



INTRODUCTION: THE ROOTS OF REFORM

It was supposed to be Malaysia's moment of triumph. Despite the trauma of the ongoing Asian financial crisis and the enormous cost of preparations, Malaysia was doing a laudable job of hosting the 16th Commonwealth Games, a major international sporting event. Amid the festivities, on the afternoon of September 20, 1998, Queen Elizabeth II was slated to attend services at a church on one side of Dataran Merdeka (Independence Square) in downtown Kuala Lumpur. Meanwhile, a short walk away, at the Mesjid Negara (National Mosque), recently ousted Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim was holding court before a crowd of tens of thousands of *Reformasi* (Reform) supporters. The mass then marched, chanting and singing, to Dataran Merdeka in what was probably the largest demonstration in Malaysia since independence in 1957. Anwar, who had been a student leader and Islamic activist before joining the ruling party in 1982, was arrested at his home later that evening. However, the protests continued into the night and over the next several days. They even reached the grounds of the brand-new Bukit Jalil Sports Complex, primary venue of the games. The ranks of sports photographers, when not covering matches, trained their lenses on protesters fleeing the acid-laced spray of water cannons while foreign journalists, in town for the games, rhapsodized about this latest display of Southeast Asian people power. Though it was Anwar who was beaten shortly after his arrest by the then-inspector general of police, it was Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad who sustained the worse black eye.

The Reformasi movement, launched by Anwar upon his dismissal from the government on September 2, 1998, brought to the fore long-simmering middle-class resentments as well as alternative notions about the nature and goals of governance. The movement spawned its own organizations, including nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and a

new political party as well as several coalitions. For the most part, though, the Reformasi movement drew in long-time activists and brought new urgency and life to perennial concerns of opposition parties as well as portions of civil society, making progress toward these reformist goals seem much more feasible than ever before. The movement was one in a succession of opposition attempts to forge for Malaysia a new political alternative, grounded in the ideology and principles of justice rather than in race and patronage. A communally oriented alliance has held power since independence, legitimating its increasingly firm control in terms of its commendable record of economic performance and maintenance of racial and religious harmony.¹ As the November 1999 elections demonstrated, the opposition's alternative failed to take hold completely—the incumbent government retained power overall. Nonetheless, the Reformasi movement represented a step toward change and serves to highlight the processes involved in protest and reform in an illiberal democracy (see Bell and Jayasuriya 1995) or in a regime that combines democratic institutions with authoritarian constraints.

Why the Reformasi movement developed as it did poses a puzzle. Solving that puzzle requires an exploration of the structural and historical context in which the movement developed, and it means taking seriously the creativity and agency of all sorts of opposition actors. While this discussion cannot hope to yield a deterministic model for political change, it does yield important insights into the how and why of contentious politics, as well as into political dynamics in contemporary Malaysia. In many ways, the Reformasi movement was atypical, from the perspective of studies of social movements. First, so broad a range of groups and individuals from civil society came together that civil society appeared almost to be a unitary actor. Second, the movement drew in opposition parties as well as NGOs and social activists. Those parties, too, set aside significant differences in favor of a common agenda and approach. Third, while street protests, proclamations, candlelight vigils, and so forth, kept things lively, the crux of the Reformasi movement quickly gravitated toward elections rather than more confrontational “informal” tactics. Fourth, the goals of the movement were both institutional and normative: participants aimed for systemic change of state institutions and policies but also for a shift in popular political culture.

Malaysia's experience suggests the importance of taking a broad, context-sensitive lens to contentious politics in order to understand how reformist efforts proceeded, and why. As conceptualized by McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly (2001), contentious politics involves the making of all sorts of claims on the part of agents of government, members of the polity with routine access to government, challengers lacking such access, politically unorganized subjects, and outside political actors (for instance,

other governments). Both contained and transgressive contention consists of “episodic, public collective interaction among makers of claims and their objects,” and in both forms, at least one government is directly involved, and the interests of at least one of the claimants would be affected if the claims were realized. Contention is *contained* when “all parties are previously established actors employing well established means of claim making.” It is *transgressive* when “at least some parties to the conflict are newly self-identified political actors and/or . . . at least some parties employ innovative collective action” (McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001: 7–8). At the juncture of these two forms of contention is what I term *coalitional capital*, a concept related to social capital, but at the organizational rather than the individual level.

Social capital is the store of interpersonal trust and faith in collective action garnered through associational activity. Collective action both augments and is encouraged by social capital. Abstract as it is, social capital is hard to measure, especially when there are risks to expressing it. The commonly used metric of vibrancy of associational life may be particularly misleading in such environments. The cost-benefit calculus of whether to get involved differs greatly across cases, but that is not to say that citizens in a more repressive setting are any less willing and eager to participate than those who risk much less by speaking out.² Even when politicized portions of civil society are relatively weak, however, or when citizens are deterred from activism, the presence of some degree of associational activity makes available the idea of participation, including participation through informal politics. Spurred by some catalyst that makes popular grievances seem especially pressing or the chances for redress unusually high, previously dormant stores of social capital may be relatively easily activated and mobilized. The structural manifestation of this social capital is in organizations that make efficient and effective use of institutional and noninstitutional resources.

Coalitional capital, by contrast, facilitates collaboration across groups. If social capital is related to trust and expectations of reciprocity among individuals, coalitional capital captures the same dimensions at the organizational level. Coalitional capital develops out of the experience of societal organizations’ working over time in the same arena and interacting so that the reputations of various organizations are known, groups have some sense of the strategic and ideological orientations of their counterparts, and coordination of efforts is readily conceivable when political opportunity structures are favorable for change. Whereas individuals join groups that represent their interests, coalitional capital may encourage those groups to subordinate their particularistic interests to a broader agenda shared among a range of groups.

