Chapter 5

Gangsta and Politics in Malaysia

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This chapter is a short exploration of the relationship between political parties and gangs through the case study of Pekida. The articulation of this relationship is the central concept of this study: we define it as 'connivance militancy'. In our scheme of thought, a gang that is involved in political actions, whether out of pragmatism or ideology, becomes a connivance militant group. It is because gangs do have an existence out of politics that they are seen as 'opportunist'. Our main argument is that gangs are the mirrored expression of the ambiguities of society; thus they play a role in the system as shadow extensions of political parties in the public sphere. This chapter exposes the context that favoured the development of connivance militancy, the nature of Pekida and its satellite groups, and finally reveals the relationship between gangs and the ruling party (UMNO). So, if UMNO is on a honeymoon with gangsters, is this opportunist relationship ephemeral or the symptom of a systemic phenomenon?

Gangsta out of the Shadows

The 'political tsunami' of March 2008 was seen as the end of ethnic politics, eclipsing the violence of May 1969 (Ooi et al., 2008). The desertion of voters from the ranks of the ethnic-based parties of the ruling coalition to the benefit of a relatively more multicultural opposition has been seen as an attempt to overthrow the political majority of the Malays. After all, the opposition coalition is led by a man with low morals and by Chinese pigs (sic).[1]

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[1]   'Chinese Pig' or 'Cina Babi' is one of the many racist insults used by some pro-Malay militants.

In this context of virtual siege, pro- or ultra-Malay groups, as self-proclaimed defenders of the Malays, started to voice out their concerns in the streets and in the media, and new groups, such as Perkasa,[2] were created in 2009. Every newspaper and blog, whatever its political affiliation, and whether to criticise or to support them, has been giving gigantic coverage to these groups. Ironically, just a few organisations managed to attract enormous attention to their cause due to a thorough media strategy: how and why an ethno-nationalist movement has succeeded while supporting the vestiges of an out-dated pro-Malay and communal discourse.

In December 2011 – that is 17 months before the 13th general elections – in Shah Alam, the predominantly Malay capital of the state of Selangor, Prime Minister Najib Razak attended the annual meeting of one of the most controversial (but registered) pro-Malay organisations, Pertubuhan Kebajikan dan Dakwah Islamiyah SeMalaysia (Association of Islamic Welfare and Dakwah of Malaysia (Pekida)). Najib's promise of government aid in exchange for political support from the organisation's members on that night has been seen by the alternative media as an endorsement of the controversial, and often seen as 'racist' or 'extremist', discourse of Pekida.[3] The question is why the Prime Minister would risk endorsing such a controversial organisation in a pre-electoral context where non-Malay votes do count. Is there any link between the emergence of a 'new' ethno-nationalist movement and the setback to UMNO's hegemony?

Rumours about Pekida accuse its members of being responsible for political violence and the harassment of opposition members. According to some, Pekida is the 'UMNO thug' (Magick River, 2010), a shadow paramilitary group or 'the UMNO fifth column' (Hakim Joe, 2012). Pekida is, in fact, a complex network of discrete NGOs that has been created by gangs in order to ally with political parties. Pekida is the name of one of the numerous NGOs created by a national gangsterised network composed of several autonomous gangs in order to offer political support, legalise parts of their activities, and ease the reception of funds. Pekida, being the most famous, has thus become a generic name that is being used to describe the network and each of its satellites (whatever their original name may be). Militancy is a business opportunity; gangsters have become militants to support the political parties with which they may share interests.

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[2]   Pertubuhan Pribumi Perkasa lead by Ibrahim Ali, former member of parliament for Pasir Mas constituency, with the support of Mahathir Mohamad.
[3]   Please refer to alternative media: Malaysia Today (2012); Mariam (2011); Chi (2011); Masami (2011).

