

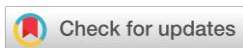
Impact of Social Movements on Policy Reforms and Legislative Change in Malaysia: The Mediating Roles of Public Awareness and Political Responsiveness

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Abstract: The social movements have come to play a significant role in influencing public discourse, politics and institutional change. Yet, there is still a lack of understanding on how social movements are able to influence policy reform and legislative change, especially in Malaysia. This study focuses on the impact of social movement effectiveness on policy and legislative change, mediated by public awareness and political responsiveness and moderated by digital activism. The study adopts a social movement and political process and institutional approach and provide an integrated conceptual perspective to examine and test the proposed relationships through survey data obtained from respondents in Malaysia. Partial least squares structural equation modelling (PLS-SEM) is used to evaluate the measurement and structural models. The results suggest that the effectiveness of a social movement has positive impacts on public awareness, political responsiveness and policy and legislative change. Public awareness and political responsiveness are also key to policy and legislative change. In addition, both variables are found to play a significant role in the social movement's effectiveness in bringing about policy and legislative change and the sequential relationship from public awareness to political responsiveness is significant. The results also show that digital activism played a positive moderation effect between the effectiveness of the social movement and the awareness among the public, indicating that digital platforms help social movements to better attract the public attention. Overall, the study posits that social movements can play a role in significant policy and legislative shifts, not only through direct mobilisation, but also through a process of 'public awareness' and 'institutional responsiveness'. The study adds to the literature by combining mobilisation, cultural, political and digital aspects of influence of social movements and offers policy recommendations for enhancing constructive civic engagement and responsive governance in Malaysia.

Keywords: Social movements; Policy reform; Legislative change; Public awareness; Political responsiveness; Digital activism; Malaysia

1. Introduction

Social movements have always been established as significant actors in changing political institutions, public discourse and outcomes of public policy. Social movements - as traditionally defined as a collective struggle against already established social, political or economical systems - are increasingly active both in the formal and informal political arena. They mobilise citizens, build public discourses, shape political agendas, and demand a shift of laws, regulations and public policies. But the impacts of such mobilisation are not limited to the success or failure of a protest campaign. Social movements can help to shift public attitudes, pressure politicians, change institution behaviour, and help to bring about policy and legislative changes (Amenta et al., 2018; Amenta & Polletta, 2019). It is therefore crucial

to understand these processes when it comes to explaining the formal institutional change of collective demands in society.

The connection between social movements and policy change is of special interest because political institutions do not necessarily react to collective claims. A movement can garner a significant amount of public support without leading to legislative reform, and a small movement can inspire important institutional reform when political opportunities, public support and institutional responsiveness are favorable. Amenta et al. (2012) show how social movements can shape political reform processes, yet Amenta et al. (2018) stress the importance of the political institutions and processes that social movements target in their action. Similarly, Cummings (2018) emphasizes the role of social movements in the process of law change: social movements can impact law not only via direct political mobilisation, but also via litigation, advocacy and institutional engagement. The arguments here show that the connection between mobilisation and policy outcomes should not be overlooked and mechanisms that link society's pressure to the institutional response should be studied.

Public awareness is one of the significant mechanisms. Social movements often aim to bring a relatively private or "marginalised" issue to public attention in an effort to make it a social and political issue. Movements can raise the salience of specific issues and shape the meaning of issues through campaigning, demonstrating, advocacy, media relations and community mobilisation. This is because social movements can bring cultural effects through the change of public discourse, meanings and perceptions, as stated by Amenta and Polletta (2019). This can then lead to a wider constituency within society for reform and make the demands of the movement more salient politically. As a problem gains wider recognition, there can be greater pressures on policy makers to accept a problem and to think about what policies might be in response.

The second key mechanism is political responsiveness. While social movements can help raise awareness and spur policy and legislative changes, this is also to a large extent dependent on the political institutions' ability and willingness to act. Political responsiveness is the degree to which the government actors and institutions acknowledge, consider and act on the demands of the society. Political effects of social movements thus partly relate to the interplay between collective action and institutions. Political institutions are also significant in shaping the outcomes of movement, as Amenta et al. (2018) have recently pointed out, and relationships between social movements and institutional politics are not static, as Somma and Medel (2017) have recently shown. As such, an analysis of political responsiveness can offer insights into how social pressures can be translated into formal policy outcomes.

