Influencing Power

Civil Society, Political Mobilisation and the Pursuit of Reforms in Malaysia, 2018–2025

Ooi Kok Hin

WP346

RSiS | S. RAJARATNAM SCHOOL OF INTERNATIONAL STUDIES
Nanyang Technological University, Singapore

Ponder the Improbable since 1996

Table of Contents

Abstract

This paper advances a thesis of seven conditions that enable or constrain Malaysian civil society organisations (CSOs) in influencing governance, policy, and political reform from 2018 to 2025. It also proposes a heuristic typology of the way CSOs operate – a fluid categorisation where actors shift between policy-driven and identity-driven actors, and between strategies of institutional engagement and public mobilisation. Drawing on the turbulent period following Malaysia's historic 2018 transfer of power, the analysis identifies seven structural conditions (political allies, leverage, sustainability, institutionalisation, catalysts, infrastructure, and diffusion) that enable or constrain civil society influence and illuminate how advocacy groups navigate the shifting political opportunity structures of a transitional democracy. Comparative case studies of BERSIH, a reformist pro-democracy coalition, and ISMA, a conservative Islamist organisation, reveal how ideologically opposing actors navigate these conditions to advance their agendas. The post-2018 opening expanded formal channels of influence for reformist actors but also exposed them to strategic dilemmas and risks, including co-optation, demobilisation, and fatigue. More broadly, this paper contributes to understanding how CSOs adapt strategies in transitional democracies and how shifting political conditions recalibrate the trade-offs between insider/cooperative engagement and outsider/confrontational activism.

Introduction

Malaysia has experienced multiple premierships, political turnovers, and fluid political coalitions since the country's historic 2018 general election (GE14), which saw the first peaceful transition of power at the national level. This environment has created both opportunities and challenges for civil society organisations (CSOs) seeking to influence governance, public policy and political processes.

Civil society in Malaysia has long played a pivotal role in advocating transparency, accountability, and institutional reforms, but the post-2018 period has tested its adaptability and relevance. This paper seeks to answer one question: *What conditions facilitate or constrain civil society's capacity to influence political and governance reforms?* By focusing on Malaysia's state–civil society dynamics from 2018 to 2025, I analyse the strategies and conditions that enable or constrain CSOs in their pursuit of influence. In this context, influence refers to the capacity to shape politics and policy through agenda-setting, public mobilisation, policy credibility, and sustained public trust. Amid democratic transition, CSOs in Malaysia can play a critical role in stewarding the transition and adapting their advocacy strategies to a rapidly changing environment.[1] Prior to 2018, many CSOs often operated from adversarial positions, rallying against the state's abuse of power, corruption, electoral malpractices, and institutional interference, and contributed significantly to the strong performance of the opposition parties.[2] A hostile state left many CSOs structurally, functionally, and operationally constrained.[3] A large segment of activists were not regarded as credible stakeholders in policymaking – mere mosquitoes, or, to use a Socratic term, "gadflies" – and several high-profile CSO leaders were even blacklisted from entering Parliament.

GE14 and its aftermath changed state–civil society relations. Just as it did in the general election of 2008 (GE12), which saw a breakthrough towards a two-coalition competition in Malaysia, civil society contributed significantly to building political momentum and waves of discontent across GE13 and GE14. For example, the 1MDB scandal – involving the embezzlement of assets from the 1Malaysia Development Berhad sovereign wealth fund – created a political opening for civil society and the opposition to mount an offensive, with the Coalition for Clean and Fair Elections (BERSIH[4]) taking the lead in fostering common platform- and coalition-building while emphasising cross-ethnic issues.[5]

The first Pakatan Harapan (PH) government (2018–2020) brought new opportunities and challenges for civil society. With sympathetic policymakers and former allies now in government, CSOs shifted from a primarily oppositional role to

---

[1] See, for instance, the role of Tunisian civil society in helping the country navigate the post–Arab Spring transition. Civil society movements were pivotal in mediating between different parties and won the Nobel Peace Prize for making a "decisive contribution" to democracy in the wake of the 2011 revolution. "Nobel Peace Prize for Tunisian National Dialogue Quartet", BBC, 9 October 2015, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-34485865

[2] Weiss, Meredith L, "Edging toward a New Politics in Malaysia: Civil Society at the Gate?" *Asian Survey* 49, no. 5 (2009): 741–758.

[3] Giersdorf, Stephan, and Aurel Croissant. "Civil Society and Competitive Authoritarianism in Malaysia", *Journal of Civil Society* 7, no. 1 (2011): 1–21.

[4] The author was affiliated with BERSIH in various capacities from 2020 to 2025, including serving as its executive director from 2023 to 2025.

[5] Chong, Chan Tsu. "Democratic Breakthrough in Malaysia–Political Opportunities and the Role of Bersih", *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs* 37, no. 3 (2018): 109–137.

engaging more directly in policy advocacy and legislative reforms. This new dynamic was not without friction, as civil society's push for accountability and reform after 2018 sometimes conflicted with the priorities of successive ruling coalitions. Tensions also emerged within civil society's support base – some feared civil society was being too confrontational towards the new government they backed, while others felt it had grown soft and insufficiently assertive in demanding change. The absence of a threat in the form of a Thanos-like villain after the fall from power of the dominant party also inhibits collective action to an extent, risking demobilisation among civil society.[6] This was the backdrop against which most civil society actors found themselves in recent years.

Mapping Civil Society and Channels of Influence in the Post-2018 Landscape

Malaysian civil society groups are not monolithic but rather a contested space with multiple, competing forces vying for influence. Mapping them presents inherent challenges as it is nearly impossible to create an exhaustive list given the vast scope of their activities and areas of focus. Such an attempt risks either inadvertently excluding significant organisations – leading to potential offence – or producing an overly extensive, indiscriminate list that has little analytical value.

Be that as it may, I attempt to provide a heuristic categorisation with four criteria:

(i) public impact and visibility, however loosely defined, e.g., when a CSO issued a press statement on a major issue, it must have received extensive media coverage and/or social media traction;
(ii) policy credibility, e.g., a CSO must be viewed as an authoritative voice on a particular policy matter;
(iii) strong access to institutional politics, e.g., a CSO must have access and allies in key government and political leaders;
(iv) influenced at least one major democratic policy or political change in the last seven years (i.e., since 2018).

Applying these criteria for selection of CSOs relevant to the discussion of this paper, I categorise Malaysian CSOs along a two-axis typology, distinguishing organisations based on their core issue (policy-driven or identity-driven) and their approach (prioritising institutional engagement or public mobilisation). This typology allows us to position CSOs within four *fluid* quadrants, capturing their respective roles in Malaysia's governance and advocacy landscape (see also Table 1).

A. **Institutional Reformers (Policy-Driven, Prioritise Institutional Engagement).** These organisations tend to work closely with state institutions, political parties, and government committees to influence policy change through structured engagement rather than direct mobilisation. They influence governance through expertise, research, and elite engagement rather than mass mobilisation. They

---

[6] Almeida, Paul D. "The Role of Threat in Collective Action", *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Social Movements* (2018): 43–62.

often produce policy recommendations, engage in lobbying and serve as reference points for policymakers. They enjoy credibility within policy circles and have successfully shaped legislative or governance reforms. It may be useful to regard this approach as one that prioritises change through *formal* institutional processes.

B. **Grassroots Mobilisers (Policy-Driven, Prioritise Public Mobilisation).** These CSOs primarily operate outside formal political structures, relying on public mobilisation, media advocacy, and pressure campaigns to influence governance. They are often at the forefront of protests and issue-based activism.

C. **Identitarian Lobbyists (Identity-Driven, Prioritise Institutional Engagement).** These organisations tend to operate within formal frameworks, focusing on identity-based advocacy to represent and safeguard religious or cultural values. They engage with political elites, government institutions, religious bodies and media platforms to contribute to national discourse and policymaking. Unlike think tanks or policy-driven CSOs, their influence comes not primarily from technical research or policy credibility but from their ability to articulate the concerns and aspirations of specific communities based on ascriptive grouping, e.g., positioning themselves as key representatives of their respective religious, ethnic or cultural groups.

D. **Identitarian Mobilisers (Identity-Driven, Prioritise Institutional Engagement).** These groups exert influence through mass mobilisation. Rather than engaging with policymakers directly, they shape public opinion through digital and physical mobilisation, ideological framing, and media amplification. Operating outside formal institutions, they could be a loose network, yet they wield significant cultural and political influence through social networks, religious rhetoric, and viral content.

Table 1: Four Quadrants of Malaysian CSOs

	Policy-driven	Identity-driven
Institutional Engagement	***Institutional Reformers*** CSOs working through legislative/policy channels for systemic change ***Examples:*** BERSIH, IDEAS, Undi18, Architects of Diversity, Centre for Independent Journalism, MCCHR	***Identitarian Lobbyists*** Groups influencing governance through ideological frameworks rather than policy research ***Examples:*** Malaysian Islamic Youth Movement (ABIM), Malaysian Consultative Council of Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Sikhism and Taoism (MCCBCHST)
Public mobilisation	***Grassroots Mobilisers*** Groups using protests, petitions and community organising to push for change ***Examples:*** Secretariat Solidariti Rakyat, SUARAM, Mandiri, HARAM, some student activist networks	***Identitarian Mobilisers*** Groups shaping discourse through large-scale campaigns or protests, often on cultural/religious issues ***Examples:*** Muslim Solidarity Front (ISMA), UMMAH, the Patriots, and other right-wing and/or Islamist networks

I acknowledge that this typology and categorisation can easily be challenged under close examination. It is not my intention to provide a fixed or exhaustive typology. Rather, I hope to offer a useful starting point for mapping civil society's strategic orientations and approaches and encourage us to think about civil society in more analytical and productive ways. I welcome suggestions for refining this model or, even better, the development of a more effective alternative.