Distinguishing between these two concepts helps elucidate how it is

that the diversity and internal conflicts of civil society may become manageable as otherwise atomized groups forge a conception of shared goals, in much the same way that individuals in a group both act upon and further elaborate those aspects of their identity they have in common with other group members. In short, social capital bonds individuals; coalitional capital bridges collectivities.

Placed in historical context, recent developments in Malaysia illustrate the activation of latent stores of social and coalitional capital, with institutions developing and coalescing as necessary to further political change. Gradual and even implicit consciousness raising by civil society agents (CSAs)³ over the long term, which encourages individual citizens to adopt new political priorities or norms, is punctuated by catalysts that galvanize more citizens to reassess prevailing risks and opportunities. CSAs may help convince citizens (for instance, by means of “alternative” media) that the moment seems propitious for change and may help them adjust their cognitive frames and strategies to optimize their influence. At the same time, other oppositional actors, including those in political parties, see the same window of opportunity as well and modify their own frames and strategies accordingly. In sum, CSAs help convince voters and elites that change is necessary and possible, and they suggest alternatives. Opposition parties organize to institutionalize an order in line with these recommendations, an order to be pursued through elections. Finally, activists and organizations from civil and political society pursue a range of strategies both to convince voters to act in accordance with the new norms being promoted and to persuade them that reform really is forthcoming.

The strategies by which CSAs in particular pursue reform are significantly conditioned by the nature of the regime. The context of an illiberal democracy offers an incentive to pursue reform via contained contention—most notably elections—rather than just by transgressive means, even if the latter are not altogether neglected. Where contained contention is not likely to be productive—for instance, in Indonesia, where the incumbent electoral authoritarian regime left very little space for the articulation of competing claims within formal political processes—transgressive contention may seem the only real route to systemic change. These concepts and processes will be explored in depth in chapters to come, and the concrete details of the long-term evolution of reformism in Malaysia (counterpoised against a very different trajectory in Indonesia) will illuminate the underlying dynamics at work. This case study, in turn, suggests a more broadly applicable framework of mobilizing for reform in illiberal polities.

Aims of the Book

This study examines the evolution of a multiethnic coalition for political protest and reform in Malaysia, with particular attention to contributions from CSAs. Malaysia is an illiberal democracy, as described in more detail below. The government is not hegemonic; it leaves at least some space for both CSAs and opposition parties to organize, but it retains a degree of coercive power. Since there is a real chance of political change through contained contention, and since such change may be less destabilizing or likely to be suppressed than change pursued through less institutionalized means, activists have an incentive to pursue reform through lobbying, elections, and the like, rather than just through extra-institutional forms of collective action.

Malaysia's illiberal democracy has proved essentially stable since independence, though control has grown increasingly centralized in the hands of the executive, especially since the 1980s. The departing British colonists ceded power to a tripartite coalition of race-based parties in 1957; that initial coalition, or an expanded version of it, has remained in power ever since. The endurance of the government is not due just to manipulation and coercion, though such factors are not absent. The opposition usually wins 40 to 45 percent of the popular vote in general elections, and often not just "a toehold in parliament" but also control over one or two states' legislatures (Case 2001: 50). Most Malaysians understand and are committed to at least a limited version of democracy (Welsh 1996) and see the ruling coalition both as competent in maintaining racial and religious harmony in addition to economic growth and patronage and as obliged by the certainty of elections to heed its constituents' interests (Crouch 1993). Malaysian political institutions perpetuate "mass complacency," usually forestalling pressure for political change (Case 2001: 47). Furthermore, over time, the development of the regime has nurtured persistent sources of conflict among opposition parties. These sources include communal divisions, even if the parties eschew such principles; ideological divisions, especially regarding Islam and socialism; and particular personalities, especially since many smaller opposition parties have splintered off from larger ones (Barraclough 1985a: 36).

History suggests that systemic reform in Malaysia is highly unlikely to come through political parties and electoral contestation alone, as might be possible were political competition more free. Also, especially since the ruling coalition has co-opted so many challengers over the years, no single party could alone hope to unseat the incumbent government. Other sorts of organizations have greater flexibility and room for ideological

and strategic maneuvering than do parties, so informal and formal segments of the opposition complement each other. Hence a coalition for reform benefits from the inclusion, as formal or informal partners, of NGOs, trade unions, public intellectuals, or other groups or activists alongside political parties. It may be that not all these sectors are closely interlinked, but all must be able to locate some common denominator around which to frame their cooperation. CSAs generate ideas and strategies, give credibility to a reformist coalition, draw in additional supporters, help with publicity and consciousness raising, and monitor parties and elections, even if formal politics is not their primary or usual focus. In the process, CSAs help bridge gaps or fortify links between political parties' leaders, members, and perspectives, both by demonstration and by facilitation of changes in popular political attitudes or priorities. The processes of negotiating, building trust, and setting rules among diverse elements of the opposition are helped by the participation of the sort of politically engaged, pro-democracy, ideologically noncommunal CSAs that have been evolving in Malaysia, especially since the 1980s. How these processes unfold is suggestive of important angles and insights that can more broadly inform the analysis of contentious politics.

