

“The Black Flag Protest Through the Lens of Media: Youth in Action”

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This summer I set out to learn about the Black Flag protests in Malaysia, a series of youth-led protests held in 2021. The protesters demanded government reform in light of the administrations’ incompetence in managing the Covid-19 pandemic which had devastating effects on the economy and livelihood of many. This ended in the Prime Minister stepping down and the ending of the State of Emergency declared in January of that same year. In a culture that heavily discourages protest and student involvement in politics and at a time when public gatherings were banned, the emergence of these youth-led protests intrigued me to discover how they were possible and their significance.

I began my research by surveying the literature on Malaysian history, protest culture and the role of media in protests. I learned that in the 60s and 70s there were many student movements in Malaysia with large impact on politics. However, due to laws which banned student involvement in politics and due to government suppression of student activism, these organizations ceased to exist. After getting an overview of Malaysia’s history, I set out to learn more about the Black Flag protests itself. Considering the protests were recent and thus very few had written about it, I had to trace its emergence through media. I did so by going through posts on social media platforms such as Instagram, Twitter, Telegram and news sites, and by looking at political discourse, satirical art, materials from the protest organizers and more. I also attended and took field notes from a youth-led protest in the capital city of Kuala Lumpur. Then, I compiled a timeline of the issues which brought the youth to the point of protest, the actual events of the protest and its effects. An example of what I learned from this process is that the protests carried significance not only as the first largest youth-led protest in Malaysia since the 70s, but as an important moment in an era where Malaysian youth are starting to unite as a cross-cultural and cross-class group with shared interests in a country where almost all political parties are race-based. Further, this is only possible due to developments in recent years such as the amendment of the Universities and University Colleges Act 1975 in 2018, finally allowing student political participation on campus. A struggle I had with documenting the protests, however, was in understanding its significance or effect as they are still unfolding. For example, even though their demand for the Prime Minister to step down was met, the position was filled by a prime minister who is not much different from his predecessor.

My research findings were compiled in a paper I wrote about the role of social media in the organizing and execution of the Black Flag protests. It argues that without social media and its influence on the youth, the protests would not have taken place. Yet, they would not have achieved the heights they did without physical protests taking place. The paper also presents a contextualized understanding of the protests, understanding its roots in the history of protest movements in Malaysia and putting it in conversation with developments right up to the protest, in an effort to understand its potential as a movement. My thoughts on the matter are still forming but I intend to study this subject more by pursuing an honors project studying student movements in the 60s and 70s in Malaysia.

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