For now, categorising in this way helps us to identify the strategic orientation guiding a CSO at a given time and allows us to make more legible (in James Scott's terms) the complex landscape of civil society in Malaysia.[7] I must add three caveats to this typology: (i) these are *fluid* quadrants and CSOs often move to different quadrants in response to changing circumstances. For example, BERSIH shifted from primarily Grassroots Mobiliser to primarily Institutional Reformer after 2018. That said, CSOs alternate their approach between institutional engagement and public mobilisation fairly often; (ii) one individual could be affiliated with more than one CSO and thus simultaneously operate in multiple quadrants; and (iii) the term "identity" or "identitarian" is not used as a pejorative but a descriptive term to emphasise a CSO's core advocacy and outlook.

This typology reveals a dynamic and multi-layered civil society ecosystem in Malaysia, where organisations adopt different strategies depending on their goals, resources, and political openings. The shift of certain organisations, such as BERSIH,

---

[7] Scott, James C, *Seeing like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (Yale University Press, 1998).

from mass mobilisation to institutional engagement illustrates how CSOs evolve in response to changing political conditions. Conversely, the rise of online influencers and right-wing religious movements signals an alternative form of civil society influence that operates beyond traditional advocacy frameworks.

Another emerging pattern from this mapping exercise is the uneven distribution of civil society functions. While institutional reformers and policy advocates have made gains in formal governance processes, there is a notable decline in large-scale grassroots mobilisation, especially in progressive circles. The increasing institutionalisation of certain progressive CSOs suggests that their influence is becoming more policy-oriented than protest-driven but this has the unintended consequence of leaving the mobilisation quadrant strongly occupied by identitarian mobilisers.

Before proceeding further, some clarifications about the terms "progressive" and "right-wing" are in order. Right-wing groups often advocate ethnoreligious nationalism, a form of nationalism that excludes or marginalises minority groups, frequently accompanied by xenophobic or ethnocentric rhetoric. They demonstrate a leaning towards authoritarianism, which supports strong, centralised leadership that suppresses dissent and prioritises a dominant order over individual freedoms by opposing allegedly "Western" ideas of fundamental human rights, multiculturalism, pluralism, or minority rights. In Malaysia, right-wing groups may push for the strict enforcement of Malay-Muslim supremacy at the expense of minority communities such as the Chinese, Indian, or indigenous groups. Even on this issue alone, a spectrum of positions exist in the right-wing space: for example, some groups are content with reserving the top political positions such as the prime minister role for Malay-Muslims, while others extend the ethnic hierarchy to senior cabinet or ministerial positions and a few would even oppose any form of political coalition with non-Malay-Muslims. They also tend to oppose secularism, liberal democracy, and human rights frameworks that challenge their vision of an ethnoreligious hierarchy, advocating the exclusivity of Muslim political leadership.

In contrast, progressive groups advocate political and social reform that promotes equality and inclusivity, often challenging traditional norms and dominant structures. They emphasise democratic values, human rights, gender equality, and the protection of minority rights that often align with policy positions that encourage multiculturalism and pluralism. Malaysian progressive groups also work to counterbalance the influence of conservative or right-wing groups by championing policies that uphold social justice, democratic governance, multiculturalism, and the protection of civil liberties, even in the face of significant opposition from more traditional or reactionary segments of society. Similar to right-wing groups, progressive groups in Malaysia also span a broad spectrum of positions and priorities. Some are progressive on certain issues but not on others. While some are more "pragmatic" and willing to collaborate with less like-minded allies, others take a "principled" position to resist coalition-building with partners that may dilute their messaging.

It is instructive to note how the channels for influencing political actors and policymakers have evolved in the seven years since the 2018 election (Table 2). In Malaysia's pre-2018 political landscape, many progressive CSOs functioned as outsider-agitators, relying on street protests, public campaigns, and even international

advocacy to generate buzz to pressure the government. Groups such as BERSIH, SUARAM, and Lawyers for Liberty were at the forefront of this oppositional approach, challenging state power through mass mobilisation, strategic litigation, and media advocacy. The late Raja Petra Kamarudin ("RPK") spearheaded the Free Anwar Campaign, which utilised online platforms to allow news and updates about Anwar's arrest and imprisonment to reach international media outlets.

At that time, access to formal policymaking spaces was limited, as the Barisan Nasional (BN) government led by the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) systematically excluded most civil society voices from legislative processes. Under this restrictive environment, the primary strategy available to civil society was confrontation, often at the cost of repression, surveillance, and public vilification.
The political realignment following the 2018 general election created new openings for civil society engagement. For the first time, many progressive activists were invited into the halls of power, assuming advisory and bureaucratic roles within government institutions. Civil society's influence was no longer confined to street protests but extended into formal and institutionalised avenues. Civil society actors were granted direct access to decision-making processes, which allowed them to influence policy formation from within. Such rare access to power is arguably one of the most critical mechanisms of civil society influence in politics.[8]

Progressive CSOs now have the ears of top government leaders and access to (some) bureaucrats – this is an advantage once possessed only by several Islamic civil society groups whose alumni or former leaders became political and government leaders. The greater roles and expanded powers of parliamentary committees in the post-GE14 period directly and indirectly contributed to increased policy influence for civil society, as the activists are no longer dependent on just one door or one channel for advocacy.

In the post-2018 landscape, CSOs have more channels of influence such that when one channel of lobbying is uninterested in the reforms they advocate, they have the option of moving to the next channel for lobbying. However, these formal channels of influence come with expectations of closed-door negotiation, deliberation and outcomes that have sometimes been classified as state secrets (under the Official Secret Act), thus guaranteeing no immediate recourse for CSO concerns.

---

[8] Andrews, Kenneth T. T., "Social Movements and Policy Implementation: The Mississippi Civil Rights Movement and the War on Poverty, 1965 to 1971", *American Sociological Review* 66, no. 1 (2001): 71–95.

Table 2: Channels of Influence for Malaysian Civil Society, 2018–2025

Before 2018 transition	After 2018 transition
Limited entry/blocked from Parliament	Lobbying cabinet ministers, including access to prime minister
Relied on opposition MPs to speak up about governance, democracy and human rights in Parliament	Persuading speakers of parliament (upper and lower chambers) to advocate reforms
Weak parliamentary committees; not present to give inputs directly to parliamentary committees	Briefing parliamentary committees, especially the Parliamentary Special Select Committee on Elections, Human Rights and Institutional Reforms
No direct involvement in parliamentary process	Participating in All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG)
Press statements	Press statements
Street demonstrations to assert public pressure for electoral and institutional reforms through legislative and policy changes	Street demonstrations only when strategically required
Grassroots engagement	Grassroots engagement

While the 2018 transition expanded civil society's channels of influence, it also introduced strategic dilemmas. Organisations that previously employed confrontational direct action tactics have had to recalibrate their strategies, for example, striking a balance between being credible partners to government actors and political leaders in pursuing reform, on the one hand, and, on the other, maintaining their independence and public role as vocal watchdogs holding the state accountable. The adoption of insider tactics exposed civil society groups to accusations of co-optation, with critics arguing that CSOs had become too embedded within the political establishment.
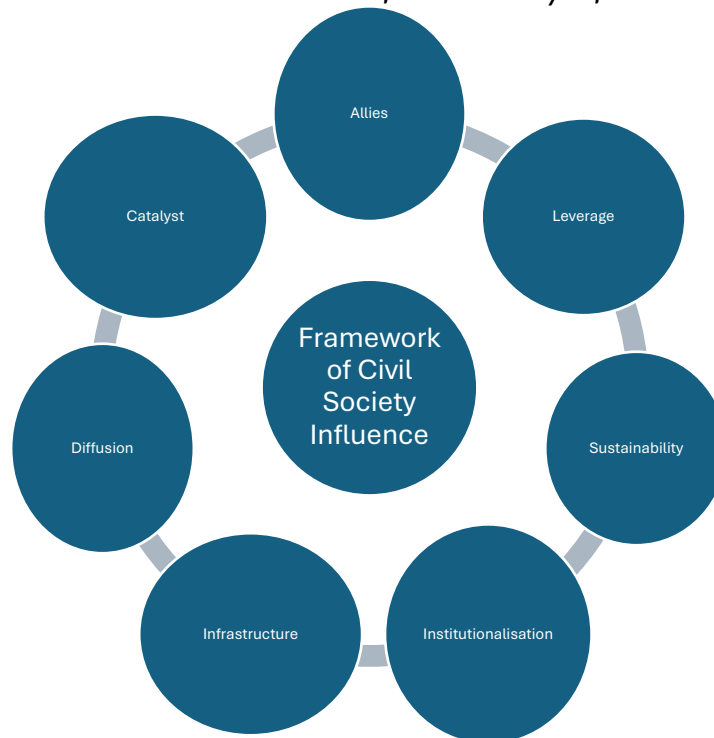
Conditions of Civil Society Influence

The effectiveness of CSOs in influencing governance, political processes and public policy depends on their ability to navigate broader conditions that affect their influence. These conditions encompass the political, institutional, and societal environments that enable or constrain CSOs in their efforts to engage with the state, mobilise public support, and push for reforms.

