

APPGM-SDG Case Study Small Grants for  
Young Researchers Programme

# DEVELOPMENT, DISPLACEMENT AND DEMOCRACY: THE PLACE OF EVICTION PROTESTS IN MALAYSIA



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*Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN) Asia*

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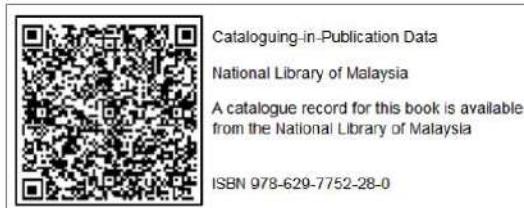
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# **Development, Displacement and Democracy: The Place of Eviction Protests in Malaysia**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Malaysia's rapid urbanisation has heightened land conflicts and displacement, with the proposed Urban Renewal Act intensifying fears of further evictions. Resistance is often dismissed by the state, yet these struggles are vital for advancing participatory governance. Analysis of transcripts of protest leaders and participants reveals deep mistrust. Politicians are often seen in a negative light, either paying no heed to the plight of the community affected or being an unreliable mediator with the developers and state authorities. The excessive force used during evictions leave the communities who experience them first hand with almost no trust in state institutions. Civil society organisations (CSO) and solidarity networks play the role of educator, organiser, facilitator and supporter. This levels the playing field for communities lacking information about the eviction process and capacity of organise. To ensure fair development, greater recognition and safe space for protestors are needed. CSOs and community organisations should be formally integrated as mediators and educators in eviction processes. Finally, robust, protected mechanisms for public consultation must be established to safeguard those opposing state and development interests.

**Keywords:** Evictions, Protests, Displacement, Development, Participatory Democracy, Civil Society

## INTRODUCTION

Malaysia as a country has done very well for itself as one of the richest countries in Southeast Asia and as one that is now upper middle-income but on the cusp of reaching its long-coveted high-income status. The economic take-off that began with the New Economic Policy of the 1970s, and industrialisation and modernisation of the 1980s and 1990s has allowed ordinary Malaysians to see this country become transformed in just a few generations. Yet, this rapid development has not come without cost nor resistance. The pace of urbanisation and commercialisation of land since independence has resulted in the displacement of many in the name of progress.

This subject of eviction, displacement and protest becomes all the more prescient as the government is proposing the Urban Renewal Act (URA). The current interest in the Act as a means of ensuring developers engage with the affected residents in a regulated and transparent manner is an opportunity to examine the role of protests and their supporters in the course of development. This also comes on the heels of evictions of the Bajau Laut in Semporna, Sabah (Loh, 2024) and the ongoing struggle in Kampung Sungai Baru.

As the Housing and Local Government Minister Nga Kor Ming had stated, the Act is about “urban redevelopment, urban rejuvenation, urban regeneration and urban reconserivation” (BERNAMA, 2025). Despite its noble aims, members of civil society and residents and homeowners’ groups have raised concerns over the present version of the Act which “grants excessive powers to developers” and “undermine[s] constitutional rights,” and that “most of their recommendations were ignored” by the Housing and Local Government Ministry (Loheswar, 2025). At the same time, the recent Federal Territory of Kuala Lumpur Planning Rules 2025—gazetted in June—allegedly removes the requirement of objection hearings and consultations with the relevant authorities, reducing the space for

public dissent before new developments move ahead (The Star, 2025; Kamal, 2025).

Outside the urban setting, plans to build data centres will require expanding the electricity and water services for their daily operations. This expansion will likely lead to conflicts over land and natural resources that may result in the removal or transfer of rural and indigenous communities. Neither displacement for the purposes of housing nor infrastructure is new to Malaysia but these two recent developments have the potential to trigger another wave of evictions and social discord.

Despite the great strides made in improving civil liberties and social rights in Malaysia in the 21st century, the state, the private sector and even the public at large remain indifferent or hostile towards the plight of those who are evicted, be they legal or illegal occupants. Though not exactly the same, the recent high-profile campaigns to save the Kuala Langat North Forest Reserve (Greenpeace, 2020) and Taman Rimba Kiara (Lim, 2023) exemplify the difficulties of making one's case to the state and winning concessions. Yet, the government of Malaysia has not yet taken proactive steps to pre-empt these conflicts or to educate the wider public about their rights, the relevant authorities to contact, or appropriate eviction procedures.

In the absence of accessible avenues of dissent, protest and mass action remain some of the only tools for democratic expression against excessive development and abuse of public office. The present structure of Malaysian democracy and representation makes these extra-parliamentary and extra-electoral movements necessary forms of participation in local and national governance. This has greater significance in light of the mission of achieving the seventeen Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) by 2030 outlined in the Paris

Agreement, particularly SDG 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions) and SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities). Addressing this issue of greater representation for those marginalised in the name of development ensures that the gains of development are more justly distributed.