This chapter presents some of the findings of my doctoral research:[4] the fruit of 5 years' fieldwork (2008–2013) in Malaysia and nearly 50 interviews with members of Pekida and satellite organisations, as well as politicians, journalists and other Malaysians.[5] This chapter will explore the context that favoured the development of connivance militancy, the nature of Pekida and its satellite groups, and finally reveal the mechanisms of the relationship between the gangs and the ruling party. UMNO is on a honeymoon with gangsters: is this opportunist relationship ephemeral or the symptom of a systemic phenomenon?

Defining Connivance(s)

The ethno-nationalist movement – in its contemporary form – is an umbrella that has been created in answer to UMNO's need for support. In that sense, UMNO's ties to this movement are stronger than those of any other party because (1) UMNO has created the need, and (2) it has maintained a favourable context for the development of such a movement. In another political, sociological, historical and geographical contexts, the ideological umbrella could have been leftist, anarchist or feminist; and the main entertainer of these movements could have been any other political party in need of support – whether it is a ruling party or an opposition party. In that sense, these 'new' NGOs, and Pekida specifically, are connivance militants which discourse and actively serve the interests of the ruling party.

Connivance militancy is a secret political arrangement by which a formal political actor (i.e., a political party, a government or a politician) sub-contracts legal and/or illegal political actions serving its interests – ranging from advocacy to demonstrations and violence – to groups of individuals. Connivance militant groups (CMG) may be seen as entrepreneurs of mobilisation and/or violence who offer their services in exchange for money or advantages, and thus become informal political actors. In the Malaysian context, connivance militants represent the 'muscle' and 'numbers' a formal political actor may need when challenged by its opponents during every occasion of political life: elections, campaigns, demonstrations, controversies, etc. Three types of CMG are observed:

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[4]   Submitted in October 2013.
[5]   All the information described here was given by free will or found on the Internet. Every person interviewed in this context was fully aware of the research project and the identity of the author.

(1) *de facto* militant groups (DMG) for which militancy is a *raison d'être*, (2) opportunist militant groups (OMG) for which militancy is a business opportunity, and (3) marginal militant groups (MMG), a category that covers marginalised groups (e.g., a banned group or a political advocacy group without a party) for which the coalition to a political party is a way to keep a foot in the political scene.

While all types of militancy were observed during the research, this work focuses mainly on the second type of militancy: 'opportunist'. This choice is justified by the fact that it covers an area that is not a new phenomenon in Malaysia but that was previously not exposed by scientific study. So, who are the 'opportunists'?

Defining Gangs

The relationship between gangsters and politics has been widely studied in Indonesia during the New Order and after the fall of Suharto. *Preman*, formerly known as *jago*, describes a freelance entrepreneur in force who is operating for the State authority in a grey zone both inside and outside the law (Ryter, 1998; Wilson, 2010). As Ian Wilson explains, 'by the 1990s *preman* was synonymous with street thugs, gangsters and an extensive networks of racket run by criminals but coordinated by the State'. The *preman* is a 'figure of public revile, embodying the intersection between criminal violence and state power' (Wilson, 2010: 12–13). Interestingly, there has not yet been any similar research conducted in Malaysia.

As Hagedorn (1998, 2008) noted: 'The debate on the definition of gang is long and rancorous', thus the definition of gang has been reshaped and updated according to the context and object of this study and implies the following characteristics. Here, 'gang' is defined as:

(1) A structured and hierarchical group federated under a leader to realise an ultimate pragmatic objective or (pseudo-) ideological cause, or both, which implies that members are involved in illegal activities and use various degrees of violence;

(2) The sustainability of the group is ensured by its flexibility and its potential for adaptation to political and social changes;

(3) The degree of institutionalisation (identity and structure) allows its longevity and credibility in the eyes of insiders, outsiders and the members of other gangs.

(4) An entity that transcends space and time. Gangs are neither the exclusive products of cities and urbanisation, nor a consequence of industrialisation; in that sense they may be grounded in rural or semi-urban areas, and pre-industrialised or industrialised societies.

(5) Authoritarian or transitional political contexts are favourable for the development of an opportunistic relationship between gangs and political parties. In this context, gangs may become entrepreneurs of politics or connivance militants to whom political actions are sub-contracted.