Overall, this project has four primary analytical aims. First, the work examines the significance of regime type in shaping citizens' engagement. A history of limitations placed by an authoritative state on political parties or social organizations, or of incentives given to play by the rules, goes a long way toward explaining why reformists choose the strategies they do from among a broad repertoire of contained and transgressive options. Second, the study introduces and examines the concept of coalitional capital. While social capital is a necessary ingredient of collective action, coalitional capital tells us more about how groups work together to bridge social cleavages and rally broad-based support for systemic change. Considering both these levels allows the development of a nuanced, process-driven framework of short-term and long-term cultural and institutional change. Third, the cases considered here demonstrate how variations in political opportunity structures—or “collective attribution of threat and opportunity,” in McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly's terms (2001: 95)—yield shifts in reformers' rational calculations about the chances for success as well as in their choices about framing and strategies. Fourth, the study affirms that CSAs and political parties play coordinating and complementary roles in political change processes. Given their different goals and time horizons, CSAs and parties have different comparative advantages in promoting and institutionalizing reform.

Empirically, the project sets out to explore whether and how Malaysian political culture has changed in recent years, what the respective

roles of CSAs and political parties are in advancing political (especially noncommunal) alternatives, and how the illiberal democratic regime has affected the structure of its opposition. Comparative reference to Indonesia demonstrates the role of coalitional capital and the importance of political history and regime type in determining how protest proceeds. These questions are significant to the study of Malaysian politics and of civil society more generally. For one thing, overcoming communalism is among the stated objectives of virtually all Malaysian governmental and opposition parties. Exploring and weighing alternative ways to achieve this goal is clearly warranted. For another, most theoretical treatments of civil society are premised on a liberal democratic framework. Even the growing literature on NGOs, and on democratization in the postauthoritarian societies of Latin America, Africa, and central and eastern Europe, presents a very different institutional environment from that of most of Southeast Asia. Finally, in an apparent era of reformist movements, careful examination of how and when these movements arise, of their preconditions, limitations, and departures from the past, and of their likely trajectories or predilections toward or for particular strategies could be enormously revealing and could carry some degree of predictive value.

Not only does this study thus add to the corpus of empirical knowledge about events and trends in Malaysia, it also contributes to a more theoretical conceptualization of how the likelihood of political reform is affected both by institutional development over time within civil society and political society and by an increased political role for CSAs. It is important to note, however, that the focus here is far more on the dynamics than on the outcomes of contention, and more on how participants and mechanisms concatenate than on whether they succeed in their objectives.

Methods, Framework, and Terminology

This work draws on a range of political, historical, and sociological literature. It also combines a range of primarily qualitative approaches, including use of interviews, participant observation, and published and unpublished (including oral) texts. Quantitative resources such as survey data are used when possible, but reliable data are scarce. Contemporary and prior political norms, priorities, and strategies are traced through coalition platforms, press statements, election results, and the like. Complementing the Malaysian case study is a more narrowly focused examination of Indonesia that highlights the importance of regime type to understanding the nature of contention and emphasizes (by its absence) the role of coalitional capital and how it differs from social capital. Any

project of this sort is complicated by problems of defining and measuring key concepts, such as norms and civic or political culture, together with the dearth in Malaysia of reliable public opinion surveys to help gauge what people are and were thinking. However, these are not insurmountable hurdles: norms can be extrapolated from behavior, for instance, and surveys of political attitudes must in any case be taken with a healthy dose of skepticism.

It is worth explaining briefly at the outset how this study treats the concept of *civil society* (to be described more fully in the next chapter). Valuable empirical and analytical work is apt, unfortunately, to be downgraded or misconstrued either because its use of such terms as *civil society* and *social movements* does not conform to standard Western practice or because its author tries too hard to make findings fit these definitions. By now it is trite to point out that when we look for civil society in a non-Western state, we are looking for a realm premised on a liberal democratic framework and hence are unlikely to find something that meets all the quibbling conditions of prevailing definitions, particularly in terms of identities activated (ascriptive or voluntaristic) and degree of autonomy from the state. At the same time, if we see a sphere of activity between state and family in which individuals form associations and networks to advocate for certain politically oriented goals—a sphere that perhaps even self-consciously refers to itself as a civil society—then surely we can accept that sphere as a “legitimate” civil society. In other words, in this study I use the terms of the literature as reference points rather than as regulations, and I hope by doing so to develop a more nuanced, context-sensitive vision of what these terms can mean in different places and at different times.

In a stable illiberal democracy, CSAs hobble themselves if they shun involvement in or links with political society. Even though the gamut of social movement organizations is, theoretically, supposed to remain independent and not seek power within the state, those sorts of ideals are less practical outside liberal democracies, especially when there is little or no available middle ground for regularized access and influence in the form of American-style professional lobbies. Interestingly, though, scholarly literature on proper spheres for NGOs and political parties has fostered doubts among some Malaysian organizations and activists. They know that their NGOs are not considered by most academics to be “non-governmental” if they ally themselves with political parties, but they also know that their struggle is likely to be fruitless and ignored if they do not forge bonds at least with opposition parties. At the same time, the government throws those rather academic definitions back at social activists, declaring that those who wish to influence politics ought to do so

through political parties (so they can be trounced, presumably, in elections that are less than fair), not civil society organizations (see Gurmit 1984).

While a broad definition of the term *civil society* is thus useful in capturing the dynamics and diversity of activism in an illiberal democracy, the distinction between civil society and political society still matters. Here, I define a civil society as a realm rather than as a specific set of actors. Malaysian civil society is populated by those groups and individuals who, regardless of their perspectives or organizational bases, debate, evaluate, and challenge or support official discourses, interpretations, structures, or policies. By contrast, Stepan (1988: 4) defines the term *political society* (referring specifically to a “democratizing setting”) as “that arena in which the polity specifically arranges itself for political contestation to gain control over public power and the state apparatus”; he explains, “At best, civil society can destroy an authoritarian regime,” but actual democratization requires the involvement of political society as well.