### **RESEARCH OBJECTIVES, QUESTIONS AND SCOPE**

At present, there is no detailed study that sits at the intersection of evictions and democratic studies, particularly the nature and dynamics of protests as a site of representation in the Malaysian context. Many studies on eviction and development centre around the disciplines of urban studies (Sohaimi, 2025), legal studies (Kader, 2011), political science (Govindasamy, 2010) and political economy (Chan, 1983). An important interdisciplinary study by Prasad (2017) looks at the evolution of squatter regulations from urban planning to anti-communist counterinsurgency to urban 'law-fare'. The study theorises the role of development-induced displacement in solving capitalism-induced over-accumulation and constructing the Malay-Islamic identity, in part through the dispossession of the Indian and Chinese. Yet, it does not delve into the political and social environment under which anti-eviction organising is carried out.

Given the theoretical and documentation gaps in the development and democracy literature around this issue in Malaysia, this paper will aim to achieve three research objectives. Firstly, this paper will aim to establish protest movements—however small—as legitimate and essential political constituents in Malaysia's democracy and link these movements to governance and the development process. The second objective is to understand and analyse the process of the formation of these movements, how they develop their resistance strategies and what obstacles they face in getting their voice heard and their demands met. Finally, with all the theoretical foundation and findings

in hand, a set of recommendations would be set out for the government and civil society to take up regarding greater recognition and space for protest movements to be included in processes of governance without being co-opted.

This paper will be broken up into three sections. The first section will survey the literature broadly to cover the history of displacement and evictions for purposes of development in Malaysia, and theories of democratic representation through protests. The second will contextualise and analyse the interview transcripts for themes that relate to the internal dynamics of eviction protest groups and the role of external actors in the process of development. The final section will be the conclusions of this study and a series of recommendations for the consideration of Malaysia's government and the relevant sections of civil society with the aim of strengthening democratic participation and expanding representation.

While located in the Malaysian context, due to resource and time limitation, the scope of this study will be mainly limited to the West Coast of Peninsular Malaysia. Several interview subjects will be from Perak and Penang, but a majority will be situated in the Klang Valley—in part due to the concentration of housing and infrastructure development within the area.

## **METHODOLOGY AND INTERVIEWEE PROFILES**

The DEMO (An Oral History of Malaysian Protests, 2007-2022) project archive features a large number of interview transcripts—published and unpublished—with protest participants, leaders and organisers, from which those which are relevant to anti-eviction protests are chosen for analysis (Pusat Sejarah Rakyat, 2023). A thematic analysis will be conducted on the transcripts to identify the internal and external factors that influence the success of these protests.

The interviewees whose transcripts this study will analyse can be largely broken up into two categories: urban and indigenous communities. A preliminary analysis of the transcripts reveals that there are broad similarities within the two groups. Any themes identified will largely be addressed within these two contexts where appropriate. The following are the profiles of the interviewees whose transcripts were deemed relevant to this study.

Tan Jo Hann (hereinafter referred to as Jo Hann) is a co-founder and director of Pusat KOMAS. He was the President of PERMAS (Persatuan Masyarakat Selangor & Wilayah Persekutuan)—a network of urban poor squatter and slum communities (2000-2015)—and served as a local councillor in Selangor from 2008 to 2012.

Yeoh Lian Heng (hereinafter referred to as Yeoh) is an artist and cultural worker based in Kuala Lumpur, and the founder of the Lostgens' artspace in the Pasar Seni/Petaling Street area. He was also a key leader in the Save Jalan Sultan campaign. Yeoh was one of the activists in working with the children in and the wider community of Kampung Berembang.

An anonymous participant in the Kampung Buah Pala anti-eviction protest speaks about her experience with the authorities, political parties and civil society organisations (CSO) in the eviction process.

The DEMO project spoke to two people on the issue of the Penang South Islands reclamation project. Tuan Haji Zakaria bin Ismail (hereinafter referred to as Zakaria) is head fisherman in the Sungai Batu area and a leader in the Persatuan Nelayan Pulau Pinang. Andrew Han is project coordinator and spokesperson for Pertubuhan Jaringan Ekologi dan Iklim Pulau Pinang (Jedi), based in Penang.

Hafizudin Nasarudin (hereinafter referred to as Hafiz) is the secretary and former president (2012-2024) of KUASA (Persatuan Aktivis Sahabat Alam Malaysia), a youth-led environmental CSO that works on conservation, climate action, and sustainable development projects. He is also the managing director of Semaian Rimba Forestry which grows trees for the purpose of reforestation, afforestation & landscape greening.