Gangster's Paradise: Ground for Connivance Militancy

For gangs, stepping into politics runs the risk of attracting attention to their illegal activities. Hence, their image changes into militant groups, and their illegal nature remains unseen. This work looks at the interaction between gangs and political parties through the prism of connivance militancy. By definition, the shadow identity of OMG remains unknown to the public, as well as connivance to political parties. The first step to identifying 'the invisible' is to understand the system of connivance that allows and favours its existence.

Political, structural and socio-cultural factors have set the foundation for the development of connivance militancy in Malaysia, and the rise of CMG in the form of an ethno-nationalist movement in the aftermath of March 2008.

Abdullah's UMNO's Need for Support

The democratisation process that followed Mahathir's resignation in 2003 put Malaysia on the road to democracy. Despite its multipartism, Malaysia should not be defined as a democracy per se, but rather as an 'authoritarian democracy' (Heryanto and Mandal, 2004). So, this relative opening of the public sphere resulted in an increase in public demand for democratic reforms; among these were the suppression of repressive laws and the revision of the privileges given to Malays. The relative liberalisation of public expression reshaped the Malaysian public sphere, promoting the rise of new political actors (NGOs) and giving them an opportunity to play a more active and direct role in politics (Weiss, 2006). Over the past decade, NGOs from different religious and political persuasions started to mushroom all over the country, inviting all layers of society to rally to their cause.

The years of Abdullah Ahmad Badawi's Prime Ministership (2003–09) witnessed the blossoming of ethno-nationalist NGOs which use a rhetoric based on religion and identity that was previously unknown or non-existent. According to a Pekida group leader based in Subang Jaya, 'The Abdullah years have been the golden age of Pekida; he is our godfather.' In the early dates of his office, Abdullah – who became Prime Minister by

Mahathir's designation, not by election – was in need of strong support. In order to maintain his party's influence, Abdullah used the network of the organisation to which he was introduced as patron.[6] Nevertheless, the opposition's victory in five states in the March 2008 election seriously hit UMNO's credibility for the first time since independence. Confronted by the emergence of alternative media on the internet (Weiss, 2012), the controversial ruling party's electoral machinery was shown to be not strong enough to retain strategic states like Selangor. Thanks to the development of new media that resulted in the emergence of greater political awareness, a large number of urban and rural traditional Barisan Nasional's (BN)[7] voters cast their vote for the opposition, cutting across the traditional communal political cleavages. The results that led to the resignation of Abdullah Ahmad Badawi less than a year later symbolise the death-knell of the UMNO's electoral superiority to the profit of the opposition, Pakatan Rakyat.

In February 2009 the defection of three Pakatan state assemblyman challenged the majority of the Perak State Assembly. This event resulted in several episodes of violence and demonstrations against Pakatan leaders who were in favour of dissolution of the State Assembly after the loss of their representatives. It was at this stage that Pekida members appeared, publicly waving flags bearing their organisation's colours (yellow, red and green), and wearing yellow (the royal colour) headbands that read 'Daulat Tuanku'.[8] Despite their violence, none of the Pekida's militants involved were arrested.

In April 2009 Abdullah stepped down from his office. In February 2010 the Court of Appeal overturned the High Court decision declaring Barisan's takeover of the Perak State Assembly as unlawful, and confirmed the appointment of Zambry Abdul Kadir as Menteri Besar (Chief Minister) of Perak. Since then, Zambry has been guest of honour at every martial arts assembly organised in Perak and Kuala Lumpur by the Pekida NGO network. Perak is indeed a stronghold for Pekida groups – and the place where I did most of my field research. Soon after the events, several leaders and members interviewed in Perak mentioned BN's takeover with pride and explained that they and 'their guys' were involved in the violence, or 'would have been ready to go anytime if UMNO's politicians needed more muscles'.

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6   Date unknown. All Pekida members interviewed recognised Abdullah as the organisation's patron.
7   Barisan Nasional (BN) is the ruling coalition lead by the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO).
8   'Long live the Sultan'.