Public policy and social movements have also changed in the contemporary setting in the context of digital activism. Through social media and digital communication technologies, movements can quickly spread information, mobilize huge numbers of people, and connect with one another and the public from around the world to facilitate collective action and keep people's attention. It is therefore possible to allow digital activism to serve as a way to increase social movements' visibility and communicative power. Digital platforms can be used to enhance and amplify messages and to increase the number of people involved in collective action, but should not be a substitute for traditional mobilisation. This puts digital activism in a special spotlight with regard to the understanding of how social movements are able to raise public awareness in today's political contexts.

The Malaysian context is significant to consider these relationships. Malaysia's political and civic landscape has undergone notable transformation, with respect to increased public involvement in governance and accountability, rights, social justice, and institutional reform. The role of civil society organisations, advocacy groups, grassroots groups and digitally connected citizens in public debates on policy and governance is growing. Meanwhile, the success of social mobilisation is related to political institutions' responsiveness to society's demands. The Malaysian context thus offers a chance to analyse if successful social

movements can lead to increased public awareness and political responsiveness and if such processes leads to policy and legislative change.

Although there is significant scholarship on the political, cultural and legal effects of social movement, there are several key gaps. Many of the writings concentrate on certain movements, specific policy campaigns or specific institutional contexts. Researchers have explored political reform pathways (Amenta et al., 2012), cultural implications (Amenta & Polletta, 2019), legal changes (Cummings, 2018), litigation (McCammon & McGrath, 2015), policy enforcement (Spalding, 2023) and the dynamics between movements and institutional politics (Somma & Medel, 2017). But an integrated empirical account that takes into account movement effectiveness, public awareness and political responsiveness and digital activism in explaining policy and legislative change has received comparatively less attention, especially in the Malaysian context.

A further weakness of the current literature is that sometimes the success of a policy is considered to be a relatively direct result of mobilisation. This can fail to account for the intermediary steps by which movements work to institutional change. It is possible to attract public attention to a movement without getting political support and political responsiveness may only occur after an issue has become sufficiently visible to the public. Likewise, digital activism can enhance the communicative power of a movement, without ensuring policy change. Together, these relationships can then be explored in order to develop a more complicated understanding of how social mobilisation has institutional impacts. The sequence of awareness, political responsiveness, and policy outcomes is especially significant because it helps in explaining how demands from the society make their way from public talk to formalized action in institutions.

In this context, this research sets out to build and test an empirical model of how social movement effectiveness is related to policy and legislative change, mediated by public awareness and political responsiveness and moderated by digital activism. The study posits that there can be both direct and indirect impacts of effective social movements, with the latter fostering increased awareness and responsiveness among the public and policy makers. It also suggests that digital activism can help enlarge the potential of successful social movements to increase the public's awareness. The study aims to transcend the black-and-white question of 'do social movements matter' and examine how and under what conditions do social movements affect policy and legislative changes.

This study has several contributions to the literature. Firstly, it offers an integrated account of the links between social mobilisation and the formal policy outcomes. Second, it provides an empirical concept of the ways by which the effectiveness of a movement can become translated into institutional change – namely, through public awareness and the responsiveness of the political sphere. Third, it also puts into perspective digital activism itself, which is a characteristic of collective action in the 21st century. In conclusion, the study will add evidence from a political setting in Southeast Asia, Malaysia, that is relatively under-studied in quantitative studies on the policy implications of social movements. It is hoped that the results not only will be of interest for the literature about social movements, but also for the debate about democratic participation, civil society and responsive governance.

Therefore, the main aim of this study is to understand the role that social movements play in shaping policy reforms and legislative changes in Malaysia and public awareness, political responsiveness and digital activism within this dynamic. Specifically, in this study, it is examined whether the effectiveness of social movements leads to increased awareness and political responsiveness in the public, whether there are connections between greater awareness and political responsiveness and policy and legislative changes, whether social movement effectiveness and changes in the policy or legislative outcomes are mediated by greater awareness and political responsiveness, and whether greater awareness and political responsiveness are strengthened by greater digital activism. In answering these questions, the study aims to give a detailed account of the potential of collective action for society to turn into effective institutional and legislative change.