Shaq Koyok (hereinafter referred to as Shaq) is an artist and environmental activist from the Temuan people in Banting, Selangor. He was a key spokesperson for the campaign to save the Kuala Langat North Forest Reserve (KLNFR) from being developed.

Interviewees of this study and the DEMO project are informed of the purpose of the interviews and given a consent form to sign, indicating that they would grant us permission to use the contents of their interview for publication. No compensation was offered or given, and the interviewees are told that they are free to stop the interview or withdraw consent at any time during and after the interview.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### ***A Short History of Development and Displacement in Malaysia***

One of the earliest documented instances of evictions and displacement in Malaysia during the 1948 Malayan Emergency where approximately 573,000 people were relocated throughout the 1950s to New Villages and “allied infrastructure projects” built to support them (Prasad, 2017). While this period of displacement was linked to national security, the subsequent waves would be in the name of development.

After the 1970 New Economic Policy was enacted, there was 'encouragement' by the government for Malays from the countryside to move to the cities to "balance the racial population" despite there being no change in policy to provide them with shelter or housing. As a result, many of these migrants who were poor, uneducated and landless became squatters in the cities (Sufian, 2009).

Since 1980, 300,000 Indians have been displaced from their plantation estate setting for housing and industrial developments, resulting in the "loss of income, social role and cultural identity" (Govindasamy, 2010, p. 90). The building of a mass transit rail system within the larger Klang Valley area in the 1990s resulted in the resettlement of almost 5,400 households who were affected by the construction (Matsui, 2003).

The most recent wave of displacement was triggered by the nationwide zero squatter policy, introduced in 2000 and taken up by many states in Peninsular Malaysia whereby the aim is to have no squatters in the states by 2005. This policy of clearing squatters has reduced the number of squatters most dramatically in Selangor from 49,000 in 2005 to 1,422 in 2007 and less so in Kuala Lumpur from 36,168 in 1990 to 25,000 in 2003 (Sufian, 2009).

Though resettlement schemes are in place, because the authorities are not required to pay squatters any form of compensation, any low-cost housing offered as part of the scheme would still remain out of reach for many who are evicted (Keuk, 2016). One study of the squatters resettlement program in Pantai Dalam found that while those resettled were satisfied with their new access to infrastructure and public services, there was "scant public consultation or information dissemination" about the project and resettlement. The researchers recommended participatory consultations with the

affected squatters and stakeholders, which they note includes CSOs (Matsui, 2003).

Salleh (2023) showed that, in an urban setting where communities are equipped with the knowledge to resist redevelopment, there still remains a “mismatch” between the state and residents as to what would be seen as an ‘upgrade’ to their living conditions. She showed that they valued “neighbourhood cohesion”, improved livelihood opportunities, and “having a stake in the direction of the development”, highlighting the need to include these communities in the city planning process.

All the while, the Orang Asli of West Malaysia and Orang Asal of East Malaysia have faced evictions over the development of infrastructure and housing, and the expansion of agriculture. Dams in particular were built in many cases at the expense of indigenous lands and livelihoods with the earliest known post-independence construction dating back in 1975 in Temenggor, Perak (Aiken, 2015). The reemergence of insurgents in the Peninsular in the 1970s precipitated resettlement schemes under the Titiwangsa Regroupment Programme which saw almost 25,000 Orang Asli relocated from Perak, Kelantan and Pahang.

Yong (2008) notes that hundreds of potential dam sites have been identified in Peninsular Malaysia and the demand for power from the urban centres and industry continues to grow, and consequently, threaten the land and livelihoods of indigenous communities. Prominent CSO, Sahabat Alam Malaysia (1992) noted the “drop in the quality of living and health” among a range of indigenous groups after resettlement or encroachment by loggers or developments into the surrounding areas. The loss of access to the natural resources of the

forests and rivers compounded the broken promises and left many indigenous communities with an “uncertain future”.

### ***Protest Governance in Malaysia***

At present, protests, rallies and public assemblies hold an ambivalent place in the minds of the broader Malaysian public. Demonstrations such as the 1947 Hartal and the 1948 Malayan Union Protests are seen as formative events in the founding of the nation. Political protest movements like Reformasi (1997-1998) and Bersih (2007-2016) have been influential in mainstream politics, despite the accusations of infiltration and foreign funding by those in power.

Yet, the social and administrative environment is hardly conducive for protests and demonstrations as legitimate forms of expression. The Peaceful Assembly Act 2012 replaced the longstanding and restrictive Section 27 of the Police Act 1967 and formally allowed for peaceful assembly without the need for a license or permit from the police (Singh, 2019). However, this merely was a shift in policing tactics, from the “use of force and repression” to “negotiated management” and “strategic incapacitation” (Boon, 2022) as the authorities continue to treat protesters of all stripes as a matter of security.