The Myths of a Nation: Sociohistorical Factors

Malays are the dominant group in Malaysia. As in every group of people, their sense of belonging to the same community lies in their belief they are sharing a common ancestry, a common history or myths. Most Malays perceive (or are made to believe) that they are the original inhabitants of Malaysia – the myth of the indigenous – thus this is used to justify the fact that they have a special position which entitles them to special privileges and rights – the myth of sovereignty – and must defend these rights against the others – the myth of resistance. The three myths are intertwined and made more complex by the religious element; the idea of the need for protection of Islam amplifies tremendously the myth of resistance. These myths, perpetuated by state institutions and political parties' propaganda, have set the foundation for ethnic tensions and fears.

Malay nationalism has been a key element in the discourse of Islamist reformist and secular traditionalist anti-colonial movements. Since its creation, in 1946, before independence, UMNO has embodied Malay nationalism and propagated the three myths described above. Today, the myth of the Malays as a homogeneous group of people is a historical fantasy that serves the contemporary ethno-nationalist rhetoric used by CMG. Ethno-nationalist groups are today the self-proclaimed defenders of the Malay myths and use this rhetoric to recruit supporters. Perkasa claims to defend Malay rights, while Pekida NGOs argue that they are the sole guardian of the Malay culture and its tradition.

The Shadows of May 1969

The 10 May 1969 election was the third general election after independence. The ruling coalition, the Alliance, was confident of retaining its two-thirds majority in the Federal Assembly. The result of the election in favour of the opposition parties was an abrupt revelation of the fragility of a superficial inter-ethnic consensus. The coalition managed to maintain a weak majority on a federal level, but lost the states of Perak and Selangor – two economically vital states with large Chinese constituencies – to opposition parties. This loss was interpreted as a switch of Chinese voters who could not remain faithful to the MCA and a risk for Malays to lose power to the Chinese. The reactions among the most extreme UMNO members were first, to challenge directly the credibility of the Alliance, and – in a more subtle way – to question the possibility of governing a multi-ethnic country within a democratic system (Goh, 1971: 17). To some, these poor results were the consequences of giving citizenship to the non-Malays after independence

which had indeed been a way for them to acquire political power that should remain in the hands of the Malay community. Goh (1971) describes a leaflet in which the author urged that 'the extra-parliamentary government instituted upon the declaration of State of emergency be perpetuated and democracy forsaken'. This election gave UMNO supporters the impression that the country was on the verge of falling into the hands of 'immigrants' (ibid.).

The riots opposing Chinese and Malays started on 13 May and continued until 18 May. Malaysian history books present the event as a 'spontaneous outburst of racial violence in a multi-ethnic society' (Kua, 2013); the official figures indicate that 196 persons were killed, 180 wounded by firearms and 259 by other weapons; 9143 persons were arrested and 5561 charged in court; 6000 persons were rendered homeless, 211 vehicles were destroyed (at least) and 753 buildings were damaged or destroyed by fire (ibid.: 9).

Kua questions the role of the State apparatus (police and army) and the political party leaders and members – more specifically, the ruling party UMNO youth branch. The author reads the orchestration of ethnic violence by the ruling party as 'a fascist trend which threatens to sabotage democracy in Malaysia'. According to Kua (ibid.), the event of May 1969 was the bloodiest clash of the many other racial outbursts to come. He argues that all were orchestrated violence. He draws the conclusion that the responsibility for the violence that has occurred in Malaysia since 1969 goes to UMNO leaders who have been manipulating UMNO Youth members, together with the leniency of the army and the police (a conclusion drawn from their reluctance to interfere in the clashes).

Kua (ibid.: 7) addresses the responsibilities of political parties and emphasises the role of UMNO and its youth branch. Unfortunately, the author does not push his analysis further to understand the reasons for such manipulation; to him the ethnic violence that occurred in Malaysia, 13 May being the most violent, is 'the physical expression of a fascist ideology run by UMNO', and used to instigate fear. The analysis needs to be pushed further. The reason for such political manipulation cannot be simplistically defined as the expression of an ideology, but should rather be seen as a way to secure political power. Secondly, the individuals or groups that were assimilated into UMNO Youth may fall under the typology of connivance militants operating under the legal banner of UMNO Youth.