What is the shape, then, of civil society in Malaysia? First, visible, coherent associations are only one part of what comprises this realm. Other key components of civil society include networks of public intellectuals or floating activists, trade unions, student groups, and even perennially out-of-power opposition political parties, which tend between elections to function more like NGOs than like parties (for example, by focusing on service delivery and issue advocacy, but without benefit of access to state resources). All these groups and individuals may be referred to as *civil society agents*. Still, it may be helpful to separate opposition parties out from this category, since ultimately their end goals are different from those of groups in civil society, even if most of their means of achieving their objectives and interim aims are the same. Second, while Putnam (1993) excludes Catholic organizations from among the producers of social capital, and Gellner (1994) posits that civil society is qualitatively different from what is found in transnationally oriented Islamic societies, all sorts of groups and perspectives are to be found in Malaysian civil society. To exclude Islamic or other religious groups from a study of civil society and social capital generation in Malaysia would be to seriously distort the picture, particularly when it comes to political activism among the Malay majority. Third, as this diversity suggests, the collective noun *civil society* implies a uniformity of purpose and perspective as well as unflinching civility, both of which are rarely if ever found in the domain in any country. Not all actors and organizations in Malaysian civil society are able even to get along amicably, let alone cooperate closely.

Other terms should be understood in the same way. When this study

refers to *nongovernmental organizations* or *social movements*, it refers to groups that would probably label themselves as such, even though they might not be so labeled by others. The average Malaysian NGO, for instance, is small, with meager grassroots links at best, and generally enjoys a rather close working relationship with at least selected (usually opposition) parties or politicians. Such a group hardly fits the official definition of an NGO. Similarly, a network of organizations and activists struggling toward a particular set of goals, whether these goals are related to the environment, to gender, to human rights, or to some other realm, is regarded in Malaysia as a social movement. It may seem retrograde or irresponsible so cavalierly to set aside our carefully crafted official definitions. Doing so, however, places attention on the processes involved, not on the terms used to define them, and contributes, in the end, to a better idea of what these terms really represent outside the liberal democracies in which they were coined. All the same, as will become clear in chapter 2, this work owes much to the ever-growing literature on democracy, civil society, and related institutions and phenomena.

Theoretical Implications

Too often, empirically rich studies are agnostic with regard to theory. At the same time, more theoretically inclined studies tend toward mechanistic accounts, coding of events, or ideologically constrained models that preclude or ignore the very significant intersection and overlap of formal and informal politics. Empirically driven but theory-enhancing studies of civil society hence crave elaboration. The present study thus introduces new data, a new approach, and new analysis.

The chapters to come treat political reform as both a normative and an institutional process. Especially in an illiberal democracy, the government maintains control not just by coercion and other material means but also by approximating ideological hegemony as closely as possible so that alternatives appear less compelling. Without shifts in popular political culture, reformists may be unable to garner and maintain sufficient support for the changes they hope to impose. The normative shifts pursued by reformers in Malaysia have been toward curtailing racialized politics in favor of more class-oriented, Islamist, or liberal democratic perspectives; toward emphasizing moral rather than economic payoffs, whether civil liberties, good governance, or Islam; and toward promoting more consistent political participation. It is quite difficult to assess what individual voters' norms are, and whether and how they might have changed. Nevertheless, a fairly good idea of these norms and changes can be gained from discussions over the Internet; editorials and essays;

speeches; interviews; the platforms or other documents of political parties, NGOs, and coalitions of groups; and the few surveys and other studies that have been done, especially when these sources are supplemented by conventional wisdom, rumor, and the ever-important “coffee-shop talk.”⁴

Moreover, the workings of CSAs do not occur in some sort of black box. There are several specific steps through which CSAs promote changes in political norms and culture.⁵ Social cleavages—in Malaysia, these are primarily racial and religious differences—play themselves out differently in NGOs and in parties, since the focus in NGOs is on advocating for issues and not on divvying up positions of power. Therefore, as a first step, and given this distinction, compromise solutions may be explored among CSAs to resolve collective action problems that might otherwise stymie coordinated attempts at reform. A history of collaborative campaigns and informal networking helps in this process and in cementing trust. As a second step, CSAs can reinforce the reputation of a reformist coalition and its platform by contributing respected, comparatively selfless leaders to political society, by offering advisors to make sure electoral initiatives stay on track and amicable, by providing grassroots support for mobilization, civic education, and campaigning, and by endorsing a coalition or particular candidates as worthwhile. As a third step, CSAs can enforce reciprocity, to ensure that voters and parties keep their promises to one another. Some sort of monitoring is crucial in order to make sure that if a new coalition comes to power, it will actually implement the platform on which it ran. Insofar as CSAs secure a role for themselves in the coalition, they may have more clout in holding a reformist government to its promises. As a fourth step in promoting change, CSAs can facilitate the institutionalization of new political norms by providing examples of them—for instance, by being noncommunal in membership and focus, if that is what they are advocating.

These factors imply a set of ideal-typical prerequisites that must be fulfilled in order for CSAs to be optimally effective at affecting norms and adherence to norms. CSAs must themselves be credible in living up to the new norms they tout. It helps, too, if CSAs are active before elections, both with election-oriented activities and with other sorts of endeavors, but not so involved in electoral politics that they jeopardize their claim to being disinterested advocates for the public good. CSAs need to have at least some degree of grassroots linkages or media access, or else they will be ill equipped to do more than “preach to the converted.” In the same vein, if CSAs have no track record on which to be judged, they may not be taken seriously or trusted by the general populace. It is important to note that even if some activists join political parties or other formal po-

litical institutions, CSAs must not lose sight of their own monitoring function and independence. A corollary is that CSAs, just like political parties, cannot be so reliant on a few key leaders as to be hobbled without them.