2. Literature Review

Social movements have long been acknowledged as key participants in the ways in which societies express grievances, contest the rules and regulations of the game, and attempt to alter public policy and laws. Contrary to their role as protest, contemporary social movements can impact upon political agendas, political discourse, mobilizing citizens and exert pressure for institutional responses. Amenta, Andrews and Caren (2018) see movements as actors who wish to affect political institutions, political processes, and political outcomes – going beyond the immediate results of protest to also include the results of the movements' efforts in affecting government policies, institutions, and political processes more broadly. The view has significant implications for the understanding of social movements as potential sources of policy or legislative change and not merely as the expression of public dissatisfaction.

There is a large body of literature which shows that the impact of social movements is linked to their ability to translate collective mobilization into political and institutional outcomes. Amenta, Caren and Stobaugh (2012) in their analysis of the historical trends of social movements in the United States, reveal that movements may shape political reforms, but their impact is different depending on history and institutions. Their analysis points to the fact that successful movements do not act in isolation of political institutions, but rather are influenced by political opportunities, institutional characteristics, and political strategies used by movement organisations. Likewise, Anria, Garay and Rich (2026) highlight the importance and complexity of researching the policy consequences of social movements, given that movements can influence policy in a variety of ways beyond exerting political pressure. As these arguments imply, the link between social movements and policy reform is not automatic and linear.

A key way that social movements can impact policy is by shifting the public conversation and public perceptions. Amenta and Polletta (2019) contend that “social movements can have cultural effects, by changing people's understandings of social problems and by contesting dominant understandings and by bringing other ideas to public attention. Increased pressure on policy makers can arise in such a cultural shift that issues will have to be addressed that were previously ignored. In this way, public awareness may be a significant middle-ground between collective mobilisation and policy change. If the social movement succeeds in framing the issue, gaining media coverage and enlisting support of wider groups of people, they can make the issue more salient and more difficult for the government to ignore.

The significance of social movements in the creation of organisational and institutional change has also come to the fore. Germain, Robertson and Minnis (2019) consider protests, rallies, marches and more general social movements to be potential organisational change agents. They see that collective mobilisation can impact organisations by contesting practices, putting pressure on organisations to adapt, and can lead organisations' actors to rethink organisational arrangements. This is especially true of policy change issues as changes in public policy often involve changes in government institutions, including changes in practices and priorities. The organisational outcomes of mobilisation can therefore be a significant mechanism for the translation of broader social demands to institutional change.

Social movements and the law are also an important aspect of policy and legislative change. In the legal world, there is now a “social movement turn” (Cumplings 2018), in which scholars have increasingly come to see the potential of movements to shape legal change and legal institutions. Social movements can impact law through the mobilisation of political support, new legal understandings, legislative debates and pressure to institutionalise change. Likewise, according to McCammon and McGrath (2015), litigation and the courts can be a strategic means for a social movement to achieve social and legal change. According to these studies, legislative change process should not be seen only through the lenses of the parliamentary process: the movements can affect legal results

through various institutional means, such as courts, legislatures and administrative institutions.

The impact of social movements on policy can also be in the implementation of laws and policies. Spalding (2023) in the context of social movements and implementation of mining policies in Guatemala shows that the influence of social movements can persist after the policies have been formally adopted. This is a critical consideration as the adoption of a policy does not guarantee that the policy is actually implemented effectively. Social movements can keep the pace of implementation under observation, and pressure and demand authorities to honour their policy commitments in the face of institutional resistance. Thus, policy influence is more of a process than an event, and it can include agenda formation, policy adoption, institutional implementation and monitoring.

Another crucial explanation of the possible policy influence of social movements is the institutionalisation of such movements. Gillooly (2020) shows how the political institutionalisation of indigenous social movements can result in a greater level of their engagement with political institutions. While this institutionalisation can give movements more direct access to decision making, it can also help to change the management strategies and political actor relationships within the movement. Somma and Medel (2017) also explore evolving dynamics between social movements and institutional politics, finding that the distinction between movement politics and formal institutional politics may not be clear-cut. The results indicate that movements can not just exert pressure from the outside, but also by interacting with political parties, legislators and state institutions more.

But there is no guarantee of successful or sustained policy influence if the institution is included. As Lima (2019) points out, participatory democracy has its shortcomings and there are difficulties in including social movements into governance at the local level. Participation in institutions can provide opportunities to communicate demands, but whether these demands have real impact on decisions will depend on the openness of the institution and the distribution of the political powers. This implies that political responsiveness is a key pathway for movement activity to have an impact on policy. The extent to which political institutions are responsive to social demands is likely to influence how well mobilisation can be translated into policy outcomes; the more resistant or exclusionary the political institutions, the less likely mobilisation is to yield formal outcomes, even if it is successful in mobilising large numbers.