The Overlap of the Spheres of Power: Structural Factors

Malaysian political theatre shall be depicted as a trio of intertwined spheres of actors, which play an active part in the design of contemporary politics. The political sphere (1) encompasses political parties, including the ruling party, the government and the state institutions. The economic sphere (2) is one of entrepreneurship, private and public companies; it is the 'corporate world'. And finally the public sphere (3) is the one of non-governmental organisation (NGOs) and the media. The nature of interactions between the elements of this trio is at the core of the political dynamics in the country. The structure of the Malaysian political theatre sets the lines along which the game of politics is played, and the way individuals (or groups of individuals) act in, out or across the spheres. The porosity of the spheres is one of the specificities of this system where political actors or individuals are allowed to play one or more roles. For example, politicians sit on the boards of private and public-listed companies, and mainstream media companies (TV, radio and newspaper) are owned by leaders of component parties of the ruling coalition. 'Business politics' or patronage is, indeed, one of the pillars of the political system.

The opaqueness of the Malaysian system (1) contributes to the perpetuation of the Malay myth refashioned into contemporary ethno-nationalism (2) and the current political and economic situation that has challenged the ruling party's hegemony (3) constitutes favourable ground for the development of connivance militancy. Pekida's NGOs have blossomed in answer to UMNO's need for support, offering great business opportunities. In developing connivance with UMNO, Pekida's gangs have been able to enjoy the flexibility of the legal framework regulating the (often loose) registration of NGOs, and the general leniency of State institutions, when creating and running their ethno-nationalist umbrellas.

Pekida: Opportunist Militant Group!

(Re)-Constructing Pekida's History

Pekida is a registered Muslim organisation. The first mention of the name 'Pekida' was found in the *Asian Almanac* in 1978. The short article advertises the creation of a new religious organisation and explains its origins. The original organisation Tentera Sabillullah (Holy Army), a religious criminal organisation, was dissolved in 1978. The members re-formed as two separate organisations: Pertubuhan Angkatan Sabillullah (Association of Holy Forces (PAS)) and Pekida. A decade later, the government authorities accused

PAS of being a terrorist organisation linked to the Parti Islam SeMalaysia (Islamist Party (PAS)) and dissolved the organisation. According to Pekida's internal history, that remains quite blurred for most members; the many activities of Pekida, in politics and in business, developed with the support of high-profile politicians and businessmen, out of sight of the authorities, the media and academia until recently.

A Snake with a Thousand Heads

Pekida is often referred to as 'Tiga Line' (Three Lines) as a symbol of the colours of its official flag: red, yellow and green. The three colours of the organisation embody its allegiances: to the Malay community (red as blood), to the Sultan (yellow for Royals) and to Islam (green). Pekida is often said to be divided into two lines: the official line 'White', which represents the registered organisation – the NGO called Pekida – and the underground line 'Red' that represents the gangsterised network behind the NGO. A large number of the Reds are in fact also members of the White line. It is important to mention that not all the members of the White line are active in the Red line; one may be an NGO activist, but not a gangster. In other words, not all members of Pekida are involved in criminal activities but may enjoy the business opportunities offered by a highly connected network. Anyway, denial of the underground branches by the official leaders, and more recently UMNO politicians, is a rule (Jamilah Kamarudin, 2011; Teoh, 2014).