While parties and NGOs alike may face difficulties in organizing, activists may elect to engage through either sort of body or through both. Which mode they select is based on ideology as well as on strategy. The goals of CSAs relate to issues, whereas the aim of parties is winning elections. Therefore, their methods and definitions of success differ. CSAs may be willing to innovate in order to bring together all who support a given issue, whereas parties are prone to be more risk-averse and to focus more on their specific constituencies unless circumstances compel them to cooperate (see Lumumba-Kasongo 1995: 409). Decisions about strategy also rely on rational calculations: the government may react less harshly to some forms of dissent than to others. In Malaysia, for instance, the regime has stayed as stable as it has through “the practiced calibration of electoral institutions, allowing heightened contestation to take place in one arena, but then containing it in another” (Case 2001: 47). As a result, activists may determine that their best course of action is to engage through organizations in either civil society or political society, and by means of either contained or transgressive forms of contention.

Scope and Background

Chapters 3 through 7 explore in depth, on the basis of a primary case study of Malaysia and a secondary examination of Indonesia, how reform processes play out over time. The story begins at the margins of Malaysian history. It is hardly surprising that, just as the history of Singapore is often presumed to be the history of Lee Kuan Yew, the history of Malaysia is often construed as that of the ruling coalition and its leaders, not least among them Mahathir Mohamad, prime minister from 1981 to 2003. While voices other than theirs have generally been either muted (in view of repression and perhaps apathy) or too cacophonous to present a coherent refrain, those other voices have been there nevertheless and merit attention. Malaysian political development has also been punctuated by a sequence of social movements, opposition party efforts, and attempts at fortifying a noncommunal pattern of political organization, all of which disrupt the official narrative of harmonious consociationalism⁶ and benign paternalism.

Ethnicity represents the most prominent and pervasive line of cleavage in Malaysian politics, economics, and society. Of Malaysia’s 23 million residents, 65 percent are *bumiputera* (“princes/sons of the soil,” or

Malays and smaller indigenous groups), 26 percent are Chinese, and 8 percent are Indian. Racial categories largely mirror and reinforce religious divisions, especially the lines between Muslims and non-Muslims, since Malays are legally required to be Muslim. It is only recently that the correspondence between ethnicity and occupation, which correlates at least loosely with class, has eroded. Malay dominance is constitutionally guaranteed, its justification drawing more on claims to indigeneity than on numerical superiority. This dominance translates not only into political power and preferential economic policies but also into a national character based on Malay culture, religion, and language.

Malaysia's parliamentary order and civil society reflect this ethnicized system. Since independence, the country has been led by a quasi-consociational coalition of race-based parties. Indeed, even though opposition parties in particular stress nonethnic issues, most Malaysian political parties are, by design or default, communal. That is, either they represent the interests of a particular ethnic community (or some subset of one), whether or not membership is restricted to that group, or they focus on nonracialized issues but have trouble attracting supporters of more than one race. Moreover, since the first real flowering of associational life in Malaya, around the 1920s, the bulk of all other sociopolitical groups have likewise been communal in nature. There may be nothing inherently wrong with so racialized an order, and in fact Malaysia has suffered much less violent ethnic unrest than have many other plural societies. Regardless, this system is contrary to what both the government and its opponents claim to want in the long term. Government policies since independence have aimed at integration, particularly through language and education policies, as well as at affirmative action, in order to erase the identification of race with occupation or class. At the same time, historical and recent opposition efforts have highlighted the need for members of all communities to recognize their common interests and work together if systemic change is to be an option.

Key societal groups started to coalesce in political parties as Malaya edged toward independence after the Second World War. Most parties that sought to center on noncommunal issues were and are repressed to at least some extent. Most, although not all, of these initiatives have found support mainly among non-Malays. The end result is that a greater proportion of Malay interests than non-Malay interests has been accommodated by reasonably potent (and legal) political parties. Moreover, a process of ethnic elites' bargaining, on behalf of their communities, in a racialized contest for state largesse has been cemented by the installation, upon independence, of the tripartite Alliance coalition (later reconstituted as the *Barisan Nasional*, that is, the National Front, or BN), by the sup-

pression of class-based political initiatives, and by the consistent failure of alternative coalitions. This order has fostered the persistent predominance of race-based rather than multicomunal parties and coalitions.

Many of the constituencies or interests excluded from the array of legal political parties (and especially from the governing coalition) were and remain labor-oriented. A substantial proportion of Islamists, too, have been marginalized politically, whether they have chosen to join Islamic parties or to act from outside formal politics. Hence, since independence, Malaysia's two key opposition constituencies, both party-based and otherwise, have represented the far left and the far (religious) right, although the character and specific programs of each constituency have changed over the years. Given how little these groups seem to have in common, aside from the fact of their marginalization, building a coalition with enough clout to unseat the incumbent government has remained problematic for over four decades.