Because civil society actors often represent marginalised or disempowered groups, their influence is rarely a direct causal force (or at least it is challenging to demonstrate direct causation) in effecting change, particularly in less democratic contexts. Instead, their effectiveness depends on how well they navigate structural constraints, seize emerging opportunities, and sustain engagement within an evolving landscape to contribute a degree of influence to create impact. Understanding these conditions is essential for assessing whether civil society can drive meaningful governance reform or risk becoming an echo chamber. Thus, rather than trying to grasp influence as causal mechanisms, it is more constructive to analyse it as the ability to

identify and respond to underlying conditions which shape both the opportunities and the constraints imposed on civil society actors.

Chart 1: Conditions of Civil Society Influence

       Underlying conditions determine the viability of civil society engagement by influencing access to policymaking spaces, the responsiveness of state institutions, and the public's receptiveness to advocacy efforts. Conditions are rarely static; they are often dynamic or evolve over time. Malaysia's political landscape since 2018 has demonstrated how varying conditions either facilitate or limit civil society's ability to drive reforms. These conditions also shape how CSOs organise, communicate, and sustain momentum over time. In addition, certain disruptions such as political crises, leadership transitions or external shocks can momentarily shift these conditions, creating openings for reform, or derail them. This may not be an exhaustive list, but below are seven conditions that I believe affect the effectiveness of CSOs' advocacy (Figure 1).

Condition 1: Allies

The importance of having allies in institutionalised politics to create an impact has long been emphasised by social movement scholars.[9] The presence of political allies within the state apparatus is a critical condition that determines whether civil society can successfully translate advocacy into policy or political change. In particular, allies provide CSOs direct and indirect access to decision-making arenas such as Parliament, political party offices or cabinet meetings.

---

[9] Andrews, Kenneth T., and Bob Edwards. "Advocacy Organisations in the US Political Process", *Annual Reviews of Sociology* 30, no. 1 (2004): 479–506.

The success of civil society in securing policy or legislative wins for a cause is often tied to having the right issue champion, dubbed "issue entrepreneurs", who possesses both political influence and the motivation to take ownership of the cause.[10]

Ambitious politicians who are keen issue entrepreneurs and exercise some degree of influence on the top party leaders are especially useful. Issue entrepreneurship is a strategy by which parties or politicians "mobilise issues that have been largely ignored in party competition and adopt a policy position on the issue that is substantially different from the mainstream status quo."[11] Whether driven by political ambition or genuine belief, an issue entrepreneur within a party is more likely to be proactive in seeking out new issues to campaign on. An implication of this is that issue entrepreneurs tend to be more receptive to working with social movements, synergise their energy, and build a larger momentum. In contrast, party veterans, comfortable career politicians, and politicians with lesser ambitions are less driven to identify, conduct research on, and amplify new issues. As top party leaders are often too preoccupied, it is these issue entrepreneurs who usually bring new issues to their attention. Top party leaders then delegate to issue entrepreneurs the task of conducting research and seeking potential collaboration with social movements.

Condition 2: Leverage

CSOs are just one of many actors competing for the attention of governments and political leaders. To ensure that civil society voices are not just heard but also acted upon, governments must have compelling reasons to engage them. In most cases, moralistic or ethical arguments alone are insufficient to persuade policymakers to adopt civil society recommendations.

Instead, CSOs must develop and exercise leverage, i.e., the ability to apply strategic pressure, create incentives, or impose costs on political and government stakeholders to encourage action. There are different forms of leverage that CSOs can try to build and exercise, for instance, developing strong public support to the degree that the threat of large-scale protests is *credible* enough to create political risks for governments. The credibility of threats is emphasised here because threats are made against the government all the time but few groups actually have the capacity to carry out their threats. A successful mass mobilisation signals to political actors that an issue has broad public support and may influence electoral outcomes, while a threatened but weak or failed protest undermines the tactic's credibility for future use.

Civil society can also influence elections by shaping voter perceptions, endorsing candidates, or mobilising specific voter blocs. Politicians are more likely to engage with CSOs that have the power to influence their voter base or constituency, thus directly impacting their political survival.

In addition, CSOs can create the perception of public support by framing issues, defining public debates and generating credible research that policymakers cannot easily dismiss. When mass mobilisation is not a viable strategy in some circumstances,

---

[10] De Vries, Catherine E., and Sara B. Hobolt. "When Dimensions Collide: The Electoral Success of Issue Entrepreneurs", *European Union Politics* 13, no. 2 (2012): 246–268.
[11] De Vries, Catherine E., and Sara B. Hobolt, "When Dimensions Collide".

civil society may generate online buzz by conducting savvy social media campaigns, mobilising netizens to tag their elected representatives to act on certain issues, and becoming a trusted authority on those issues.

CSOs also use legal challenges, strategic litigation, and institutional mechanisms (such as parliamentary committees or ombudsmen) as leverage to influence governance. Courts, oversight bodies, and independent commissions can serve as avenues to adjudicate civil society demands and compel government action. For instance, several human rights groups have successfully challenged repressive laws through judicial reviews and constitutional litigation.

Overestimating one's leverage can be costly, while underestimating it results in wasted chances. The game theory matrix in Table 3 models the strategic interaction between the state and civil society to help understand leverage and why it matters:

Table 3: Understanding the Strategic Calculations behind State–Civil Society Dynamics

	State cooperates	State does not cooperate
Civil society has high leverage	CSOs gain policy wins, state avoids risky confrontation and seen as responsive	State is confronted with public mobilisation, creating political risks for next election
Civil society has low leverage	State seen as meek when it yields to minor pressures, encouraging more groups to challenge it	Civil society looks weak when unable to deliver on its threats

In brief, governments and political leaders respond to power dynamics, incentives, and strategic pressures. By building and exercising leverage, civil society can increase its influence beyond making moralistic claims.

Condition 3: Sustainability

The effectiveness of a CSO is also contingent on its organisational sustainability. Many CSOs face chronic challenges related to funding, talent retention, and leadership continuity. Apart from a few, most CSOs are small, often with fewer than five staff members, usually dependent on voluntary commitment, and/or consist of informal, loosely organised networks that struggle to sustain operations beyond individual campaigns or short periods.

Funding remains a persistent issue. Not an insignificant number of Malaysian CSOs rely heavily on international grants or project-based funding, making them vulnerable to shifts in international funding priorities. For instance, the Trump administration's recent decision to pause foreign aid had a direct impact on the funding streams of many democracy support groups around the world, including international organisations that provide partial funding to some CSOs in Malaysia.[12] CSOs that lack diversified (especially local) funding sources find it difficult to sustain long-term advocacy efforts.

---

[12] "M'sian NGOs Hobbled By Trump Aid Freeze, Forced to Crowdfund", *Malaysiakini*, 5 February 2025, https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/733638

Condition 4: Institutionalisation

One of the most enduring ways civil society can exert influence is by securing a place within institutional structures. This involves shifting from external advocacy to formalised roles within government agencies, national committees, or advisory bodies. Institutionalisation is particularly critical in a country like Malaysia, where the civil service operates as a vast and insular bureaucracy, largely inaccessible to outsiders. When CSOs achieve institutionalisation, they gain a crucial mandate, i.e., access to decision-making processes, resources and the authority to engage meaningfully. Without this formal recognition, the civil service is unlikely to collaborate or take civil society input seriously.

Condition 5: Catalysts

While conditions define the structural landscape of civil society engagement, catalysts are disruptive events that create sudden and often temporary opportunities for influence. Catalysts may be understood as "windows of opportunity" and may take the form of political crises, leadership changes, policy failures, or external shocks that force governments to recalibrate their approach to civil society. Unlike conditions, which evolve gradually over time, catalysts are more unpredictable and require civil society to respond rapidly in order to maximise impact.

Condition 6: Infrastructure

Infrastructure is a critical factor in determining the effectiveness of civil society, as it provides the necessary ecosystem for movements to sustain themselves, expand their reach, and influence public discourse and policy. A well-developed infrastructure includes having its own media outlets (or a strong relationship with an existing media outlet), production houses, and alternative digital platforms that amplify civil society's messages, counter misinformation and shape public narratives. Beyond traditional media, influence networks such as social media influencers, public intellectuals, publishing houses and grassroots activists play a crucial role in disseminating movement narratives, mobilising support, and engaging diverse audiences. Indeed, digital infrastructure and mastery of digital tools – e.g., social media savviness through digital storytelling, "priming" and framing, targeted outreach, and algorithm-driven engagement are important as the day-to-day engagement between NGOs and their public constituents are now mostly occurring on social media platforms (TikTok was particularly prominent during GE15) and instant messaging apps (e.g., WhatsApp and Telegram).

Aside from digital infrastructure, strong coalition-building and network organisation are also important infrastructures. Civil society thrives when it is supported by a strong network of allied NGOs, professional associations, and interest groups that enhance collective bargaining power and legitimacy. Effective organisations with clear structures, division of labour, resource commitment, strong leadership, and operational capacity ensure stability and strategic direction.

