and practices, and who organise and move into action to assert demands (Moberg, 2012). Labour scholars, too, have emphasised the importance of these kinds of collaboration to revive labour's fortunes (Gallin, 2000; Spooner, 2004; Tattersall, 2010).

We identified above the weak relationships between Malaysian unions and other interest groups, and consequently their failure to influence politics (see also analysis in Miles and Croucher, 2013). In fact, unions have been reluctant to participate in politics at all. There is the uneasy question of which political party unions should support. Given their diverse ethnic memberships, support for any one (ethnic-based) political party would antagonise members from other ethnic groups. Many unions also tend to be dominated by one ethnic group, marginalising members from other groups. Those who are most prominent in the trade unions are often co-opted by their patronage connections to ruling party elites and their allies, removing them from the front lines. At the thirteenth general election, unions sought to align themselves with the wider democratic movement and reframed workers' struggles in universalistic terms. But labour's advances beyond this were limited. It occupied only a subordinate place within the wider oppositional movement (Croucher and Miles, 2016). Solidaristic links between itself and the wider movement were not of the kind which Piven asserts would mobilise disruptive power. Given the external and internal influences which have shaped labour's character, it is perhaps unrealistic to expect it to be an effective political force within one or two election cycles.

### ***Worker fragmentation and stratification***

Finally, we deal with labour fragmentation and the lack of unity among workers, which again dilutes prospects of mobilising disruptive power. The strategies of employers and the state continue to promote multiple divisions among working people, fragmenting them as a class. Labour has been unable to bridge these divides, and in some ways has even contributed to them.

The pursuit of an export-oriented industrialisation model in Malaysia in the 1970s brought rapid feminisation of its labour force. Women entered waged employment, especially in manufacturing (electronics, textiles and garments), in unprecedented numbers (Ahmad, 1998). These sectors continue to be heavily feminised. Women were presented as a malleable, passive and obedient workforce, and their labour promoted as relatively flexible and cheap (Ng, 2006). Despite their thorough integration into the workforce, they are also an isolated workforce, focused mainly in export processing zones and industrial estates. Organising activities are strictly controlled.

Trade unions themselves suffer from gender bias in organising. Ramasamy and Rowley (2008: 125, 126) point to a number of explanations for this (citing Jomo and Todd, 1994): male domination of unions, society's disapproval of female involvement in organisations outside the home and union neglect of issues confronting women, such as childcare, harassment and discrimination. Crinis (2008) notes that as a result of the lack of union activity to protect women workers in Malaysia, civil society groups have stepped in to fill the gap. Unions were the obvious route to organising women, but their willingness to be involved was not always forthcoming. Finally, existing ethnic tensions caused women workers to identify themselves with their respective ethnic communities, rather than to a unified social class (Ng, 2006). Women have thus not only been isolated from the wider working population, but also divided internally.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> For an analysis of the empowerment of women factory workers in Malaysia, see Miles (2016).

State employment is along ethnic lines. The Malaysian civil service is dominated by Malays (78.8 per cent being Malay workers, 5.2 per cent Chinese and 4.1 per cent Indians, see Free Malaysia Today, 2015). The New Economic Policy of 1971 promised Malay workers jobs for life, access to low-interest loans and other benefits. The appointment of workers from other ethnic groups into the civil service very much depends on their sympathies. Malaysia's civil service has been criticised for being unduly biased against employing ethnic Malays, unresponsive to the needs of other ethnic groups and inefficient (Woo, 2015). Its 1.4 million workers constitute a tenth of the country's labour force, the largest in Southeast Asia. The government has been reluctant to reform the sector, wary of antagonising Malays, a vital source of support for the Barisan coalition (Reuters, 2013).