Social movement - political institution relations can also alter after policy success. Suh (2014) in the context of the Korean women's movement shows that the success of a policy can have unintended consequences and change the dynamics between the social movement and the institutional politics. Successful movements may start to become more formal, changes in the organisation's identity, or problems sustaining mobilisation once original demands have been partly met. This discovery signals the dynamism in the relationship between movement and policy and suggests that movement success does not necessarily mean the end of social mobilisation. Rather, new political relations, expectations and conflicts can be created through policy reform.

The literature also indicates that the results of movements are heavily reliant on activists' strategies. Movements can utilise demonstrations, public campaigns, media engagement, litigation, political lobbying, community mobilisation and institutional participation. McCammon and McGrath (2015) demonstrate how litigation can be an avenue for legal change for movements, and Cummings (2018) highlights the wider connection between social movements and legal change. In the same vein, Germain et al. (2019) draw attention to the importance of protest and collective action for organisations. These suggest that effectiveness of movement is not one-dimensional and cannot only be measured in terms of protest intensity. The capacity of a movement to mobilise the public and advocate for institutional change could be crucial to the translation of social demands into specific policy outcomes.

There are a number of gaps in the literature on social movements. Most of the research so far is historical, qualitative case studies or movement specific investigations and

there has been comparatively little focus on quantitatively modelling the pathways and processes by which movement activity can lead to policy and/or legislative changes. Moreover, literature on policy reform, legal change, cultural change or political institutionalisation are often discussed in isolation. Opportunities still exist for a more comprehensive approach that will link the effectiveness of social movements with public awareness, political responsiveness, and policy and legislative outcomes. This would not only clarify the question on whether or not social movements affect policy, but also how and under what circumstances it takes place.

An understanding of these relationships is important when considering the Malaysian context. Malaysia has seen substantial advancements in civil society mobilisation, public activism, political engagement and institutional changes. Both traditional mobilization and digital communication have become more and more prominent in social movements and civic campaigns to shape public debates and reach political institutions. Meanwhile, civil society and formal political institutions have undergone several stages of political competition, institutional reform and political opportunities for public participation. Hence the Malaysian setting is an apt one for the study of the capacity of social movements to transform collective mobilisation and the creation of public awareness into political responsiveness and, ultimately, policy and legislative change.

With this background, the present study takes the effectiveness of social movements as the central independent variable and suggests that the effectiveness can impact policy and legislative change via public awareness and political responsiveness. Social movements can raise awareness by introducing issues that are not being discussed, and awareness can create political pressure and prompt the policy makers to respond to the citizens' demands. Political responsiveness, in turn, can help to translate movement demands into policy reform and legislative change. It also acknowledges the increasing relevance of digital activism as a tool to amplify the impact and recognition of social movements. This integration of points of view widens the current literature by linking cultural, political and institutional channels in a single empirical model. Hypotheses include:

H1: Social movement effectiveness has a positive and significant effect on public awareness.

H2: Social movement effectiveness has a positive and significant effect on political responsiveness.

H3: Social movement effectiveness has a positive and significant effect on policy and legislative change.

H4: Public awareness has a positive and significant effect on political responsiveness.

H5: Public awareness has a positive and significant effect on policy and legislative change.

H6: Political responsiveness has a positive and significant effect on policy and legislative change.

H7: Public awareness mediates the relationship between social movement effectiveness and policy and legislative change.

H8: Political responsiveness mediates the relationship between social movement effectiveness and policy and legislative change.

H9: Public awareness and political responsiveness sequentially mediate the relationship between social movement effectiveness and policy and legislative change.

H10: Digital activism positively moderates the relationship between social movement effectiveness and public awareness, such that the relationship is stronger at higher levels of digital activism.

3. Methodology

The research design used in this study is quantitative and cross-sectional in order to explore the influence of social movements towards policy reforms and legislative changes in Malaysia. The research is based on the notion that the impact of social movements may not only be direct political pressure, but also through raising awareness and prompting political response. The study thus builds an integrated model of structure where social movement effectiveness is the key explanatory variable, public awareness and political responsiveness are mediators, policy and legislative change is the dependent variable, and digital activism is a moderator. The proposed relationships are examined using the data obtained from the survey of Malaysian citizens.