Pekida's nebula cannot be reduced to a set of colours: it is a well-developed – and nurtured – system. Pekida's gangsterised network is a polymorphic entity: a snake with a thousand heads that do not always talk to each other nor look in the same direction. Pekida's gangs share the same roots, the hierarchy, the codes of honour, similar induction rites but bear differences in ethnic composition (exclusive or inclusive), nature of business (legal or illegal: drugs, clubs, rackets), level of political involvement and degree of violence. Leadership rivalries have sealed these differences and led to a political split. Since the death of PLB (his name must not be pronounced in public) in 2006, Pekida's network has been in crisis. PLB did not name a successor and all the *paduka* (top leaders) still claim to be his natural heir. Since then, numerous offshoots of Pekida have been created by PLB's first line of acolytes. Today, the most famous gang networks include 77 ('double 7') and 36. Each network is composed of several sub-groups, which may answer to different names. Names and logos, if any, often represent numbers and animals – tiger, dragon, eagle, etc. – as inspired by the names

of the *congxi gelap* (Chinese secret societies). Gangs and their sub-groups are spread all around the country: there is no geographic logic – a member originally from Perak may belong to a gang that has its leadership in Kuala Lumpur. The name Pekida has thus become a generic term that embraces a very large national network. Estimations of membership are impossible because Pekida is a shadowy network; nevertheless, field research showed that members can be found all over West Malaysia, in every layer of society (rural to urban elite), and every institution (state, political, social and economic).

From Exclusive Ethnic Politics to Inclusive Pragmatic Business

According to the narrative of most Pekida members, the organisation was created following the May 1969 riots to protect the Malay community and Islam. The myth of the genesis of Pekida is largely cultivated by leaders to recruit youngsters, and used to justify political actions and/or mobilisation that may lead to violence. But when it comes to pure business (no politics), the ethno-nationalist rhetoric used by Pekida's NGOs reaches its limits, to the benefit of a more pragmatic strategy. As a leader of a Subang area group would say: 'We are not racist, I don't care about *ketuanan Melayu*. Our motto is: make money and don't get caught! But of course if needed I'll do what it takes to protect my community (the Malays).' Pekida NGOs' ethnic exclusivity shatters when it comes to business. A network like 77 which is seen as one of the most powerful in the country, whose leaders are based in Kuala Lumpur's outskirts, is multi-ethnic and multi-religious. And members are encouraged to mix in order to favour business. Most groups, even the most exclusive ones, are obliged to work with Chinese and Indian gangs outside and inside the network.

The sub-groups' philosophy, political obedience and strategy are more or less flexible according to each leader and his personal ambitions. The level of political involvement, as well as the type of business operated, and the degree of cultural and religious mix may differ from one group to another.

Orang Di Dalam: The Insiders

Why did you join Pekida? is one of the first questions I asked each of my sources. The most common answers were: 'I wanna be a gangster', 'I want to protect my race and/or religion', 'I want to make money and develop a network', 'I want to become a UMNO politician'. The membership is not a charge that you may inherit from your father, but some families may count more than one member. An individual becomes a 'brother' once he

has been through the induction rites. From an oath to a group fight, the induction ritual is a passage from the status of outsider to insider 'brother'. Some rituals are tainted by mystical practices that are also found in silat and Sufi tradition. These practices are only cultivated and encouraged in some groups, but may take a very mystical dimension: invisibility charms, invulnerability, astrology, etc.

The gang's hierarchy and structure remain quite identical from one group to another. The evolution of a brother to the top of the pyramid depends on his capacity to mobilise people around him: the more members he recruits 'under him', the higher he goes. Business activities and political connections do count. Since the leadership crisis after the death of PLB, no national leader has been able to emerge. The Pekida gangs' network has numerous top leaders, called *paduka*. The first circle of PLB's acolytes was identified during the research, but most names are aliases. Most of the top leaders have a criminal record, mostly for murder and/or rackets.