Finally, burgeoning numbers of migrant workers (about 15 per cent of the Malaysian workforce) have entered the country in search of work. Malaysia is one of the largest importers of labour in Asia, owing to its aggressive industrialisation policies. Migrants from Indonesia, the Philippines, Bangladesh, Vietnam, Pakistan, India and Sri Lanka come to work in construction, manufacturing, services, on plantations and in households to carry out low-skilled and low-paid work (Athukorala and Devadason, 2012). The literature reveals their vulnerability and exclusion from legal protections. They are regarded as second-class citizens and second-class workers. They often work in cramped and dangerous conditions and are paid less than their local counterparts (Hill, 2012). They are prohibited from joining unions by employers (Crisis, 2010). They live with the perpetual threat from employers that their contracts will be cancelled and they will be repatriated if they participate in politically motivated protests. They, too, have remained beyond organised labour's reach.

There are recent signs of change. The MTUC has focused on helping migrant workers, framing their struggles in a new light (Croucher and Miles, 2016). The MTUC (2016) has stressed that migrant workers were equal to local workers and therefore also deserving of equal protections under the law. It opposed the practice of employers recovering levies payable to the government for employing migrant workers from migrant workers themselves through wage deductions (The Star, 2013). It has worked with migrant domestic workers, helping them strengthen their advocacy capabilities, securing representation before the authorities, and coordinating with embassies and civil society organisations (MTUC, 2012). Nonetheless, these new developments around migrant workers need also be embraced by the wider labour movement and migrant workers themselves in order for synergistic links to be created.

The forceful and belligerent power of protestors at grassroots level to break down "institutionally regulated cooperation" (Piven, 2008) requires the involvement of *all* categories of workers. This could, as in the past, constitute the "surge from below", the disruptive force which she argues can force meaningful change. Yet deep divisions (gender, ethnicity and nationality) have hindered workers from different sectors and backgrounds from uniting. Reversing this requires workers from all categories to identify common grievances and common strategies – the construction of class identity – a formidable challenge in any context.

## Conclusion

Our principal contribution has been to show both the applicability and limits of Piven's theory in the Malaysian context. The potential in the "power to disrupt" to secure progressive reform has been demonstrated in Malaysian history, notably in the immediate post-war period. More recent experience in a sense provides a negative example of how Piven's theory operates by showing how

such a renaissance has been guarded against by ruling elites. Three insights in relation to her theory's operational aspects are therefore offered.

First, central to Piven's theory is that actions need to be coordinated successfully so that protestors can mobilise disruptive power. This assumes that working people from all walks of life combine to organise and contrive ways of acting in concert. But what are the chances of working people doing so where the state has constructed long-lasting divisions among them? Where the state has reworked *cultural* differences into real *political* distinctions to divide working people and pit them against each other, how can the latter collectively disrupt "institutionally regulated cooperation"? Indeed, are conditions present for the successful coordination and organisation of their disruptive power? The Malaysian case reveals the immense challenges of securing such coordination. The issue here is the relatively powerful appeal of ethnic identifications, with their strong bases in culture and language, in relation to more abstract class or even limited social movement identifications.

Secondly, Piven asserts that it is critical for protestors to maintain disruption, withstand reprisals and overcome the constraints imposed by their relations with others. This is a challenging task even in nations with highly-developed democratic traditions. In non-liberal regimes, how can protestors maintain disruption when the state deploys force to remove them? Under what conditions can they activate their interdependent power without giving in to severe repression? How can this be done where democratic freedoms and political space to interact among civil society actors and opposition elements are absent? In the Malaysian case, a vibrant multi-ethnic reform movement had developed. Labour, too, had been influenced by its ideology. Yet neither could overcome the actions of a strong and repressive state to secure reform.

Finally, implicit in Piven's theory is the collective confidence which protestors need in order to mobilise disruptive power. When workers are afraid to break rules to disrupt cooperative relations, when they fear the consequences of reprisals, and without strong links to an effective leadership, they dare not conceive of the act of protesting. Similarly, when unions themselves lack oppositional capacity and where solidarity from their allies is weak, they lack the courage to challenge those who subjugate them. A challenge, therefore, is to find out how, in illiberal and authoritarian contexts, networks can be built among labour leaders and other activists on the one hand, and workers at grassroots level on the other, in ways which can sustain boldness and determination.

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