The target population is Malaysian citizens aged 18 years and older who have some awareness of social, political or public-policy issues to give informed answers to questions about social movements and their possible impact on government decisions. The main data-collection tool used is a structured questionnaire. The questionnaire is sent out via online means and community networks to target respondents from various demographic and geographic backgrounds. To this end, attempts are made to get responses from various states, urban and semi-urban populations. Participants are told that they are volunteering, and that their responses will be used for academic purposes and kept confidential. Responses with major irregularities in form and/or observations with incomplete responses are not included in the final analysis.

All the key constructs in the questionnaire consist of several reflective items based on conceptual dimensions from the literature on social movement, political participation, institutional change and digital activism. Items measuring the effectiveness of a social movement are operationalised as the ability of the social movement to mobilise citizens, to communicate collective demands, to attract the public's attention, to generate pressure on decision makers and to influence public debate. Public awareness indexes respondents' awareness of movement issues (social issues and policy issues promoted by social movements), understanding of movement demands and levels of movement contribution to public discussion. Political responsiveness refers to the perceived willingness and capacity of political leaders and government institutions to acknowledge, consider and respond to demands that have been mobilized through social mobilization. Policy and legislative change is an enactment of perceived changes in government policy, public programmes, regulation and legislation that stem from social demands and collective mobilisation. Digital Activism is a measure of how social media and other digital platforms are utilized to spread information, mobilize citizens, coordinate campaigns and influence policy makers.

The principal constructs are measured on a five-point Likert scale with 1 = strongly disagree and 5 = strongly agree. Multiple indicators per latent construct are used to capture the multidimensional nature of social movement effectiveness and its institutional consequences. The questionnaire may be pilot tested on a small sample of individuals who are similar to the target population prior to the actual survey. The pilot exercise can be used to detect any unclear questions, double-barreled or any possible issues with the question structure. The final survey is modified as needed.

The researchers use partial least squares structural equation modelling (PLS-SEM) to examine the proposed conceptual framework. As the study explains the relationship among multiple latent constructs, and considers the direct and mediation effects as well as moderation effects, PLS-SEM is appropriate. The analysis is done in two steps. First, the reliability and validity of the measurement model is tested. Secondly, the structural model is tested to examine the hypothesized relations among the constructs.

Indicator reliability, internal consistency reliability, convergent validity and discriminant validity are used for the measurement model evaluation. Outer loadings are used to test the reliability of the indicators; values close to or greater than 0.70 are deemed acceptable. Cronbach's alpha, composite reliability and rho_A are used to assess internal consistency. The average variance extracted (AVE) is used to test for convergent validity and a value of 0.50 or higher indicates that the construct accounts for sufficient variance in the indicators. The heterotrait-monotrait ratio (HTMT) is used to investigate the discriminant validity, which is supplemented by the Fornell-Larcker criterion and cross-loading assessment wherever applicable. These procedures are used to ensure that the constructs are empirically different and that the instruments used to measure the constructs are suitable representations of the theory being assessed.

After the measurement model is validated, the structural model is evaluated to see how strong and significant the relationships are. To test the proposed direct effects, path coefficients, standard errors, t-statistics and p-values are reported. Resampled with large number of bootstraps to obtain large sample confidence intervals and significance estimates. Explanatory power of the model is measured using the coefficient of determination

(R^2), and effect sizes (f^2) are analyzed to understand the substantive contribution of the individual exogenous constructs to the endogenous constructs. The predictive relevance score, Q^2 , is used to assess the predictiveness and the standardised root mean square residual (SRMR) is reported as a secondary measure of model fit.

The mediation analysis will test the idea that the link between social movement effectiveness and policy and legislative change is mediated by public awareness and political responsiveness. Specific indirect effects and the total indirect effect are estimated via bootstrapping. The first mediation pathway examines if the effectiveness of the social movement changes policy and legislation through public awareness and the second pathway is indirect through political responsiveness. A sequential mediational path is also examined in which the effectiveness of the social movement leads to public awareness, which in turn leads to an increase in political responsiveness, and political responsiveness in turn leads to a change in policy and legislation. To test the proposed mediation relationships, the significance and confidence intervals of these indirect effects are calculated.