Pekida's membership is seen as a duty, and sometimes a burden. There is an obligation to answer the call of the leader once one has taken the oath. Members may be co-opted from every layer of society, at any age (above 17). The organisation cultivates a strong sense of family and brotherhood among members. Each member is able to climb the pyramidal hierarchy (see Fig. 5.1) according to the number of recruits he has below him (he has thus created his own sub-groups) or according to its actions. According to Azmi,[9] a member from the KL area: 'You join Pekida; you don't leave or you die.' Sleeping members do exist, more specifically when they are public figures. Some famous individuals are alleged or proved to be Pekida members; they do not take part in any of its political activities, but rather use the networks to multiply business opportunities and for private protection: sons of politicians in power, hip hop and pop singers, politicians, businessmen, civil servants or army officers. So, the social profile of members ranges from rural lower income to urban high elite and the network, while remaining mostly Malay, is after all relatively inclusive – Pekida may be one example of the cherished concept of Najib's 1Malaysia. Women do take part in some of Pekida's NGOs, but remain a minority and are rarely involved in political actions.

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[9]   Not his real name.

Fig. 5.1. Gang Groups "Tiga Line" Hierarchy

Paduka

Ayahanda or Ayah

Kekanda

Abang Long

Abang Ngah

Abang Cik

Abang Kawasan

Member Biase/Regular Member

Gang Brand: Pekida's Sub-Culture

Pekida's brothers do cultivate a gang culture that is sometimes initiated and encouraged by their leaders. Being a gang member is a source of pride. Despite secrecy being required, members do show off their membership, and cultivate the image of being an insider (*orang didalam*). Some leaders have understood this tendency of the youngsters to bear the colours of their groups and have put a great deal of attention into designing aesthetic logos that will be put on T-shirts, keychains, stickers, hats, etc. and sold to members.

Most Pekida gang members do believe that their political activities, or connection, put them in a grey area, and above the law. Thus they are not afraid of police authorities. 'As long as you are not seen committing a crime there is no problem in showing where you are coming from.' Recognition of brothers, ranks and sub-groups is essential for some, and this idea of belonging to the same family but different branches motivates the development of internal codes: clothes, car tuning, hairstyle, etc. The sense of belonging to an exclusive club is made even stronger by the use of the internal language called *buah*; it has 120 signs and is learned by most brothers. Some groups refuse to use it, but for most it is a way to communicate with brothers,

beyond the cultural, linguistic or ethnic differences.[10]

Gangsters and Masters: The Rules of the Game

'Do you fight?
- Yes
Why?
- I want to defend my race and my religion.
When do you fight?
- I fight when I'm asked and paid.
By who?
- I know UMNO politicians.
When was the last big fight?
- We did it during Hindraf rallies. To kick Indians' butt.
Do you have weapons, or do you fight with your own hands?
- Oh, Indians are crazy! We have parang, and I have a gun too but in Malaysia it is very hard to keep. We fight with fist too.
But, Azmi, I know your grandfather was Indian. So how does that make you feel?
- I don't care, I'm a Malay first!'

(Interview with Azmi, 21, sub-group leader in Cheras, January 2009)

The strength of Pekida resides in the secrecy. Pekida's potential for mobilisation and violence is intangible, and should as seen as potential 'muscle' for political parties in exchange for freedom for illegal entrepreneurship. In exchange for this support the organisation may exercise its business activities without any legal consequences. Thus, NGOs are only used to offer political support and gather militants. Gangs and sub-groups have developed their relationship to the ruling party and created martial arts, religious or Malay culture NGOs among which are Pekida (the most famous), BATAS, Amal etc. Interestingly, some members of these NGOs may not be part of the gang but co-opted directly from the NGO attracted by its 'code', its visibility or its official rhetoric. Some boys join these organisations to be part of a network they know as sitting on the edge of legality but might never get involved in criminal activities and mostly remain active militants within the NGOs. Nevertheless, the gangsterised nature of the network behind the NGO is clear to most, if not all, members. One of the bases for recruitment is martial art (silat) groups. Numerous silat organisations are

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[10]   http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=59EJN7XvdIk.

indeed Pekida's NGO network and it is very natural that their members eventually turn to political militancy.

Today, ethno-nationalist organisations are among the most vocal in the public sphere, pushing the entire political continuum to the far right. The rise of Pekida reveals the shortcomings of the Malaysian system of governance and the ambiguities in its legal system, while emphasising divisiveness in the concept of a coherent Malaysian nation and identity. It seems that the government majority has been hijacked by a 'right-wing lobby' and is struggling to restore credibility and trust within the non-Malay constituencies; this hijacking may indeed be part of UMNO's political strategy to maintain its influence to secure Malay votes and muscle if needed.