A recent ruling by the Federal court has decriminalised the failure to notify the police five days ahead of a protest and deemed the penalty for it as unconstitutional (Article 19, 2025a), further strengthening the right to peaceful assembly. While some of the recent Malaysian administrations—both the politicians and state officials—have signalled their openness to public protests (Buang, 2025), law enforcement agencies have continued to suppress and persecute those who participate and lead protests, even after the federal ruling (Article 19, 2025b).

### ***Democratic Participation and the Role of Protest Groups***

At present, the modes and mechanisms of public engagement before development projects are executed are seen as inadequate by civil society and academia, in both the urban (Zanudin, 2019) and indigenous rural context (Amnesty International, 2020). The issues of the Kuala Langat North Forest Reserve (KLNFR) (Greenpeace, 2020) and Petaling Jaya Dispersal (PJD) Link Expressway (Achariam, 2025) exemplify the dissonance between the government's rhetoric on transparency with the public rejection of these proposed developments. Both recent instances had elements of formal engagement with stakeholders but did not seriously consider their grievances until the issue became national media stories. This pattern of behaviour by state actors suggests that public pressure is the surest way to elicit transparency from policymakers and government officials.

Yet, the leaders of these social movements and campaigns are painted as troublemakers and flirting with illegality and impropriety when they ought to be recognized as important actors in the shaping of public policy and democratic participation. These groups should be seen as "counterpublics", spaces where alternative and oppositional notions of rights, citizenship, and identities are formulated or reformulated, as Prasad (2017) shows with the case of the 'peneroka bandar' (urban pioneers) of Kampung Berembang. These "counterpublics" also serve as an important democratic check on the government when these groups "demand self-determination" and engage in the "reclamation of public space" and the "development of alliances" (Jackson, 2023). Weldon (2011) sees this type of social movement having a "representative" role for and being an important avenue for participatory democracy.

## **ANALYSIS OF RESULTS**

Analysis of the transcripts reveals themes such as the instrumentalisation of ethnic identity, the role of political parties, their relationship to state authorities, CSOs—a key source of information and resources, and networks of solidarity between their communities.

### ***Race and (De)Mobilisation***

Many interviewees speak about the difficulty of organising communities—whether their own or on behalf of the community—to resist eviction in relation to ethnic identity being one source of fragmentation. In the case of Kampung Cempedak, Shah Alam, Yeoh Lian Heng describes the process of displacement that happened in phases, with Chinese homes being demolished first before moving on to Malay and Indian homes.

Tan Jo Hann describes a time when the three major ethnicities (Malay, Chinese and Indians) within urban poor communities were largely “controlled” by the three component parties of Barisan Nasional and would make educating these communities a dangerous affair. Though these more restrictive times have seem to have passed, race and ethnicity remain a fixture in much of the urban and peri-urban spaces when it comes to evictions and displacement. Several interviewees make references to the ethnicity of the politicians, police officers, developers, “gangsters” and the communities at risk of eviction.

Prime Minister Dato’ Seri Anwar Ibrahim had to defend a recent version of the Act asserting that his government is not serving the interest of anyone who is looking to “evict Malays to make way for Chinese to take over their housing” (Malaysiakini, 2025). This defining fault line in the Malaysian society has important implications for the upcoming Urban Renewal Act as it would not be able to escape the

actions carried out under its powers being perceived as racial—and by extension, political.

This racial component was absent from the accounts of interviewees that dealt with indigenous struggles due largely to the ethnic homogeneity of these communities. Hafiz reasons that because there is a shared suspicion of the Tok Batins—who are appointed by the government and assumed to be pro-government, Orang Asli communities such as the Semai and Temiar see their struggle as one despite being from different groups. However, here political affiliations would then be a crucial source of disunity.

### ***Interference of Political Parties***

The involvement of political parties in the process of development and displacement stem very much from the nature of Malaysia's political economy. The well-documented system of patronage (Gomez, 1999) leads to instances where members of political parties appear to act in the interest of developers and construction firms and against the communities who make up their constituencies.

A pioneering study on the politics of Malay squatter and their relationship to United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) in the 1980s by Kassim (1985) showed that the members of a squatter village in Kuala Lumpur displayed "high level political consciousness and strength" such that they are able to "exert some measure of influence" over policies that affect their lives and settlement. This was done through a mutually beneficial "patron-client" bond between the community and party whereby eviction is forestalled in exchange for political support. The interviews analysed for this study showed no trace of such a dynamic any longer, suggesting that the politicians or political parties may have less to gain from such a relationship in our contemporary times.