Additionally, partnerships with academia, legal experts, and policy professionals strengthen advocacy efforts by providing credible research, legal backing and well-informed policy recommendations.

Taken together, these components form the foundation of a resilient and effective civil society. When infrastructure is robust and well-integrated, movements are better positioned to navigate political challenges, sustain momentum and translate activism into meaningful social and political change.

Condition 7: Diffusion

Successful diffusion occurs when civil society groups or their leaders transition into other arenas of influence, where they then embed and advance the movement's goals. A clear example is when a prominent civil society activist joins a political party, wins an election, and assumes a public office. This shift – from activism to the political, parliamentary, or even governmental sphere – is often justified by the desire to effect real change from within these institutions.

There are typically two pathways for this transition: either a civil society group transforms into a political party, or an individual leader makes the move independently. The latter is the more common approach, as it allows the civil society group to maintain its independence while a former leader takes the individual risk of entering politics to test the waters and expand the movement's influence. However, making this transition does not automatically translate into meaningful influence. The effectiveness of diffusion depends on several factors: whether the individual or group secures a strong position within the party, whether they succeed in winning elections, and ultimately, whether they can exercise real influence as a member of parliament or government minister to advance the movement's goals.

Navigating the Seven Conditions: Comparing the Approaches of Progressive and Islamist Civil Society Organisations

These multifaceted conditions shape the ways civil society actors in Malaysia operate, with their responses to these conditions either enabling or constraining their impact. I now turn to applying these seven conditions as a framework to understand how two prominent CSOs navigate the post-2018 landscape to influence political and institutional reforms: BERSIH,[13] a pro-democracy electoral reform movement, and ISMA (Ikatan Muslimin Malaysia or Malaysian Muslim Solidarity), a conservative Islamist organisation. The two groups are chosen because they exemplify the four quadrants of Malaysian CSOs, i.e., BERSIH has occupied both the "Public Mobiliser" and "Institutional Reformer" quadrants, and ISMA has occupied both the "Identitarian

---

[13] Disclosure: The author was affiliated with BERSIH in multiple roles, including resource person, researcher and executive director, over several years until January 2025.

Lobbyist" and "Identitarian Mobiliser" quadrants at different periods depending on the prevailing political circumstances.

By examining how these organisations navigate the same set of conditions, despite ideologically opposing stances, we gain insight into how their differing strategies and organisational characteristics manifest in practice. This analysis will deepen our understanding of their impact, the challenges they face, and how they pursue their respective agendas in a complex political environment.

Case Study: BERSIH

BERSIH emerged in response to the controversial electoral boundary delineation that helped secure BN's overwhelming victory in the 2004 general election. It was fuelled by mounting frustration over systemic electoral manipulation, gerrymandering, and the erosion of institutional independence.[14] Initially a loose alliance of NGOs and opposition parties, BERSIH reconstituted itself as a non-partisan civil society platform after the 2008 general election. It gained prominence through a series of mass mobilisations, which marked a turn towards more visible expression and collective action in Malaysia's political culture.[15] Since the 2018 general election, BERSIH has diversified its approach – by leveraging institutional access, BERSIH now plays a more direct role in formal political and policy processes while retaining protest as a tactical option when necessary.[16]

Allies. BERSIH's long-standing relationships with opposition parties before 2018 meant that many of its allies entered government following the transition of power. After 2018, BERSIH also expanded its outreach to cultivate ties with a few key figures from BN, marking a significant shift in its engagement strategy. Two crucial allies emerged from this effort: Wan Junaidi Tuanku Jaafar, former law minister, now governor of Sarawak; and Azalina Othman Said, former deputy speaker, later special adviser on law and human rights to Prime Minister Ismail Sabri Yaakob and now law minister. Through these key allies in both opposition and government coalitions, BERSIH was able to influence the legislative process, particularly in crafting legal mechanisms to curb party hopping – a crisis that destabilised the political landscape following the "Sheraton Move", a series of political manoeuvres involving defectors from the then ruling PH and members of the opposition, which culminated in a meeting at the Sheraton Hotel in February 2020 and precipitated the fall of the government.

BERSIH advocated two potential mechanisms: a recall election system and an anti-hopping law (AHL). The latter was ultimately adopted by political elites, passed into law, and implemented just before the 2022 general election. This legislative milestone was a testament to BERSIH's strategic ally-building. Without the AHL, the aftermath of GE15 and its hung parliament could have resulted in prolonged political instability, as government formation would have hinged on fluid declarations of

---

[14] For the most complete account of BERSIH's formation and early days, see Danny Lim, *We Are* De Vries, Catherine E., and Sara B. Hobolt, "When Dimensions Collide".

[15] Khoo Ying Hooi, *The Bersih Movement and Democratisation in Malaysia: Repression, Dissent and Opportunities* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2020).

[16] For an overview of the institutional reforms pushed by BERSIH after 2018, see Ooi Kok Hin (ed.), *Making Democracy Work: Institutional Reforms for Malaysia* (Gerakbudaya, 2022).

political loyalty via statutory declarations.[17] AHL was a significant legislative victory for BERSIH, which would not have been possible without making inroads into new allies with influence.

Through their new and old political allies, BERSIH also played a pivotal behind-the-scenes role in shaping the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on Transformation and Political Stability between the Ismail Sabri government and the PH opposition in 2021.[18] Leaders and thinkers aligned with BERSIH played a crucial role in shaping the bipartisan MoU by providing thought leadership, engaging in quiet diplomacy (including media outreach to build public support for bipartisan collaboration on reforms) and seeding reform ideas that were reflected in the agreement's final terms.

Leverage. Mass mobilisation has historically been perceived as BERSIH's most substantial leverage. However, the organisation has been cautious about issuing protest threats, recognising that repeated, unfulfilled threats would weaken its credibility. Beyond mobilisation, BERSIH's leverage also lay in its in-house expertise. Few organisations in Malaysia could match BERSIH's technical knowledge on electoral reform, making it an indispensable player in institutional reform discussions. Additionally, BERSIH provided strategic advice on implementing reforms and policy sequencing, further enhancing its influence beyond the image of rabble-rouser.

Infrastructure. BERSIH maintained strong media partnerships, particularly with alternative media such as Malaysiakini. After 2018, it also expanded its engagement with mainstream media, notably the news channel Astro AWANI. During the six state elections in 2023, BERSIH collaborated with Astro AWANI on the #VoteLokal campaign, which contributed to raising voter turnout through its key strategic messaging that emphasised the importance of state elections.[19] This move was complemented by ground campaigns like *Ketuanan Pengundi* (Voter Supremacy).

However, BERSIH's attempts to build its own digital infrastructure, such as Bersih TV on YouTube and a TikTok presence, faced challenges due to limited capacity and funding. The lack of a new generation of savvy activists and consistent content creation further hindered these efforts, underscoring the difficulties in maintaining a sustained digital presence.

Sustainability. BERSIH has faced challenges in financial sustainability and talent retention. Its annual operational budget has consistently remained under one million ringgit – significantly less than the funding available to right-wing NGOs and (previously) government-backed propaganda agencies. This financial constraint limits effective organisational planning and operations, a challenge shared by many progressive CSOs in Malaysia. Given that BERSIH is considered one of the larger pro-democracy groups, smaller organisations often operate with even more limited resources.

---

[17] Thomas Fann, "Anti-Hopping Law Saved Malaysia from Post-Election Chaos", *The Round Table* 112, no. 3 (2023): 343–344.
[18] "5 Key Takeaways from Bipartisan Cooperation MOU between Malaysian Government and Opposition Pakatan Harapan", Channel News Asia, 14 September 2021, https://www.channelnewsasia.com/asia/malaysia-mou-bipartisan-cooperation-government-pakatan-harapan-political-stability-reforms-2176266
[19] "Bersih, Astro Awani Push for Higher Voter Turnout", *The Malaysian Insight*, 1 August 2023, https://www.themalaysianinsight.com/s/455026

Leadership transitions have also posed challenges. In the lead-up to GE14, many BERSIH leaders either left the organisation or joined the government, creating a leadership vacuum that nearly led to its closure. However, BERSIH was subsequently resuscitated" under Thomas Fann's leadership and adopted a renewed approach. Nevertheless, internal tensions resurfaced during the 2023 leadership contest, leading to Thomas' resignation[20] due to competing visions of BERSIH, i.e., whether it should remain a social movement or evolve into an advocacy organisation – an identity question with significant implications for its tactics and direction. With Muhammad Faisal Abdul Aziz at the helm since 2024 as its new and youngest chairperson, BERSIH held a major congress to re-energise civic momentum.[21] BERSIH also created buzz when it published its "D" grade for Anwar's Unity Government, framing it as a "midterm exam", a move that drew wide media attention, sparked parliamentary debate, and prompted a response from the prime minister.[22]   BERSIH's direction and strategy heading into GE16 remains to be seen.

Institutionalisation. During Mahathir Mohamad's second tenure as prime minister (2018–2020), civil society engagement was institutionalised through the Institutional Reform Committee (IRC), the Electoral Reform Committee (ERC), and the Council of Eminent Persons (CEP). These mechanisms provided formal avenues for civil society, including BERSIH, to contribute to governance without directly entering politics.