The rumours and legends built around Pekida are its biggest strength, playing on the fears of Malaysian society. Violent political actions allegedly committed by Pekida are serving the interests of the government in that they legitimate the sustainability of the ruling party's authoritarian and discriminative laws. In fact the Minister of Interior pointed to contemporary violent political events that CMG are responsible for. The violent events are instrumentalised to revive the remembrance of the violence of May 1969, and the potential of racial riots. According to this idea, a strong government and strong laws are needed to prevent violence, and protect 'racial harmony', and UMNO is the sole protector of this harmony. In an interview, Mahathir Mohamad expressed his view on Pekida and Malay NGOS in general.[11] To him Abdullah, in need of support, had no choice but to use these types of groups. According to him, they are the symptoms of a weak power. Nevertheless, the former Prime Minister explained that this support is important to the party and an old practice. In his own words, Mahathir explained:

> Their formation [the Malay NGOS] is due to their lack of faith in the Malay party of the government to look after their interests (…) [Pekida] is a shadowy organisation, we're not so sure about what they are doing. A government, you don't know what they could do, they might undermine your support. So since you don't know what they do, you support them. (…) It's good to have them on your side. These are organisations whose strength and influence are not very clear, but it seems you should not be against them because you would lose votes. There is no reason why the government should not be with them.

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[11] Interview with the author in Putrajaya, 30 April 2012.

Pekida is a nebulous and politically dual entity which could potentially serve the interests of any political party; although several members do acknowledge their allegiance to opposition parties, it has not been measured. As a consequence, and following the 2008 general elections, some gangs and sub-groups chose to turn their back on UMNO to give their support to the opposition parties. The leader (*ayah*) of a sub-group based in Perak explained 'I used to be an UMNO member. I was locally in charge with running projects for the community, but I never saw the money. The money coming from the top will never come to me. UMNO is too corrupted. Now I'm a PAS member.'

Another Way of Looking at 'Civil Society'

The political role of NGOs, despite their claim of being apolitical, is proven (e.g., Weiss, 2006; Lee, 2010). Usually the NGO scene is seen in a dual dimension: Muslim opposing non-Muslim NGOs or pro-opposition opposing pro-government. Interestingly, most NGOs are understood as occupying the political scene in opposition to the ruling party in general, and particularly to UMNO, since 1957. Apart from its own party branches, the mentioning of pro-government NGOs is rare in the analysis of Malaysian politics. There is another division within these pro-opposition organisations: between Islamists on one hand, and secular or non-religious organisations on the other hand. Thus when we look at connivance militancy (as in pro-government NGOs) it is a large area of the public sphere that has been totally ignored.

The independence of NGOs in the public sphere should be questioned; we argue that a large number of NGOs are embodying the interests of political parties in different aspects, such as diffusing or supporting the party's ideas, supporting and/or getting involved in its public actions, initiating political action such as demonstrations or violence serving the party's interests. Clearly, the notion of independence usually associated with NGOs is a sham.

The notion of 'civil society' is often used as a barometer to measure the degree of democratisation of a country. A country where a vibrant civil society has developed is often classified as 'democratic'. Nevertheless, the true political independence of these NGOs is rarely challenged, nor is the legal frame under which they have emerged.

Gangster-Mind or Master-Mind?

Pekida should be seen as a macro image reflecting today's society: it is a

product of the disrupted structure of Malaysian society, and is rooted in the same myths. Pekida is indeed a product of the frustrations and anxiety of the Malaysian society as a whole. Pekida members have claimed responsibility for several outbursts of violence that were seen as ethnic or religious clashes.

The connivance between gangs and political party that we call 'opportunist connivance militancy' is not ephemeral, but one aspect of a system that has been in place since independence that questions the very nature of political militancy.

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