Open advocacy of communalism has diminished over the years, with even parties in the BN now more likely to tout "development" and "harmony" than the rights of their respective racial groups. At the same time, the divide between Muslims and non-Muslims has to some extent supplanted race as the political cleavage of record, though the categories "Muslim" and "Malay" are largely coterminous. For instance, when opposition parties attempted to overcome their legacy of polarization in order to forge an electoral pact in 1990, it was religion that stymied their efforts as the secular, Chinese-based Democratic Action Party (DAP) could not cooperate with the Parti Islam SeMalaysia (the Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party, or PAS). However, toward the end of the decade, as CSAs developed and extended their influence and networks, and as the government found its legitimacy in crisis, the climate for coalition building changed.

By the late 1990s, a range of both religious and secular NGOs had been working singly or jointly for some time. While most of the politicized, pro-democracy NGOs in Malaysia are communal in character, to at least some extent (mostly because of persistent linguistic, residential, and occupational divisions that coincide with racial categories), few if any are so in principle. Islamic organizations are the principal outlet for Malays, while issue-oriented groups focusing on human rights, gender, housing rights, and other concerns tend to attract more non-Malays, though there are exceptions. Most of these secular advocacy groups are quite new. NGOs per se have only really developed in Malaysia since the 1970s, with most growth only since the mid-1980s.

Both Islamic and secular NGOs have generally eschewed formal political involvement (in the sense of nominating office bearers for legislative

office, for instance), yet many are highly politically involved or have strong links with political parties. While new secular advocacy organizations are generally not overtly class-oriented, they are for the most part sympathetic to social democratic or socialist-inclined appeals, facilitating cooperation with leftist parties. For their part, mass Islamist organizations have a long history of personal and institutional ties with both Malay and Islamic parties in the government and the opposition. Through the late 1990s, PAS and the Islamic groups affiliated with it reframed their appeals, seeing an opportunity to find allies and cement more broad-based support against the BN. They played down their Malayness and stressed instead a nonracialized, Islamic concept of justice. That stance opened up common ground with non-Islamic NGOs and parties.

Starting in mid-1997, the “Asian flu”—a stunning economic crisis—swept southeast Asia. Malaysia was not immune. The currency, employment, and growth rates plunged. Although the country was less hard-hit than some others in the region (Indonesia, for instance), the crisis severely undercut popular confidence in the government’s economic programs and heightened awareness of corruption and “money politics” in the BN. Meanwhile, the same economic crisis had helped to catalyze a massive protest movement in Indonesia, which ultimately toppled Soeharto and demonstrated anew the capacities of “people power.” Other coincidental difficulties, from a stifling bout of air pollution to a mysterious swine-borne disease, further stimulated a popular sense of grievance against the government.

Then, in September 1998, United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim was ignominiously dismissed from the government and the party and was made to stand trial for alleged sodomy and corruption. His ouster proved a turning point in making the mass public—especially the Malay middle class—perceive a fortuitous change in political opportunities. Popular among many social activists for his at least rhetorical support of Islam and social justice, Anwar launched the massive Reformasi movement, which persisted after he was confined to prison. Islamic and secular NGOs alike, along with trade union activists, students, public intellectuals, and opposition party leaders, formed several coalitions of CSAs and parties over the course of the Reformasi movement. Central to all were questions of good governance, civil liberties, and the perceived predations of the government. All capitalized, too, on intense popular anger over Anwar’s treatment: among other things, he was beaten in custody, given a trial of dubious fairness and a harshly punitive sentence, and denied permission to travel overseas for spinal surgery. The theme of *keadilan* (justice) provided a

credible basis and message on which Islamic and secular organizations, including CSAs as well as PAS, the DAP, and the newly formed Parti Keadilan Nasional (the National Justice Party, or Keadilan), could cooperate and mobilize the broader public. Perceiving an opportunity for systemic change, the participants in the Reformasi movement thus altered their collective action frames to capture as broad a constituency as possible.

In the same vein, CSAs, having brought critical common issues to the fore over years of advocacy work, changed their strategies to be more effective in capitalizing on political opportunities once elections seemed imminent. CSAs active in Reformasi directed their energies to electoral politics, helping to formulate, reinforce, publicize, and lend credence to the joint message of usually polarized opposition parties. The focus and structure of issue-oriented coalitions in civil society presented a model for cross-party cooperation; moreover, a number of Reformasi activists ran for office, whether or not they were “politicians” in the usual sense. The spate of NGO or “social issue” candidates, representing all three main ethnic groups, helped keep the debate centered on issues, not race or religion, and reasserted to voters the opposition’s commitment to these substantive concerns.

The opposition’s campaign in 1999 was cast as the logical extension of a social movement rather than “politics as usual.” United in the Barisan Alternatif (the Alternative Front, or BA), the opposition made a concerted effort to run an idealistic, nonethnicized campaign. In line with this approach, activists from civil society were deemed equally competent to stand for office (though most joined a party first, if only for convenience in campaigning), and actual party affiliation was downplayed, albeit perhaps more in rhetoric than in reality for most candidates. The parties involved (especially PAS and the DAP) came as far as they did in their negotiations, and in communicating their agreement to the general public, largely by dint of the active cooperation of CSAs, including alternative media.

A large factor in the relative success of the BA in cohering and having a real impact at the polls was that the coalition was not a few parties struggling to suppress their differences in pursuit of a shared foe but was instead rooted in, supported by, and monitored by a wide range of CSAs and could call upon a proactive, normative agenda that evoked a sequence of reform initiatives from the past. Previous coalition-building initiatives from the 1950s through the 1990s had left activists not only with a repertoire of contained and transgressive strategies of contention but also with coalitional capital: the groups involved were familiar with each others’ ideologies and goals, had established means of communicating,

and had built up at least some degree of mutual trust and expectations of reciprocity at the organizational level.