The IRC, which included former BERSIH chairperson Ambiga Sreenevasan, focused on systemic governance reforms, such as curbing executive overreach, enhancing judicial independence and strengthening anti-corruption measures.[23] The ERC, with sizeable BERSIH representation, was granted official mandates and resources to work on electoral reforms, including improving voter registration, election management, and the autonomy of the Election Commission.[24] However, the Sheraton Move in 2020 led to the suppression of many of these reform proposals under the Official Secrets Act.

---

[20] "Bersih Chairman Resigns", *The Malaysian Insight*, 19 November 2023,https://www.themalaysianinsight.com/s/472485

[21] "Bersih Congress Approves 19 out of 20 Motions on Institutional Reforms, Better Governance", *Malay Mail*, 25 May 2024, https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2024/05/25/bersih-congress-approves-19-out-of-20-motions-on-institutional-reforms-better-governance/136450

[22] "Bersih Gives Unity Govt 'D' Grade, Says Ismail Best PM since 2009", *Free Malaysia Today*, 19 November 2024. https://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/nation/2024/11/19/bersih-gives-unity-govt-d-grade-says-ismail-best-pm-since-2009

[23] "Ambiga, Shad Saleem Members of Newly Formed Institutional Reforms Committee", *Malay Mail*, 15 May 2018, https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2018/05/15/ambiga-shad-saleem-members-of-newly-formed-institutional-reforms-committee/1631086

[24] "ERC Submits 49 Election Reform Recommendations", *Astro AWANI*, 27 August 2020, https://international.astroawani.com/malaysia-news/erc-submits-49-election-reform-recommendations-256994

Table 4: BERSIH's Advocacy through Institutionalised Committees

Committee	Institutional Reform Committee (IRC)	Electoral Reform Committee (ERC)
Mandate	Established to propose key institutional reforms in governance and anti-corruption, focusing on rebuilding public trust.	Tasked with reviewing and recommending reforms to Malaysia's electoral system for greater transparency, fairness and integrity.
Key BERSIH Individuals	• Datuk Ambiga Sreenevasan, former BERSIH chairperson	• Thomas Fann, then BERSIH chairperson • Wong Chin Huat, BERSIH co-founder and resource person • Ann Teo, BERSIH vice-chair for Sarawak • Yap Swee Seng, then BERSIH executive director
Achievements	Developed comprehensive reform proposals on anti-corruption, judiciary independence and public sector transparency.	Produced 49 major recommendations in a detailed report proposing reforms such as electoral system change and fairer constituency delineation.

BERSIH's experience with institutionalisation highlights both its potential benefits and inherent risks. Greater political buy-in increases the likelihood of a CSO securing an institutional role to exert influence. However, such buy-in is often tied to individual leaders. For example, it was Prime Minister Mahathir who approved the establishment of the IRC and ERC, providing crucial political backing. However, once a new prime minister took office, both committees lost their support and were swiftly disbanded. A well-designed institutionalisation process should ensure longevity beyond a single administration, with safeguards in place to prevent or discourage its abolition or neglect by future governments. Ideally, political actors who support the institutionalisation of CSO-led reforms should work to codify these changes, whether through legislation, formal policies, or the creation of agencies that cannot be easily dismantled.

Catalyst. The Sheraton Move in 2020 served as a major catalyst for BERSIH's advocacy shift. Despite criticism for not organising mass street protests, BERSIH chose to channel its efforts into longer-term legislative solutions.[25] Recognising that public demonstrations – especially with uneven ethnic turnout – could be counterproductive in a politically fragile environment, BERSIH focused on lobbying for anti-hopping laws. By capitalising on its political alliances and leveraging its institutional influence, BERSIH successfully pushed for AHL through then Law Minister Wan Junaidi. This legislative victory, achieved just before GE15, was a direct response to the political instability triggered by the Sheraton Move, which created the opportunity to galvanise political and public support for such a law.

---

[25] "Bersih Calls for Anti-Party Hopping Law", *the Sun Daily*, 2 March 2020, https://thesun.my/malaysia-news/p62nd-lead-bersih-calls-for-anti-party-hopping-law-IF2135486

Diffusion. Former BERSIH chairperson Maria Chin Abdullah stepped down from the role in 2018 to enter the political arena and won a parliamentary seat under the Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR) ticket. Her transition from movement leader to member of parliament (MP) illustrates the potential and challenges of translating activist influence into legislative impact.[26] As a key figure in the parliamentary committee on gender equality and the Multi-Party Democracy Caucus, she contributed to discussions on gender inclusivity and democratic reforms. Despite her reformist credentials and electoral success, her legislative impact was constrained. For example, long-standing civil society demands such as repealing the Sedition Act and SOSMA (the act that permits preventive detention without trial and under which Maria was arguably the most well-known victim) remained unmet. The failure to have such acts removed was largely because Malaysian backbench MPs generally have limited influence over agenda-setting and policy advancement. These challenges were further compounded by intense factionalism within her party, which ultimately led to her being dropped as a candidate in GE15 by a rival faction.[27]

Maria's experience highlights a broader reality for progressive CSOs: movement leaders-turned-politicians are not immune to party constraints, factional disputes or bureaucratic inertia. To drive substantive change, they must either secure influential positions within government or wield significant influence over those who do. After leaving Parliament, Maria redirected her efforts towards civil society, focusing on initiatives to support women politicians. Her trajectory also reflects the broader difficulty of sustaining reformist influence within Malaysia's rigid political structures, reinforcing the need for strong institutional footholds and strategic positioning within the system.

Case Study: ISMA

Ikatan Muslimin Malaysia (ISMA) is a conservative Islamist NGO established in 1997, originally as Ikatan Siswazah Muslim Malaysia, which focused primarily on university students and graduates, before subsequently rebranding itself to reflect a broader sociopolitical mission. With the slogan *Melayu Sepakat, Islam Berdaulat* ([If] Malays Unite, Islam [Will Be] Sovereign), ISMA positions itself as defender of Malay-Muslim identity and actively opposes ideologies and movements that it perceives as threats to Islamic values, such as liberalism, secularism, pluralism, Shi'a teachings, and the LGBT movement.[28]

Composed of urban, middle-class professionals (many of them doctors, academics, and businesspeople), ISMA's leadership frames its mission as both Islamist and ethnonationalist. "Our ideology is that Malays and Islam are synonymous", said Ustadz Abdullah Zaik, its former and longest-serving president (2005–2018) and, until 2023, its amir (loosely translated as de facto spiritual or supreme leader). In the same interview, Zaik emphasised the group's belief that Malaysia's national identity must be

---

[26] Maria Chin Abdullah, "Bringing the Reform Agenda from the Streets into Malaysia's Parliament", *The Round Table*, 107, no. 6 (2018): 817–818.

[27] "PKR Retains Anwar Loyalists, Drops Prominent Incumbents as it Fields MB to Take on Azmin", *MalaysiaNow*, 28 October 2022, https://www.malaysianow.com/news/2022/10/28/pkr-retains-anwar-loyalists-drops-prominent-incumbents-as-it-fields-mb-to-take-on-azmin

[28] Refer to the background page on ISMA's official website, https://isma.org.my/latar-belakang/

rooted in Islam and Malay primacy.[29] ISMA's leadership also argued that existing Malay political parties have failed to sufficiently safeguard Malay interests and projected the movement as the unifying force to "help the Malay community regain their strength" and reassert cultural sovereignty.[30]

The Islamist group famously generated public controversy in 2014 when its then president Abdullah Zaik claimed that "The Chinese entered this country together with the British invaders as intruders. Who gave them citizenship and wealth until their intrusion is protected until today? Those were all done by the British, who were conspiring with the Chinese to oppress and bully the Malays."[31] He was charged with and found guilty of sedition but handed a light sentence of a RM 2,000 fine.[32]

With about 20,000 members, ISMA operates through a wide domestic and international network of branches, including student-led units in Australia, Jordan, North America, and Europe. Its community ecosystem includes affiliated arms like PEMBINA (university students), KRIM (youth), NAZIM (children), I-Medik (Muslim healthcare professionals), and the ISMA Ulama Council (MUIS), indicating a sophisticated, cradle-to-grave grassroots apparatus designed to shape and reinforce the Malay-Muslim world view across every stage of life from early childhood to professional adulthood.

ISMA's vision and mission, according to its official website, are to become a strong and influential Islamic movement to "lead the ummah to restore the dominance of Malay Islamic power."[33]

Allies. ISMA has built notable connections and garnered support not only from segments of the Malay-Muslim political class but also from individuals within the civil service and state institutions who are aligned with or sympathetic to its ideological outlook. This network has allowed ISMA to exert influence beyond traditional NGO channels, embedding itself in policymaking spaces and public discourse.