Our interviewees cite various cases of politicians playing a negative role in these struggles. Jo Hann recalls instances where the Malay communities about to be evicted had gone to the then dominant party in power and were “refused or played out,” only to later approach his organisation, PERMAS at the last moment to seek help. Yeoh recounts that the cause of Kampung Berembang did not see any support from the parties in power and singled out the dominant party in the government coalition as being “ashamed” to speak out as they were likely the ones to benefit from the development of the village.

In the case of Kampung Buah Pala, politicians had provided reassurances with little actual support to back the villagers up during confrontations with the developer and state authorities. A prominent Indian political party in power at the time had initially promised a section of the residents of Kampung Buah Pala but as our anonymous interviewee had attempted to demand greater reassurances from the state government, they were verbally chided for “sign[ing] last” and later excluded from the formation of a negotiating committee that they claimed were only made up of villagers aligned to the state or developer.

In cases where communities sought the help of opposition politicians, there are contradictions in the extent of their support with many displaying support only when it advantaged them more than the communities. Hafiz expressed his disappointment with political parties who stood with them on environmental issues merely to gain “political ammunition” against other parties and allow the same logging issue in areas they govern. Where he used to be able to appeal to the state government led by an opposition party at the federal level, Zakaria notes now that the federal and state government are from the

same coalitions, it leads him to feel constrained in advancing the cause of his association and fellow fishermen.

Jo Hann recounts a struggle for land involving an evicted Rawang longhouse community where PERMAS had been organising this community for 33 years. Only in May of 2023 did a resolution come after having gone to court twice and losing both times, a duration spanning four chief ministers. He speaks how, despite having a role under the Selangor Housing EXCO, the issue remained unresolved. Worse still, those who had stood with him against those in power at the time now became “the people who tried to stop our actions, they closed the gate and made us wait and stand in the hot sun for a few hours.” These accounts demonstrate the shifting interest of politicians that are hardly bound to the interest of these vulnerable communities.

Some of our interviewees, however, approved of taking advantage of these competing interests between politicians in and out of power. Hafiz approved of the “opportunist” tactics of some communities where they appear to support all and every political party in order to maximise their benefits from them. Zakaria saw the importance of remaining politically neutral so that “any party can join us” and understood their struggle but was simultaneously cynical about the nature of politicians. He recounts that the change of government in 2018 did cause some to “change their tune.”

While this should not negate the agency of communities in engaging political parties for support, there should be some consideration for the fact that many of these communities, particularly squatters and indigenous groups who have little legal claim to their land and housing, have limited avenues to have the demands heard by the state. Thus, they have little choice but to try all avenues to preserve their land and housing, including reaching out to politicians.

The sole exception to this inherent duplicity is the Socialist Party of Malaysia (PSM). Our anonymous interviewee from Kampung Buah Pala, though themselves a PSM party member, lauded the party for the legal support provided by its members and its presence during the protest to defend their village. Jo Hann and Yeoh also commended a prominent party leader for their consistency and commitment to the communities they fight for.

Yet, even considering this exception, politicians largely have thus far appeared to have little to no positive contribution towards the resolution of these eviction struggles. This applies to both politicians in power as well as those in opposition.

### ***Distrust of Institutional Procedures***

One consistent theme through all these accounts of evictions is a lack of any confidence in the neutrality or impartiality of state institutions. The long rule of the Barisan Nasional coalition has solidified a deep association of these parties—now all mainstream political parties—with state institutions. Interviewees note various instances of physical violence by state authorities as a prominent feature of interaction with these institutions. Some even see local government officers and law enforcement forces who carry out these evictions as mere extensions of the will of politicians and developers.

In the case of Kampung Berembang, Yeoh recalls being physically attacked with chains by officers from a municipal council during a protest. One instance recounted by Hafiz was the seemingly random arrest of Orang Asli from a village in Sungai Siput in 2019 under the charge of obstructing a public servant doing his duty. This was instigated when one of the villagers approached a forest ranger marking trees for logging and simply asked him not to disturb the

locals here. The anonymous interviewee from Kampung Buah Pala recalls the inaction and indifference of law enforcement authorities in the face of “gangsters” whom they claimed is in league with the developer. These instances of violence or indifference to violence by law-enforcement authorities naturally leaves the party being evicted with a less than positive view of those in power.

Yeoh speaks about how the Kampung Berembang community did not even try to reach out to any authorities because they had lost any and all trust in the state institutions. They saw these government agencies as the ones who had come to demolish their homes—up to six times—and physically assault them.

When asked who did the Kampung Berembang villagers blame for their plight, Yeoh said the whole government, and equated it to the dominant party in power. He pointed out an awareness amongst them about the inequality between their living conditions and those of politicians.