Communalism and developmentalism have not been expunged as key political priorities. Still, there has been a shift toward these discourses' sharing political space with alternative priorities of good governance, civil liberties, and socioeconomic justice. Individual voters have been urged, through issue-advocacy campaigns and more direct messages, to vote along new lines—in other words, to accept and internalize these new political priorities or norms. These voters have also been urged to reconceptualize political participation more broadly: to understand “democracy” not solely in procedural terms, as voting once every five years, but as staying legitimately and continuously engaged and critical.

Many or most of those who voted for the BA in 1999 might have done so just as a vote against Mahathir or in support of Islam and Anwar rather than as a vote for Keadilan. The fact that the BN fared so much better in the 2004 general elections, after Mahathir had stepped down as prime minister, indicates that the incumbent coalition remains both powerful and popular. Still, that “justice” discourse clearly had at least some sway over voters, especially in 1999, and has pressured UMNO to cultivate a reformist image itself. Also, a preference for multiracialism has clearly already taken root, to some extent, even within government rhetoric, and even if the idea of more equitable development has been less well accepted among those not on the receiving end of proposed redistributive policies. The persistent salience of the *keadilan* theme and its attendant foci seem assured if for no other reason than that these are among the only bridges to unite PAS with the secular left-wing opposition, and to unite all these parties with CSAs' resources and experience in order to challenge the government as effectively as possible.

Caveats

These processes all sound rather inevitable and irreversible. It is worth asking why, if civil society is so potent and promotes such lofty ideals of multiracialism and social justice, it has failed to get the general public to internalize these ideals more fully. Perhaps most important, racial and religious fears are still very significant, though the latter have largely upstaged the former. Thus the BN warns Chinese—non-Muslims—not against supporting Malays but against supporting strident Muslims. CSAs have yet to convince most voters that PAS and its adherents will not press for an Islamic state—not least because it was never absolutely clear that PAS would not in fact do so.⁷ Furthermore, although they seem to be growing a bit more bold, secular NGOs have generally been very tenta-

tive when it comes to religious issues, with non-Malay/Muslim NGOs hesitant to intervene in anything related to Islam. As a result, these NGOs promote multiracial perspectives but have had rather little to say about multireligious issues, particularly in recent years.

Old-style communalism remains salient, too, aside from its transmutation into religious divisions, primarily because of economic incentives that favor those particular identities. Government policies privilege Malays and their fellow *bumiputera* and make ethnic identity the center of a whole system of economic, social, and political rewards. Contributing to this persistent vertical segmentation are language differences (and hence the media accessible to members of various communities), an ingrained tendency to trust those of one's own group more than others, racially segregated settlement patterns, and a host of other factors. Even the BA parties were not immune in 1999: the leadership of Keadilan, for instance, included only a token sprinkling of non-Malays, and its electoral appeals were sometimes communally tinged. Indeed, as the BN often warns, Malaysia's ethnic balance could break down over time: the country is hardly immune to the centrifugal tendencies endemic to plural societies (for instance, Bosnia and Indonesia). In 1999, opposition actors saw multiethnic cooperation as the most promising avenue for achieving the sort of polity they wanted. If political culture evolves in a different direction, Malaysians' ideas about race and communalism may change again, too. In fact, the same trajectory of coalition building that was followed in the 1990s, in pursuit of multiethnic cooperation, could conceivably be pursued in the future for more particularistic ends, especially given how personalistic the process was, even in 1999. Regardless, the evolution of opposition politics and the progress of the Reformasi movement in Malaysia suggest that this two-level process of reform (in civil society and political society, over both the short and the long term) is most likely to bring both cultural and institutional change—and it is progress toward reform, not the fact of whether reformers actually achieve their goals, that is analytically relevant here.

Shifting our gaze to Indonesia clarifies what this framework can and cannot explain. This comparison is particularly revealing for exploring the importance of coalitional capital in facilitating coordinated, proactive mobilization. Three decades of authoritarian rule had left Indonesian opposition parties debilitated and CSAs mutually wary. The collective realization that threats of repression were comparatively low (given factional splits in the military), while the opportunity for change was high on account of Soeharto's unprecedented weakness in 1998, led CSAs and opposition parties in Indonesia, as in Malaysia, to rework their collective

action frames and strategies in pursuit of systemic reform. That mass upsurge brought down the authoritarian order but did so before all involved had established any sort of proactive consensus. While democratization is gradually proceeding, the CSAs most critical at the transgressive stage were largely barred from influence at later stages. As in Malaysia, then, CSAs and political parties alike enjoyed certain advantages and attempted to collaborate in Indonesia's Reformasi movement, but historical and contextual factors rendered those processes significantly different in each country.

Summary of Conclusions

I conclude that CSAs, as one part of the political opposition, broadly defined, help to bridge the gap between disparate political actors by promoting changes in political culture both before and during efforts at further institutional reform. In a political system in which the governing coalition co-opts virtually all but polarized actors and leaves relatively little space for dissent, inventive coalition-building arrangements, premised on prior and ongoing cultural shifts and galvanized by periodic catalysts from within or outside the system, make reform possible. The key contributions of CSAs lie in their helping to change individuals' political norms, opening the range of available strategies to include both institutional and noninstitutional approaches, mobilizing the public to see and act upon changing political opportunities, and helping to validate reformist candidates and parties. The Reformasi movement in Malaysia was different from past movements, not so much because of its noncommunal, *keadilan* frame—since this echoed a sequence of past reform initiatives—as because of the cluster of relatively new (either secular or religious) pro-democracy, ideologically noncommunal organizations that has come to populate Malaysian civil society.