ISMA's leadership played a role in shaping developments that contributed to the fall in 2020 of the PH government, including mobilising opposition to the government's intention to ratify the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD) and promoting narratives that laid the groundwork for Muafakat Nasional and later Perikatan Nasional (see the section on "Leverage" below). One ISMA leader even claimed that the group "planted the seeds" for the eventual alliance between UMNO and the Parti Islam Se Malaysia (PAS). In a social media post, the head of ISMA Johor stated that their slogan, launched in 2010, was realised with the formation of Muafakat Nasional in 2019. He noted that even prior to the 13th general election, ISMA had been advancing the "Melayu Sepakat, Islam Berdaulat" (Malay Unity, Islam Sovereign) message to encourage PAS and UMNO to consolidate

[29] "In Isma, a Portrait of Political Islam Driven by Urban Middle-Class Professionals", *Malay Mail*, 16 May 2014, https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2014/05/16/in-isma-a-portrait-of-political-islam-driven-by-urban-middle-class-professi/669709
[30] "In Isma, a Portrait of Political Islam".
[31] "Isma: Chinese Migration into Tanah Melayu 'a Mistake' Which Must Be Rectified", *Malay Mail*, 6 May 2014, https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2014/05/06/isma-chinese-migration-into-tanah-melayu-a-mistake-which-must-be-rectified/664033
[32] Isma Chief Guilty of Sedition, Fined RM2,00", *Malay Mail*, 30 August 2016, https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2016/08/30/isma-chief-guilty-of-sedition-fined-rm2000/1194755
[33] See ISMA webpage, https://isma.org.my/latar-belakang/

influence within their respective coalitions, thereby bolstering Malay-Muslim political dominance.[34]

But ISMA's buoyancy over Muafakat Nasional's formation did not last long. When the Tanjung Piai by-election took place, the opposition (which included UMNO/BN and PAS) fielded a non-Malay candidate from the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA), which generated a backlash from pro-Malay groups including ISMA.[35] As a protest, the pro-Malay BERJASA party fielded a candidate, its president, Ts. Dr Badhrulhisham Abdul Aziz, against both PH and BN. Notably, the candidate was also the head of ISMA's Strategic Planning & Human Resources Bureau, and former deputy vice-chancellor of Universiti Malaysia Pahang (UMP).[36]

After the Sheraton Move in 2020, then ISMA president Aminuddin Yahaya publicly opposed the inclusion of non-Malay parties such as MCA and the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC) in the Malay-Muslim coalition of Muafakat Nasional. He warned of the "dilution" of the Malay agenda and claimed that after becoming part of the government, "MCA and MIC have received various benefits despite contributing nothing to strengthening the Malay-Islam narrative... Even without their formal inclusion, many compromises have already been made. We can hardly imagine what would happen if they were included officially."[37]

This frustration arguably contributed to a strategic misstep in the 2022 general election that weakened ISMA's ties with mainstream conservative parties (UMNO, PAS and BERSATU). During GE15, Aminuddin – by then, ISMA's immediate past president after being a central figure in its post-2018 leadership – contested under the Gerakan Tanah Air (GTA) banner, directly challenging candidates from Perikatan Nasional, BN and PH. While ISMA did not officially endorse Gerakan Tanah Air, Aminuddin's decision to contest under its banner against Perikatan Nasional may have complicated perceptions of ISMA's positioning, for example, risking the perception by the opposition coalition that ISMA was more a potential political rival than a civil society partner, thereby weakening its alignment with mainstream conservative parties.

Leverage. Compared to progressive CSOs, ISMA commands a massive online audience and boasts an extensive membership base. The organisation effectively leverages Malay-Muslim preferences, insecurity or anxieties over race, religion, and political dominance. The peak of the movement so far is arguably its successful mobilisation against ICERD ratification and its role in shaping narratives that paved the way for the Muafakat Nasional pact and the fall of the PH government.[38] ISMA skilfully combined online campaigns with offline mobilisation, working with political parties and Muslim NGOs under the UMMAH coalition spearheaded by its then president Aminuddin. On 8 December 2018, with support from PAS and UMNO, UMMAH organised a mass rally

---

[34] See Facebook post by Tn. Hj. Mohd Tahir Hamdan, ISMA Johor chief, 22 November 2019, https://www.facebook.com/100062993182031/posts/2480013078987806/

[35] Politics and Policy: A Case of One Party in Two Coalitions", *The Edge Malaysia*, 11 November 2019, https://theedgemalaysia.com/article/politics-and-policy-case-one-party-two-coalitions

[36] See Isma web archives, Barisan Jawatankuasa Pusat Isma Sesi 2017-2020, Ikatan Muslimin Malaysia, https://web.archive.org/web/20190401091056/http://isma.org.my/v2/barisan-jawatankuasa-pusat-isma-sesi-2017-2019/

[37] Aminuddin Yahaya, "Semoga Muafakat Nasional, Kembali ke Pangkal Jalan", ISMA website, 14 September 2020, https://isma.org.my/semoga-muafakat-nasional-kembali-ke-pangkal-jalan/

[38] Hew Wai Weng, "Manufacturing Malay Unity and the Downfall of Pakatan Harapan", *New Mandala*, 8 June 2020.

of about 60,000 people in Kuala Lumpur to oppose ICERD, which they claimed threatened Malay rights and Islam's position. ISMA played a central role in uniting UMNO, PAS, and other Islamist and Malay nationalist groups, fostering the "Muslim unity" narrative that underpinned later political realignments.

Although its influence has somewhat waned, ISMA's capacity to mobilise public sentiment still affords a veto-like role in certain decisions, as major political coalitions including Anwar Ibrahim's Unity Government remain sensitive to maintaining their Malay voter base and thus reluctant to risk reforms that could trigger mass protests by right-wing organisations like ISMA.

Infrastructure. ISMA operates through multiple platforms, including its media arm ISMAweb, a "news" portal which reports political news from the right-wing perspective, which has been instrumental in disseminating its narratives.[39] Prior to GE14, another ISMA bureau launched the *Gerakan Pengundi Sedar* (GPS or Voter Awareness Movement) campaign, purportedly to "provide accurate information to the public about the performance, character, and credibility of election candidates."[40] In practice, however, the campaign primarily urged Muslims to support *calon Muslim berwibawa* (credible Muslim candidates) who champion the Malay-Muslim agenda. GPS later launched the *Vote Muslim First (VMF)* campaign, calling on all Islam- and Bumiputera-based parties to field their strongest Muslim candidates during the Tanjung Piai by-election.[41] Following GE14, GPS evolved into an active presence on social media, particularly Facebook and later TikTok, where it regularly posts content highlighting so-called un-Islamic incidents and promoting the narrative that Islam is under constant threat.[42]

Additionally, ISMA's influence extends through affiliated individuals with vast cultural reach. A prime example is Abdul Rahman Mat Dali. When he was ISMA vice-president a decade ago, Abdul Rahman warned against what he perceived as attempts to gradually shift Malaysia's identity from an Islamic state to a non-Islamic one. He claimed that such developments, if allowed to continue, could sow division and potentially trigger instability, invoking the spectre of the May 13, 1969, racial riots as a cautionary example.[43] Fast forward to 2022, Abdul Rahman's film production company invested millions in the blockbuster *Mat Kilau*, a film that presents a stylised portrayal of Malay resistance against British colonial rule, depicting the British and their alleged allies (Sikhs, Chinese schemers, and Bornean mercenaries) as antagonists.[44] By blurring historical fact with fiction, the film taps into powerful emotional narratives of ethnic identity and heroism. While some critics have raised concerns about the film's potential to reinforce ethnic stereotypes and distort historical understanding, its emotive appeal

---

[39] The website has undergone several domain changes over time. Initially known as ismaweb.my and ismaweb.net, it now operates under ismaweb.org.my.

[40] "Isma Akan Keluarkan Rating Calon PRU14", *The Malaysian Insight*, 7 Oct 2017, https://www.themalaysianinsight.com/bahasa/s/17559/

[41] See Facebook post by Ikatan Muslimin Malaysia – ISMA Cawangan Johor Bahru, 24 September 2019, https://www.facebook.com/IkatanMusliminMalaysiaJohor/posts/gerakan-pengundi-sedar-gps-akan-melancarkan-kempen-vote-muslim-first-vmf-untuk-m/2459207457450580/

[42] Hew Wai Weng, "Social Media and the Manufacturing of Malay-Muslim Insecurity", *Stratsea*, 17 November 2023, https://stratsea.com/social-media-and-the-manufacturing-of-malay-muslim-insecurity/

[43] "ISMA: DAP Mampu Cetus 13 Mei Sekali Lagi", *Malaysiakini*, 16 May 2014, https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/262935

[44] "Mat Kilau – What's All the Fuss About?", *The Vibes*, 14 July 2022, https://www.thevibes.com/articles/culture/65748/mat-kilau-whats-all-the-fuss-about

struck a chord with audiences, ultimately making it the highest-grossing film in Malaysian history.[45] Not only was Abdul Rahman involved in Studio Kembara (the production house behind the film), but a former BERJASA deputy president, Datuk Rosli Ramli, also chaired it.[46] The film's messaging aligned with ISMA's ethnoreligious ideology, serving as a cultural tool for mass ideological reinforcement. This demonstrates the capacity of personalities associated with ISMA to embed its narratives within mainstream media and entertainment.