Digital activism is introduced as a moderating variable in order to analyse the impact of the digital environment in increasing social movements' capacity to raise public awareness. A structural model is added that includes the interaction term between social movement effectiveness and digital activism. Digital activism would be found to have a positive interaction coefficient if the result is statistically significant, suggesting that digital activism has a positive effect on the relationship between social movement effectiveness and public awareness. For ease of interpretation, the interaction can be explored in simple-slope analysis at the low and high levels of digital activism.

To minimize the likelihood of systematic differences among respondents affecting the relationships observed, several demographic and behavioural characteristics are included as control variables. These comprise age, gender, education, employment, income, urban or semi-urban dwelling and political interest and frequency of social media use. Specifically, political interest and social media use is relevant as people with higher political interest or more engagement with social media may be more likely to be involved with or feel the impact of social movements.

Common method bias is controlled for both procedurally and statistically. Anonymity and confidentiality are stressed, the items of the questionnaire are introduced clearly and neutrally, and the respondents are not tempted to try and suggest an answer that they would like to have. It can be seen from a statistical point of view that if the variance inflation factors of the full-collinearity are examined, the common method issue can be identified. Variance inflation factor values are also used to check for multicollinearity among predictor constructs: high values may suggest that the predictor constructs are redundant.

4. Results

The 500 respondents in the study were described in terms of their demographic characteristics in Table 1. There is a relatively balanced gender composition with males representing 54.2% and females representing 45.8% of the respondents. In terms of age, respondents aged 25–34 years constitute the largest group (33.6%), followed by those aged 18–24 years (25.2%) and 35–44 years (23.8%). As for educational qualifications, the highest number of people are educated up to Bachelor's degree (42.8%) and 21.2% till Masters. As per the employment profile, the private sector employees constituted the maximum number (30.2% of the population) followed by public sector employees (22.4%) and students (18.2%). 33.4% of the respondents are earning between MYR 2,500 and 4,999 per month. Moreover, 65.4% of the respondents live in urban and 34.6% live in semi-urban area. There is a moderate level of social media engagement, with 36.6% saying that they use social media for 3–5 hours per day and 27.6% using social media more than 5 hours per day. Overall, the demographic distribution is deemed to be representative enough to explore perceptions on social movements, digital activism and policy and legislative change in Malaysia.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of the Respondents

Characteristics	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	271	54.2
	Female	229	45.8
Age	18–24 years	126	25.2
	25–34 years	168	33.6
	35–44 years	119	23.8
	45–54 years	57	11.4
	55 years and above	30	6.0
Education	Secondary or equivalent	72	14.4
	Diploma/College	83	16.6
	Bachelor's degree	214	42.8
	Master's degree	106	21.2
Employment status	Doctoral degree	25	5.0
	Student	91	18.2
	Private sector	151	30.2
	Public sector	112	22.4
	Self-employed	88	17.6
Monthly income (MYR)	Other	58	11.6
	Below 2,500	109	21.8
	2,500–4,999	167	33.4
	5,000–7,499	126	25.2
	7,500–9,999	60	12.0
Residence	10,000 and above	38	7.6
	Urban	327	65.4
	Semi-urban	173	34.6
Social media use	Less than 1 hour/day	42	8.4
	1–3 hours/day	137	27.4
	3–5 hours/day	183	36.6
	More than 5 hours/day	138	27.6
Political interest	Low	84	16.8
	Moderate	241	48.2
	High	175	35.0
Total	—	500	100.0

The descriptive statistics and the correlation matrix of the main constructs are shown in Table 2. Generally the mean scores are moderate to high (between 3.46 and 3.83), reflecting high perceptions of social movement effectiveness, public awareness, political responsiveness, policy and legislative change and digital activism among the respondents. Digital activism had the highest mean score (3.83), followed by public awareness (3.78) and social movement effectiveness (3.71), indicating that the respondents believe digital platforms and social mobilisation to be relatively important aspects of civic and political engagement today. Correlation outcomes show that each of the constructs are positively related to each other and are statistically significant. Political responsiveness is most closely related to policy and legislative change ($r = 0.674$) and public awareness is also closely associated with policy and legislative change ($r = 0.601$). Positive relationships are found between social movement effectiveness and public awareness ($r = 0.612$), digital activism ($r = 0.586$) and policy and legislative change ($r = 0.574$). These correlations offer preliminary evidence of the suggested theoretical relationship and do not exceed a level that would normally be of concern for excessive bivariate multicollinearity.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics and Correlation Matrix of the Study Constructs

Constructs	Mean	SD	SME	PA	PR	PLC	DA
Social Movement Effectiveness (SME)	3.71	0.71	1.000				
Public Awareness (PA)	3.78	0.68	0.612***	1.000			
Political Responsiveness (PR)	3.52	0.74	0.548***	0.631***	1.000		
Policy & Legislative Change (PLC)	3.46	0.76	0.574***	0.601***	0.674***	1.000	
Digital Activism (DA)	3.83	0.72	0.586***	0.659***	0.522***	0.547***	1.000

Notes: SD = standard deviation; SME = Social Movement Effectiveness; PA = Public Awareness; PR = Political Responsiveness; PLC = Policy and Legislative Change; DA = Digital Activism. ***p < 0.001.

