Chapter 8
Protest Songs as Catalysts for Political Change in Malaysia

Samuel Chibundu Ihediwa

https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2883-5937
Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman, Malaysia

ABSTRACT

Social change and political expression have always had their place in music. Often, artists use their creative talent to send controversial messages they relate to, with the aim to motivate the masses to take action. Throughout history, protest songs have always galvanized the oppressed into resisting their oppressor. Usually, artists turn to protest songs when they know that the media, education, and government are largely in the hands of the oppressor, be it a democratic or authoritarian regime. This chapter explored some protest songs and how they served as a new form of resistance against Malaysia's hegemonic power – the ruling National Front (Barisan Nasional). It is informed by the theory of hegemony and resistance.

INTRODUCTION

Nation-states have patriotic songs and music which most of their citizens know about and sing at national events and festivities. Such national and patriotic music usually express richly layered meanings and evocative metaphors, thereby providing an ideal archetype for other forms of music produced within the national context. The malleable qualities of songs render them perfect instruments for shaping a nation's image and by extension its national identity (Bohlman, 2011).

While national ceremonies and flags are often employed to celebrate, recognize, promote, recreate and reinforce identities, music on the other hand projects sonic

symbols with the capacity to enhance the importance of a nation among the citizens. National and patriotic music are also known to acquire their aesthetic and sonic characteristics from the aesthetic and lyrical ways in which they narrate a nation's history (Bohlman, 2011). Viewed from another perspective, music has also played an indispensable role in the social progressive movement within and across nations. Thomson (2016) posited that when faced with social and political injustice, songwriters turn to their craft to produce songs that seek to shed light on the perceived inequalities of the day. The multilayered history of these songs and the way they adapt as technology changes, reflect the state of contemporary protest music: ready to create an artful, thrilling soundtrack for effective mass civic engagement. In doing this, the artists express themselves politically and become powerful forces in society. Therefore, the musician's political and philosophical beliefs not only determine the trajectory of his or her creative works, they also influence how that artist interacts with the music world itself (Thomson, 2016).

Consequently, this chapter seeks to explore how protest songs constituted a new form of resistance in Malaysia, particularly against the ruling party – the National Front (Barisan Nasional) - and its hegemonic hold in the country. Essentially, the present research was impacted by past studies that explored the strategies surbordinate groups use to express their resistance against the people in power. This chapter is also informed by Scott's (1990) theory on everyday resistance. This theory proposes that people who are apparently powerless have their own "hidden transcript" in response to domination. Scott had earlier in 1985 researched on the politics of resistance by poor Malay peasants in Malaysia, who were angered by changes in rice production that systematically worked to their disadvantage. Rather than risking the consequences of protests, the Malay peasants resorted to more subtle tactics of attacking property, poaching, character assassination and shunning the elites. They meticulously avoided any act of public defiance against the dominant group. Instead, resorted to using disguise, deception and acquiescence in maintaining an outward impression of consenting to the ideology of the people in power. This attitude, according to Scott, was the "public transcript" acceptable to the dominant group. Scott argued that the peasants had to use this strategy because large scale uprising in the country was very rare, given the history of such revolts being crushed unceremoniously by the ruling elites.

Political dissidents in Malaysia are arrested under the Special Offenses and Security Measures Act (SOSMA), while street protests are often crushed by the riot police using water cannons and tear gas. To facilitate the understanding of how subordinate classes in Malaysia respond to hegemony, this chapter will also explore the role of protest songs in creating political awareness in the country and how this led to the defeat of the ruling party in the 2018 general election. In this regard, two songs from two Malaysian musicians were randomly selected to show how their

17 more pages are available in the full version of this document, which may be purchased using the "Add to Cart" button on the publisher's webpage: www.igi-global.com/chapter/protest-songs-as-catalysts-for-political-change-in-malaysia/320264

Related Content

Using Interactivity to Improve Online Music Pedagogy for Undergraduate Non-Majors
Eric James Mosterd (2018). *Pedagogy Development for Teaching Online Music (pp. 110-135).*
www.irma-international.org/chapter/using-interactivity-to-improve-online-music-pedagogy-for-undergraduate-non-majors/203873

Music in Video Games
Dimitrios Margounakisand Ioanna Lappa (2016). *Digital Tools for Computer Music Production and Distribution (pp. 160-182).*
www.irma-international.org/chapter/music-in-video-games/157956

Modeling Music Notation in the Internet Multimedia Age
Pierfrancesco Belliniand Paolo Nesi (2004). *Visual Perception of Music Notation: On-Line and Off Line Recognition (pp. 272-303).*
www.irma-international.org/chapter/modeling-music-notation-internet-multimedia/31061

What to Listen For: Making Music Appreciation Work for Everyone
Kathleen McGowan (2018). *Pedagogy Development for Teaching Online Music (pp. 69-84).*
www.irma-international.org/chapter/what-to-listen-for/203870

An Expert System Devoted to Automated Music Identification and Recognition
María Ángeles Fernández de Sevilla, Luis M. Laitaand Eugenio Roanes-Lozano (2008). *Intelligent Music Information Systems: Tools and Methodologies (pp. 80-101).*
www.irma-international.org/chapter/expert-system-devoted-automated-music/24429