Aside from physical force, the bureaucracy and enforcement of unjust legal claims appear in several accounts from our interviewees as indirect means of tempering resistance. Zakaria speaks about his struggle against the state government in Penang as they try to use “all sorts of tricks” to remove his fishermen’s association. Jo Hann recounts how one community struggling against eviction felt “so lost” when simply confronted by a security guard, and the need to teach them how to navigate “bureaucratic processes” and employ “tricks and tactics” to ensure the government officials were not able to intimidate them into submission. Hafiz speaks about the infractions of licensed logging while noting illegal logging is under control. Licensed logging is plagued by a host of issues such as being approved in improper

places, encroaching on Orang Asli land and not being punished for these offenses, allegedly because of corruption at different levels.

It should be of little surprise that there is little trust between communities facing eviction and government authorities. The undemocratic nature of state appointments and the staffing of agencies deepen this distrust, particularly in the context of indigenous communities. Shaq speaks about how politicians use JAKOA to buy political influence among the communities through contributions that are attributed to the politician. JAKOA also influences the government-appointed Tok Batin's decisions through the agency's providing of payment to the Tok Batin, funding for works in the village and aid for the villagers. Hafiz asserts that this government agency in charge of Orang Asli hardly opposes logging, rarely sides with the community in defending their land, and at best, simply requests for their compensation. He cited a case in Pahang where the officer deceptively asked for villagers' ICs for a logging agreement under the guise of requesting aid for them.

It is rather insightful that there has been no instance within the transcripts analysed where organisers or community members have identified a positive role of the state at any level. The only exception to this might be the judicial branch of government. Communities mount legal challenges against the state or developers in hopes of establishing the necessary legitimacy to force the relevant authorities to enact the court's rulings in their favour. The cases of Bukit Tampoi and Baram cited by Shaq and Kampung Berembang narrated by Yeoh are some of the rare examples of legal successes against evictions.

### ***Civil Society as Alternative Source of Support***

Given the mistrust in politicians and state institutions, CSOs and members of civil society have historically filled a key role as relatively neutral actors who have little to gain directly or personally from these eviction struggles. As Fisher (1997) notes, CSOs are often perceived as “unencumbered and untainted by the politics of government or the greed of the market”. Furthermore, the almost singular nature of the demands from these communities allow them to quickly build trust with CSOs who share their aims, namely preventing eviction of their communities.

Hafiz speaks about the case of one Orang Asli village that supported the governing coalition of the time but was against the logging and destruction of forest. While this village did not join with the allegedly anti-government Orang Asli network, they were friendly with KUASA because “as long as they protect the forest, you are my friend.” Hafiz makes the claim that at some point in the life of his organisation KUASA, “we didn’t look for communities, communities came looking for us.” Despite being an arts and culture group, Yeoh and his organisation recalls gaining the trust of the villagers because the group would consistently go and aid them anytime they called. This took various forms, be it the arts programs to help the children of Kampung Berembang deal with their situation or the physical presence during evictions.

CSOs, given their interaction with a larger number of communities and causes, are then also able to be important sources of information and support. Jo Hann speaks about the work of an organisation he founded, Pusat KOMAS, that educated grassroots communities, “from Indigenous people to urban poor areas to students, as many as we could.” He spoke about the programmes teaching people about government at all levels, their rights, down to the specifics of “how to

deal with the local government, for instance when you have a garbage problem, who do you go to; which department handles housing issues and so forth." Here he benefitted from his four years as a local councillor where he noted "it was not easy to be in the government." Shaq credits Pusat KOMAS as a crucial source of help, providing various equipment for the purposes of organising with his village and others like it.

The access to information, support and resources from CSOs are not insignificant as they could determine the outcome of an anti-eviction struggle. Shaq cites his experience of hearing about many cases where indigenous communities have lost their case against evictions because of their lack of financial resources to pay for legal services.

Bukit Tampoi was the sole case he mentions where they received compensation and a notice to future residents that this land used to belong to Orang Asli. Han describes the background role of his CSO, preparing press statements, working with lawyers, sending letters and getting the endorsement of other CSOs. He was proud that despite this issue concerning mainly Malay fishermen, the local Chinese press picked up the story.

Interviewees the author spoke to show signs of having adapted to the new media landscape and changes in state bureaucracy, teaching the communities they work with new skills of documentation for their causes. KUASA taught fishermen not just to fight for compensation in these struggles but also how to document their livelihoods, "what's their income, what fish, what's their fishing schedule, when exactly and so on." Hafiz asserts the purpose of this type of documentation is to show others that this area should not be destroyed, something he facilitated Orang Asli communities to teach these fishermen. He recounts the success of the Penang Island fishermen in "intercepting the reclamation project" by nullifying its Environmental Impact

Assessment, which he is imparting to the Orang Asli, highlighting the value of this “knowledge exchange”. Han affirms this and speaks about teaching the fishermen to conduct documentation to show things like the daily catch and make comparisons with the last year, emphasising the importance of “collecting all data that is strong”.