In other words, CSAs may not serve just a minor policy-reform or lobbying function but may actually have an impact on the nature, aims, and shape of the regime as a whole. Therefore, shifts in the shape or orientation of structures within civil society can facilitate political reform, especially given changes in prevailing political opportunities to spark mobilization. This is not to say that *only* CSAs are at work, or that this process is inevitable. Indeed, many of the processes that are probably crucial to the development of politicized, reform-oriented CSAs—such as urbanization, more widespread access to higher education, and the spread of the Internet and other media—no doubt have an independent effect on society that *also* encourages the same normative and strategic trends. Nonetheless, one might then see groups within civil society as the institu-

tional manifestation of, or means of channeling, some of these rather amorphous forces. As these groups persist, they generate coalitional capital, which leaves both CSAs and parties better able to coordinate frames and strategies for taking advantage of moments of weakness within the usually strong government, and to press for reform. Hence the two-track process described here, of long-term cultural shifts punctuated by periods of institutional innovation, proceeds, however gradually, toward the ultimate aim of political change.

Chapter Overview

This study begins in chapter 2 with an introduction to the concepts and theories that frame the work. I describe and evaluate the dominant debates engaged through the study and preview the framework to be filled out by subsequent chapters. Several of the terms central to this study are highly contested. I explain how and why I define and employ those concepts, and how Malaysia's state and civil society correspond or clash with dominant formulations. Chapter 2 makes a case for paying attention to regime type rather than assuming easy comparability of cases; for avoiding essentializing preconceptions about Islamic (or other) societies; and for considering various sorts of political reform as important and valid. In particular, the Malaysian case suggests ways in which CSAs and coalitional capital may help bridge social cleavages that might otherwise cripple opposition coalition-building efforts. The Malaysian case also illustrates the complementarities of CSAs and political parties where both are necessary to reform but are also constrained by a hostile and powerful government.

Once the theoretical context is set, the empirical picture unfolds. Chapter 3 offers an institutional history of early noncommunal political initiatives in Malaysia and of why they failed. The colonial era ended with the purposeful entrenchment of a communal political order that reflected the racialized colonial economy. Those constituencies not absorbed by the coalition that came to power when the British left assumed a position of relatively intractable marginalization, whether represented by opposition political parties, voluntary associations, or both. Moreover, experiences of this period hint at how polarizing, durable, and often debilitating issues of ethnicity, religion, language, class, and education have been to Malaysia's formal and informal opposition.

This narrative continues in chapter 4. The four decades after independence saw the intensification of the racialized order begun earlier and the gradual narrowing of political space. Malay dominance in government, official culture, and patronage structures became more deeply pervasive

and unshakable, making noncommunal initiatives seem an even harder sell than before among the Malay majority, the community's internal divisions notwithstanding. Also, the ruling coalition expanded to draw in a host of potential challengers while new and amended laws curtailed informal political participation. Still, moments of economic decline and factionalism within the government revealed how dependent it was on material incentives, and hence how fragile was its hegemony in the face of alternative paradigms. At the same time, demographic and cultural changes, from rising educational and income levels to Islamic revivalism, provided CSAs with new grounds for complaint and mobilization. Over the years, a range of religious and secular associations became stronger, more institutionalized, and more experienced. These groups learned to cooperate across racial and other cleavages around those issues that they had in common, but political parties were hard pressed to do the same. Hence, while citizens became ever more open to the idea of participation, and better educated on a range of sociopolitical issues, institutionalized reform lagged behind normative change.

As described in chapter 5, the situation changed in the late 1990s. Economic and political weaknesses spurred citizens to mobilize against the government. Their protests grew ever more bold as the government failed to respond to popular grievances. CSAs and political parties stepped forward to channel and coordinate this popular frustration. The primary peninsular opposition parties, caught up in the urgency and opportunity of the Reformasi movement and substantially aided by CSAs, found sufficient grounds to cooperate in a plausible coalition, adopting a *keadilan* frame. Meanwhile, CSAs adapted their strategies to take advantage of this window of opportunity, becoming more involved than ever before in electoral politics.

Chapter 6 puts these developments in perspective by exploring how distinctive the Reformasi movement was and what it represented. The BA did not do as well as it had hoped to in the November 1999 elections, yet those electoral data are an imperfect indicator of the depth of change that has occurred, particularly at the level of political culture.

Chapter 7 furthers this discussion by describing the process of reformism in neighboring Indonesia. While, broadly speaking, Reformasi and its catalysts seemed largely comparable in Indonesia and Malaysia, the different long-term evolution of opposition politics in Indonesia, its more authoritarian state and meager stores of cleavage-bridging coalitional capital, and the deeper crisis and faster pace of change there, among other factors, precluded the crystallization of a unified opposition coalition and limited the role of CSAs in institutionalizing a new political order.

Finally, in chapter 8, I sum up these empirical and theoretical findings to consider the implications of the study. Recent developments in Malaysia suggest that political culture and praxis are changing, and the same developments point to the role of coalitional capital in enabling, for instance, Islamist and secular opposition blocs to cooperate. The results of the post-Reformasi elections in March 2004 emphasize the essential stability of BN control, but even this coalition has been forced to adopt a focus on good governance, internal reform, and moderate Islam in order to sustain voters' confidence and obviate support for the opposition. While the specific context of reform initiatives largely determines their shape and focus, the framework developed here suggests important angles for studying reform movements that privilege no sphere unduly and treat both "successes" and "failures" as revealing and significant. Overall, then, this study enhances not only empirical understandings of Malaysian political development but also theoretical conceptions of contentious politics in illiberal democracies more broadly.