Beyond the media sphere, there are several organisations led by individuals with past or present affiliations to ISMA – including some who have held committee positions – that appear to share and promote similar ideological perspectives, thereby contributing to the wider dissemination of those views. These include professional associations, research centres, and advocacy groups that provide ISMA's positions with a more neutral or mainstream platform. The IRIS Institute, a local think tank, reflects this ideological alignment. Its CEO, Syed Israa' Syed Ibrahim, was deeply involved with ISMA throughout his formative years by serving in various leadership roles between 2008 and 2014 such as head of ISMA Egypt's Cadre Development Bureau and deputy chairman.[47] The institute's publications, including titles like *Pembandaran kolonial dan penghapusan Bangsa Melayu di Malaysia* (Colonial urbanisation and the eradication of the Malay race in Malaysia) and *PenChinaan Malaysia: Tergadaikah tanah kedaulatan bangsa?* (Sinicization of Malaysia: Has the sovereign land of the nation been pawned?), echo ISMA's core themes of Malay-Muslim identity, perceived demographic threats, and post-colonial anxieties.[48] While these organisations may not be officially under ISMA's banner, their leadership profiles and output suggest a sustained influence that resonates with ISMA's world view.

Sustainability. ISMA has demonstrated financial and organisational resilience, allowing it to maintain influence despite some political setbacks. A glimpse into the financial capacity within ISMA's network through its affiliated individuals and organisations was provided in 2022, when – as described earlier – its former vice-president Abdul Rahman's film production company invested millions in producing *Mat Kilau*. The blockbuster, which carried strong ethnonationalist themes, underscores the scale of resources accessible to ISMA's extended ecosystem. ISMA also astutely maintains steady recruitment pipelines through Islamic schools and their affiliated youth organisations in colleges and universities. One major pipeline is PEMBINA (Persatuan Belia Islam Nasional), which was founded in 2006 as an initiative of ISMA, originally functioning as its Youth Bureau.[49] Conceived by then ISMA president Zaik, PEMBINA was intended to operate independently with its own style and focus on Islamic youth development, although it remains ideologically aligned with ISMA's founding vision.[50]

---

[45] "'Mat Kilau Becomes the Highest Grossing Malaysian Film of All Time", *Augustman*, 15 July 2022, https://www.augustman.com/my/entertainment/film-tv/mat-kilau-is-highest-grossing-malaysian-film-ever/

[46] "Stealthy Islamism Riding on Mat Kilau's Stellar Success", *Fulcrum*, 12 September 2022. Article was withdrawn following legal threats and right-wing backlash but its archived version remains accessible here: https://web.archive.org/web/20220912015616/https://fulcrum.sg/stealthy-islamism-riding-on-mat-kilaus-stellar-success/

[47] See website of ISMA Kuala Terengganu, https://www.ismakualaterengganu.com/2015/09/syed-ahmad-israa-syed-ibrahim.html

[48] See website of Interdisciplinary Research and International Strategy (IRIS Institute), https://iris.institute/kenali-iris/#

[49] Refer to "History of PEMBINA", https://pembinaum.weebly.com/sejarah-pembina.html

[50] "History of PEMBINA", https://pembinaum.weebly.com/sejarah-pembina.html

However, ISMA's institutional credibility and financial resilience have come under scrutiny in recent years, particularly following controversies involving key leaders. Former president Zaik faced multiple charges related to sedition, money laundering, and criminal breach of trust (more elaboration on this later),[51] while former president Aminuddin Yahaya failed in his bid to enter the political arena and lost badly in the 2022 general election (see the section on "Diffusion" below). Their successors, Muhammad Fauzi Asmuni and now Shuhaib Ar-Rumy Selamat, have yet to revive ISMA's former level of assertive influence and appear somewhat more restrained, arguably due in part to the changing external environment and pressure, raising questions about the movement's long-term strength and direction.

One high-profile case that captured public attention was the move by the Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission (MACC) to freeze the financial assets of Aman Palestin,[52] a humanitarian organisation closely linked to Zaik, who also served as its executive director. Zaik now faces serious legal proceedings, including dozens of charges of cheating, criminal breach of trust, and money laundering involving millions of ringgit.[53]

While ISMA and Aman Palestin are legally distinct, the personal links between senior leadership figures has prompted public scrutiny. In response, ISMA issued a public statement "completely denying the allegations" and condemned attempts to associate the group with Aman Palestin as "malicious in order to undermine ISMA's credibility."[54]

Institutionalisation.   ISMA's ideological reach appears to extend into state policy conversations, state religious institutions, and university campuses through a network of individuals and organisations that operate independently but share common narratives. For example, the head of ISMA Ulama Council from 2019 to 2023 is serving as the deputy mufti of Perak, making him the second-highest-ranking Islamic cleric in the state.[55] Additionally, at one point ISMA's head of strategy and human resources bureau was a former deputy vice-chancellor of Universiti Malaysia Pahang (UMP).[56] A quick biographical review of their leadership suggests that many of ISMA's key leaders hold influential positions within academia and public institutions, including roles as university lecturers, educators, research institute heads, civil servants, and members of state religious bodies. In an apparent effort to further institutionalise its ideology, ISMA

---

[51] Ikatan Muslimin Malaysia, "Kenyataan media pasca pilihanraya negeri", Facebook post, 16 August 2023, https://www.facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=677979804362008&id=100064499837703&rdid=0crcC8WAq NR5gBlF

[52] "MACC Freezes Aman Palestin's Accounts, Raids Premises amid RM70m Misappropriation Probe", *Malay Mail*, 23 November 2023, https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2023/11/23/macc-freezes-aman-palestins-accounts-raids-premises-amid-rm70m-misappropriation-probe/103687

[53] "Non-profit NGO Caught in Multi-Million Graft Trial", *The Star Online*, 16 February 2024, https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2024/02/16/non-profit-ngo-caught-in-multi-million-graft-trial; See also "Aman Palestin Duo Charged with 161 Counts in Total for Criminal Breaches of Trust, Cheating and Money Laundering Involving RM40m", *Malay Mail*, 15 February 2024, https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2024/02/15/aman-palestin-duo-charged-with-52-counts-each-of-criminal-breaches-of-trust-involving-rm21m/118129

[54] "ISMA tiada kaitan dengan Aman Palestin, henti sebar fitnah", Malaysia Gazette, 19 February 2024, https://malaysiagazette.com/2024/02/19/isma-tiada-kaitan-dengan-aman-palestin-henti-sebar-fitnah

[55] See ISMA's webpage, https://isma.org.my/kenyataan-media-barisan-jawatankuasa-majlis-ulama-isma-muis-bagi-sesi-2019-2023/

[56] Archived ISMA webpage, Barisan Jawatankuasa Pusat Isma Sesi 2017–2020, Ikatan Muslimin Malaysia, https://web.archive.org/web/20190401091056/http://isma.org.my/v2/barisan-jawatankuasa-pusat-isma-sesi-2017-2019/

launched the Malaysia Negara Islam campaign, seeking to formally establish Malaysia as an Islamic state.[57] The initiative aimed to collect one million signatures within five months for submission to the Yang di-Pertuan Agong. However, the campaign failed to gain traction and was abandoned, probably due to shifting political priorities after the Sheraton Move and the COVID-19 pandemic.

Catalyst. ISMA has demonstrated an ability to capitalise on a catalytic event for significant political mobilisation. As discussed earlier in the "Leverage" section, ISMA provided leadership in UMMAH, a coalition of right-wing Malay-Muslim civil society groups at the height of its influence. ISMA's then president Aminuddin acted as UMMAH's head and spearheaded the secretariat in organising a major rally against the PH government in 2020. At the time, PH's historic electoral victory had installed in government the coalition's Chinese-led partner, the Democratic Action Party (DAP), leading to widespread "Malay anxiety" over perceived threats to Malay political dominance. UMMAH capitalised on this fear, particularly regarding PH's proposed ratification of the ICERD. The government's poor handling of the issue allowed UMMAH to frame ICERD as an existential threat to Malay-Muslim rights.

ISMA's savvy and rapid capitalisation of a hasty government announcement created the protest that sent shockwaves through the ruling coalition and contributed to PH's defeat in the Tanjung Piai by-election, which in turn intensified internal pressure on BERSATU to realign itself with Malay-Muslim interests. Eventually, BERSATU exited PH,[58] leading to the collapse of the coalition in 2020.

UMMAH's success was not merely due to grassroots strength or ideological appeal but also to its ability to exploit a political vulnerability – namely, PH's mismanagement of the ICERD announcement. This case highlights how civil society actors can seize and exploit pivotal moments for mobilisation.