However, this seeming neutrality of CSOs should not be taken for granted given the changing tactics by state actors. Han particularly lamented the “astroturfing” issue where the government creates their own CSOs and “pretend to be grassroot”, and how they have a competing fishermen’s welfare association. This allows the ‘astroturfed’ association to work with the government unit and create confusion in the media about whether the fishermen themselves support any government initiatives.

### ***Solidarity Networks and Self-Organising***

The role played by CSOs in empowerment and education has paved the way for the affected communities to organise themselves and share information about their causes. While this was not seen with urban squatters, indigenous communities are relatively more advanced in self-organising and the development of solidarity networks.

Hafiz talks about the use of blockades, a strategy from South America that was brought in and adapted by the Orang Asal, specifically the Penan, in the 1990s and 2000s and has since been used by Peninsular Malaysia Orang Asli in the early 2010s. He attributed this spread of tactics as well as rights education to the various programs and workshops that have been organised by these communities themselves alongside CSOs.

Shaq recalls attending workshops with a relative and describes this as an “opening of his mind”, where Orang Asli activists from different parts of the country came to bring awareness about the rights of indigenous communities. He recalls the cases of Baram and Bukit Tampoi as his source of hope and inspiration with their instances of educating people about our democratic system and the rights of communities who live in close proximity to forest areas. Bunnell (2004) traced the networking of indigenous groups from Malaysia with those from around the world, culminating in legal victory in Bukit Tampoi for the Temuan people which drew on landmark cases in Canada, Australia and Nigeria to strengthen claims of “proprietary” and “usufructuary” rights.

The only instance of solidarity and information sharing outside of indigenous groups was the fisherfolk in West Malaysia. Han recounted organising a forum where he invited fisherfolk from all over the Peninsular to learn, seek advice and gain inspiration from Zakaria and his Penang Fishermen’s Association. The association’s economic strength with its own restaurant and hotel allowed them to move independently and “speak out without fear.”

### ***Summary of Interview Themes***

Analysis of the transcripts reveal very well the role of a number of important actors. Political parties and the state do not appear to assist with the just resolution of anti-eviction struggles. Their mutual association and potential links to the developer leave little room for impartial mediation or settlement in many cases. CSOs and self-organised solidary networks, on the other hand, supply information, skills and resources that improve the odds of success for affected communities. The alignment of aims, coupled with scant personal gains on the part of CSOs, makes it possible for trust to be built between civil society organisations and said communities.

While all the interviewees were involved in various aspects of protest, they themselves admit that it is difficult work and hardly preferable to other means of dissent or resistance. Hafiz admits that he does prefer the use of protest only as a last resort after exhausting other formal and legal avenues and asserts that the communities he works with concur with that. Han also notes the stressful, time-consuming and resource intensive nature of organising large protests, saying it would only be a “last resort” in lieu of writing press statements.

## **CONCLUSIONS AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS**

The literature available on development and displacement alongside the oral history accounts of anti-eviction protest participants and leaders align well to produce a number of conclusions in relation to (1) politics and the state, (2) the role of CSOs, and (3) the capacity for self-organisation.

Mainstream political parties have a mixed to negative record of helping those facing eviction make their demands to the state, with the exception of one party which focuses on economic justice. At their best, many fail to play any meaningful mediating role in negotiations or confrontation with the authorities. At their worst, they can be duplicitous in their dealings with the community they claim to represent or protect. Furthermore, given the association of these mainstream parties with the state apparatus, it should be no surprise that our interviewees have little to no trust in the government—be they political or bureaucratic agencies.

The violence and indifference in the course of eviction struggles meted out against those who resist solidify a view that these agencies at both the state and federal levels are mere extensions of the parties in power. Ethnicity then often plays a divisive role in these struggles as

an avenue for politicians and developers to fragment communities from various backgrounds to carry out piecemeal removal of dwellings, particularly in urban settings.

As corroborated by the academic literature, CSOs play a vital role in the formation and operation of anti-eviction groups. The interviewees have attested to the commitment shown by activists, their willingness to teach and share knowledge, as well as supply vital resources and funding to anti-eviction groups. A number of studies recommend the role of CSOs as stakeholders (Matsui, 2003) and mediators to ensure transparency and public participation (Sufian, 2009). These accounts of anti-eviction struggles simultaneously demonstrate the viability of self-organising solidarity networks—particularly through the example of indigenous communities of Malaysia, and greater need for them among the squatters and other marginalised communities. Aside from CSO-mediated bilateral sharing between squatters and urban pioneers, a more systematic, sustainable means of self-organising and information sharing is very much needed for these communities.

