

[Nasional]. Because of him and his relatively more liberal outlook, there was room for critical discussion and it gave others like myself in the university and activist communities some freedom to disagree and debate the government's policy directives. With the way Mahathir has moved to discredit Anwar with these charges of sexual misconduct ... many of us are quite concerned. The spaces we have carefully carved for ourselves are in danger and may disappear, forcing many of us to either remain silent, go underground or hope that foreigners will articulate our concerns for us.<sup>10</sup>

While the Anwar trial is of concern to virtually all Malaysians, this specific community of activists and scholars see the Anwar affair as the beginning of more widespread erosion of debate and dissent in Malaysian society. Over the last 25 to 30 years, academics, researchers and activists critical of the Malaysian government have managed to carve limited spaces within which they and others could articulate views that are critical of Mahathir and/or various UMNO policies. How much longer these spaces (and, as a result, the personal security of those who exist in this milieu) can be guaranteed is unclear.<sup>11</sup>

NGO activists and analysts interviewed in Malaysia articulated three different strategies they could employ in response to the potential erosion of their political space. The first is to do nothing. Simply remaining quiet and curtailing their activism is seen as a legitimate response, especially among those who are concerned for their safety. The second option is to take their criticism underground and/or channel it through an emerging set of alternative fora for critical debate (such as the various artistic/performance groups that were emerging at the time of writing).<sup>12</sup> A third choice is to wait for foreign governments, agencies and international groups to articulate their concerns for them and/or provide funding for the creation of (often temporary) spaces for public debate and discussion.<sup>13</sup>

As stated in the introduction, the crisis was an exogenous shock to the (sometimes

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<sup>10</sup> NGO representative (wished to remain anonymous), interview with author, November 12, 1998; similar concerns were voiced to the author during subsequent interviews with artists and academics engaged in research and voicing views that were critical of UMNO.

<sup>11</sup> Some might argue that the *reformasi* movement as evidence of new and growing space within Malaysian society for the expression of contrary views. Sources in Malaysia, however, warn that the movement has not yet gained sufficient momentum to solidify into a credible political force against the dominant UMNO. *Reformasi* draws on a several different critical groups, many of whom are quite new to the work of political opposition and others who bring to the movement divergent (if conflicting) agendas. Aside from the potential for conflict and eventual defection, those who are concerned with the government's handling of the crisis may lack the resolve to stay the course once the economy improves and their economic concerns are met.

<sup>12</sup> Such groups include Artis Pro Activ (APA), a non-politically aligned collective of artists and performers which focuses on using artistic expression to promote public criticism and debate over what they see as the increasingly closed and undemocratic governance of Malaysia. There are other such groups and collectives, a number of which centre themselves around the Five Arts Centre in Kuala Lumpur.

<sup>13</sup> An example would be the Asia Pacific Peoples Assembly (APPA), which took place on November 11 and 12. APPA is very similar to the Peoples' Summit, which took place alongside APEC '97 in Vancouver. The Canadian government, through the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade, provided C\$60,000 to the organisers of the APPA to assist with conference overhead expenses and information dissemination activities.