Diffusion. As in the case of BERSIH, some prominent ISMA leaders have attempted to enter the political arena to spread their influence. Former president Aminuddin contested in GE2022 under the Gerakan Tanah Air (GTA) coalition headed by former premier Mahathir.[59] Aminuddin explained his decision to enter politics by stating that, despite trying various avenues to effect change as an NGO leader, he found himself with limited influence over actual policy decisions.[60] He felt increasingly sidelined and treated like a peripheral figure (*macam daun kari*).[61]

Ultimately, his campaign under the Gerakan Tanah Air coalition diminished his political influence. His candidacy in Temerloh backfired as the local party machinery of

[57] "'C for Crescent': Isma Launches Campaign to Recognise Malaysia as 'Islamic State'", *Malay Mail*, 27 November 2018, https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2018/12/27/c-for-crescent-isma-launches-campaign-to-recognise-malaysia-as-islamic-stat/1706715

[58] "Muhyiddin: Bersatu Quits Harapan," Malaysiakini, 24 February 2020, https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/512025

[59] "GTA Fields Islamist Hardliner and Former Ummah, Isma Leader Aminuddin Yahaya in Temerloh", *Malay Mail*, 2 November 2022, https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2022/11/02/gta-fields-islamist-hardliner-and-former-ummah-isma-leader-aminuddin-yahaya-in-temerloh/37072

[60] See Aminuddin Yahaya's Facebook post, 7 November 2022, https://www.facebook.com/hjaminuddinyahaya/posts/warga-temerloh-inilah-perjuangan-saya-saya-beriltizam-menjadi-ahli-parlimen-untu/678008890362509/

[61] "Aminuddin mahu bawa suara NGO ke Dewan Rakyat", *Malaysia Gazette*, 6 November 2022, https://malaysiagazette.com/2022/11/06/aminuddin-mahu-bawa-suara-ngo-ke-dewan-rakyat/

PEJUANG, the party formed by Mahathir after his resignation as prime minister in 2020, boycotted his campaign and endorsed a rival coalition.[62]

Additionally, Aminuddin's conservative rhetoric about the erosion of Malay rights failed to resonate in Temerloh, even though it is a Malay supermajority constituency. His electoral defeat – where he lost his deposit after failing to obtain at least 12.5% of the votes – illustrates the limitations of charismatic individuals and ethnoreligious messaging in certain constituencies up against established parties and the voters' strategic calculations in a first-past-the-post electoral competition.

This episode proved to be a lose-lose scenario for both ISMA and Aminuddin as they lost some degree of credibility as political brokers.

After GE15, Aminuddin attempted a comeback in the civil society space, forming Gabungan Nasionalis and convening forums on Malay unity.[63] However, his ability to regain influence remains uncertain.

This was not the first instance of political involvement by individuals or organisations linked to ISMA. In past elections going back to 2013, ISMA openly acknowledged that it had fielded candidates through the BERJASA party.[64] Its strategy focused on contesting in Malay-Muslim–majority constituencies where non-Malay candidates from mainstream parties were standing. In GE2013, the then ISMA president described this shift from civil society activism to direct political participation as a necessary step to reclaim Malay influence in areas where it perceived such dominance to be waning.[65]

Conclusion

The evolving state–civil society dynamics in Malaysia since 2018 have presented both opportunities and challenges for civil society. The shift from adversarial activism to institutional engagement for many progressive CSOs has expanded their avenues for influence but also introduced new dilemmas and the perceived risks of co-optation. Malaysia's civil society continues to be a contested and dynamic force, shaped by shifting political tides, generational renewal, and evolving modes of engagement. The post-2018 era has tested the limits and possibilities of institutional access, revealing both the opportunities to shape reform from within and the risks of dilution, fatigue or co-optation.

This working paper has outlined seven key conditions that affect civil society's ability to exert influence, i.e., allies, leverage, sustainability, institutionalisation,

---

[62] "PRU15: 20 AJK Pejuang Temerloh keluar parti susulan pemecatan Mohd Rofaie". Astro AWANI, 6 November 2022, https://www.astroawani.com/berita-malaysia/pru15-20-ajk-pejuang-temerloh-keluar-parti-susulan-pemecatan-mohd-rofaie-389952

[63] Gabungan Nasionalis is a new (re)grouping of several right-wing conservatives. Their committee members and priority areas can be found on the website https://nasionalis.org/.

[64] "Calon Isma bakal tanding PRU13 atas tiket Berjasa", Astro AWANI, 17 February 2013, https://preprod.astroawani.com/berita-malaysia/calon-isma-bakal-tanding-pru-13-atas-tiket-berjasa-7655

[65] Hamid, Ahmad Fauzi Abdul, and Che Hamdan Che Mohd Razali, *Middle Eastern Influences on Islamist Organizations in Malaysia: The cases of ISMA, IRF and HTM* (ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, 2016).

catalysts, infrastructure, and diffusion. The case studies of BERSIH and ISMA illustrate how CSOs navigate these conditions in different ways, leveraging their strengths to achieve their respective goals.

BERSIH, with its roots in electoral reform advocacy, has transitioned into a policy-driven institutional actor, influencing electoral and institutional reforms. There have been some successes, such as its introduction of the anti-hopping law and the MoU between Ismail Sabri's government and the PH opposition, but much of its envisioned major reforms remain outstanding. However, leadership transitions, funding constraints, and the challenge of maintaining grassroots mobilisation at a time with no clear and convincing Thanos-like villain remain key concerns. Progressive CSOs like BERSIH have had to recalibrate their tactics with newfound access to formal channels, while navigating internal challenges and external expectations.

ISMA, on the other hand, has effectively harnessed public sentiment, digital infrastructure, and mass mobilisation to shape the political narrative. However, strategic miscalculations in the electoral arena and reputational damage to its former leaders have weakened its political positioning. ISMA has demonstrated how Islamist CSOs that were previously dismissed as fringe organisations, when strategically embedded and coordinated, can exert disproportionate influence over national discourse and policy direction.

The post-2018 period underscores the importance of adaptability and strategic leadership. Civil society actors must be able to recalibrate their strategies based on shifting political conditions, by, for example, adopting a multi-pronged approach to strengthen coalition-building, deepen expertise in policy advocacy, maintain pressure through strategic mobilisation, and intentionally invest in leadership renewal.

Ultimately, the effectiveness of civil society in Malaysia is not static but contingent on its ability to innovate, build alliances, and institutionalise influence. CSOs that successfully combine strategic engagement with resilience against political shifts will continue to shape Malaysia's democratic trajectory. As political conditions remain fluid and governance challenges persist, their roles remain indispensable in advocating for transparency, accountability, and institutional reform. In the long run, civil society's ability to shape Malaysia's democratic trajectory will depend on how well it can navigate these conditions, ensuring that advocacy translates into enduring institutional and societal change. The divergence in CSO strategies reflects both the richness and fragmentation of Malaysia's civil society landscape. As the country approaches new political milestones, the question is not whether civil society matters, but how it strives to influence political and policy change in a contested democratic space.

About the Author

Ooi Kok Hin is a former executive director of The Coalition for Clean and Fair Elections (BERSIH), a coalition of 70 civil society organisations focused on electoral and institutional reforms and was research manager of a boutique think tank in Kuala Lumpur. He is currently leading the Malaysia office of a UK public body dedicated to making governance and democracy stronger. Bridging the worlds of think tanks, civil society, academia and international organisations, Ooi has provided policy advice to government ministers, opposition leaders, parliamentary committees, and civil society stakeholders. His advocacy focuses on electoral, institutional, and public policy reforms, underpinned by a strong commitment to democratic principles. Ooi earned his MA from Waseda University, graduating as Salutatorian and winner of the Best Thesis Award in the Graduate School of Political Science, and obtained his BA in Political Science and Philosophy (Magna Cum Laude with research distinction) from Ohio State University. His writings have been published in and referenced by national and international media outlets, academic journals and parliamentarians. He is also the editor of the book *Making Democracy Work: Institutional Reforms for Malaysia.*

About the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies

The S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS) is a global graduate school and think tank focusing on strategic studies and security affairs. Its five Research Centres and three Research Programmes, led by the Office of the Executive Deputy Chairman, and assisted by the Dean on the academic side, drive the School's research, education and networking activities.

The graduate school offers Master of Science Programmes in Strategic Studies, International Relations, International Political Economy and Asian Studies. As a school, RSIS fosters a nurturing environment to develop students into first-class scholars and practitioners.

As a think tank, RSIS conducts policy-relevant and forward-looking research in both national and international security, science and technology, society and economic and environmental sustainability. RSIS also produces academic research on security and international affairs. It publishes scholarly research in top-tier academic journals and leading university presses, and distributes policy research in a timely manner to a wide range of readers.

RSIS Working Paper Series

346	Influencing Power :Civil Society, Political Mobilisation and the Pursuit of Reforms in Malaysia, 2018–2025 *Ooi Kok-Hin*	2025
345	Analysing ASEAN Chairmanships in Perspective: Malaysia in 2025 and Future Leadership Outlook Amid Vision 2045 *Prashanth Parameswaran*	2025
344	Public-Private Partnerships in Outer Space: Implications for the Defence and Security Sector *Wichuta Teeratanabodee*	2025
343	How Will Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim Advance Malaysia's Belt and Road Cooperation with China? Ngeow Chow Bing	2025
342	Anwar Ibrahim in Power: A Historical Locating of the Limits for Change in Malaysia *Ooi Kee Beng*	2024
341	Institutional Challenges for China's Chip Industry *Manoj Harjani*	2024
340	How Doctrinal Differences Among Distinct Islamist Strands of Thought Influence Malay-Muslim Political Actors and Political Outcomes in Malaysia *Ahmad Fauzi Abdul Hamid and Che Hamdan Che Mohd Razali*	2023
339	Malaysia's Changed Electoral Landscape *Meredith L. Weiss*	2023
338	From Competition to Cooperation: The Global Palm Oil "'Sustainability Turn" as a Turning Point for the Malaysia-Indonesia "Special Relationship" *Helena Varkkey*	2022
337	Can Youth Save Malaysia's Democracy? *Meredith L. Weiss*	2022
336	Malaysia Policies and Interests in the South China Sea *Johan Saravanamuttu*	2021

To access the full list of past RSIS Working Papers, click here.

Please share this publication with your friends. They can subscribe to
RSIS publications by scanning the QR Code below.