This study has made the necessary case for several important recommendations in regards to development and displacement in the Malaysian context. These suggestions will draw on Weldon's (2011) idea of the "advocacy state" which advances policies to "promote marginalised groups" and "encourages autonomous organising". She advocates for the use of state resources to "foster voluntary associations", strengthen legislations to require public consultation, supplying funding for lawsuits and providing administrative infrastructure and research support to underrepresented communities.

The first recommendation would be recognition from all levels of government for anti-eviction protesters and self-initiated protest

groups. This recognition would be similar to that afforded to a labour or trade unions, possibly even enshrined in law for legitimacy and procedural clarity. There are rights to speech, assembly and association enshrined in the Malaysian constitution that protect all its residents (Amnesty International, 2014).

This recognition should extend to state or national networks of associations who could function as observers and potential mediators in the case of eviction disputes and protests. The recognition of eviction protest formations as legitimate actors allows space for those who are facing eviction to self-organise and seek information ahead of negotiation with the state agency or developer involved.

Another important complement to this first recommendation is to create a mechanism for independent CSOs to come in to educate and support communities who are about to face eviction. Such support could take the form of legal aid, capacity building or funds to facilitate discussions. This could have an element of participatory governance whereby the communities themselves decide which CSOs would be involved in the process and allow for a change if the chosen CSO is not up to the task. This levels the playing field between the community, the state and the developer given a lack of neutral state actors to inform their decision making about the land they live on. As suggested by Weldon, funds could be administered by an independent body to channel funds to chosen CSOs tasked with research and administrative support for their case.

The last but crucial recommendation is to legislate policies that allow for more public engagements on matters of evictions and displacement. One such legislation is the Land Acquisition Act which needs to be reformed to strengthen transparency and openness, especially around issues of compensation, consultation of

communities affected and the preservation of cultural heritage (Mat Noor, 2024). While law like the Environmental Quality Act and Town and Country Planning Act have provisions for public consultations, more needs to be codified to ensure “clear, explicit, and inclusive participation mechanisms” are set up for such consultation to be held freely and without fear discrimination or intimidation (Jaafar, n.d.). In June 2025, the gazettlement of the Federal Territory of Kuala Lumpur Planning Rules 2025 alarmed lawmakers and civil society as it removed requirements for public consultations for the city’s development (Lim, 2025). This came shortly after the Kuala Lumpur Local Plan 2040, which governs the city’s physical development for the next 15 years, came into effect. This recent development highlights the persistent need to defend the right to public consultations on matters of development.

All of these recommendations should also consider guardrails against co-optation by the state or the use of government-sponsored or politically-aligned CSOs in these processes as much as possible as Weldon (2011) warns against. Preventing the proliferation of ‘astroturfed’ CSOs is one way to preserve the credibility of these mechanisms and forums in the eyes of the public and the communities at risk of eviction. Given the longstanding distrust among marginalised communities, the government would have to work doubly hard to rebuild the necessary trust in their institutions.

These changes to state policy and governance structures have specific relevance to SDG 16 and SDG 11. For the former, it directly addresses target 16.7 (ensure responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative decision-making at all levels) and contributes to indicator 16.7.2 (proportion of population who believe decision-making is inclusive and responsive, by sex, age, disability and population group). This study also indirectly contributes to the

discourse around the Urban Renewal Act and moves towards achieving target 16.6, which is to develop effective, accountable and transparent institutions at all levels.

Its relation to urban spaces would link the findings to target 11.3 (By 2030, enhance inclusive and sustainable urbanization and capacity for participatory, integrated and sustainable human settlement planning and management in all countries). Improvements to indicator 11.3.2 (proportion of cities with a direct participation structure of civil society in urban planning and management that operate regularly and democratically) could be achieved through a greater societal participation in urban development.

## **STATEMENTS AND DECLARATIONS**

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Malaysia's rapid urbanisation has heightened land conflicts and displacement, with the proposed Urban Renewal Act intensifying fears of further evictions. Resistance is often dismissed by the state, yet these struggles are vital for advancing participatory governance. Analysis of transcripts of protest leaders and participants reveals deep mistrust. Politicians are often seen in a negative light, either paying no heed to the plight of the community affected or being an unreliable mediator with the developers and state authorities. The excessive force used during evictions leave the communities who experience them first hand with almost no trust in state institutions. Civil society organisations (CSO) and solidarity networks play the role of educator, organiser, facilitator and supporter. This levels the playing field for communities lacking information about the eviction process and capacity of organise. To ensure fair development, greater recognition and safe space for protestors are needed. CSOs and community organisations should be formally integrated as mediators and educators in eviction processes. Finally, robust, protected mechanisms for public consultation must be established to safeguard those opposing state and development interests.

### **About the Author**

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