The results of the evaluation of the reliability and convergent validity of the measurement model are presented in Table 3. All indicators have outer loadings of 0.781 to 0.911, above the generally accepted outer loading limit of 0.70 and have good indicator reliability. The Cronbach's alpha scores for the constructs range between 0.892 and 0.921, and the composite reliability scores range from 0.920 to 0.941, suggesting good internal consistency of all constructs. Satisfactory construct reliability is also indicated by the rho_A coefficients, which range from 0.895 to 0.924. Additionally, the AVE values of all the results are from 0.681 to 0.761, which is a much higher value than the lower recommended value of 0.50. The results show that more than half of the variance of each indicator is accounted for by the corresponding construct. Overall, the results suggest that the indicators of the measurement model have satisfactory indicator reliability, internal consistency and convergent validity, which serves as a basis for the measurement of the structural relationship.

Table 3. Measurement Model Assessment: Outer Loadings, Reliability and Convergent Validity

Construct	Item	Outer Loading	Cronbach's α	rho_A	Composite Reliability	AVE
Social Movement Effectiveness (SME)	SME1	0.812	0.903	0.906	0.928	0.681
	SME2	0.846				
	SME3	0.859				
	SME4	0.823				
	SME5	0.781				
Public Awareness (PA)	PA1	0.827	0.892	0.895	0.920	0.697
	PA2	0.851				
	PA3	0.873				
	PA4	0.804				
	PA5	0.805				
Political Responsiveness (PR)	PR1	0.814	0.914	0.918	0.936	0.747
	PR2	0.884				
	PR3	0.901				
	PR4	0.875				
	PR5	0.858				
Policy & Legislative Change (PLC)	PLC1	0.836	0.921	0.924	0.941	0.761
	PLC2	0.879				
	PLC3	0.892				
	PLC4	0.911				
	PLC5	0.848				
Digital Activism (DA)	DA1	0.821	0.899	0.903	0.925	0.710
	DA2	0.867				
	DA3	0.853				
	DA4	0.841				
	DA5	0.797				

Note: AVE = average variance extracted; rho_A = Dijkstra–Henseler's reliability coefficient. All outer loadings exceed the recommended threshold of 0.70, while composite reliability and AVE indicate satisfactory internal consistency and convergent validity.

The heterotrait–monotrait (HTMT) ratio is used to assess the discriminant validity in Table 4. The HTMT values vary between 0.603 and 0.758, and are less than the conservative criterion of 0.85. The highest value of HTMT is found between public awareness and policy and legislative change (0.716), public awareness and digital activism (0.739), political responsiveness and policy and legislative change (0.758). These relationships are relatively strong, but do not reach the recommended threshold, thus suggesting that the constructs are empirically distinguishable. In this way, these five concepts are able to capture conceptually different dimensions of the proposed research framework: social movement effectiveness, public awareness, political responsiveness, policy and legislative change, and digital activism. These results thus indicate acceptable discriminant validity and the analysis of the structural model proceeded.

Table 4. Discriminant Validity Assessment Using HTMT

Constructs	SME	PA	PR	PLC	DA
Social Movement Effectiveness (SME)	—	0.672	0.611	0.634	0.648
Public Awareness (PA)		—	0.701	0.716	0.739
Political Responsiveness (PR)			—	0.758	0.603
Policy & Legislative Change (PLC)				—	0.621
Digital Activism (DA)					—

Note: SME = Social Movement Effectiveness; PA = Public Awareness; PR = Political Responsiveness; PLC = Policy and Legislative Change; DA = Digital Activism. The HTMT ratios are below the conservative threshold of 0.85, supporting discriminant validity among the constructs.

The results of the structural model for the direct relations proposed in the study are shown in Table 5. Results show that all six direct hypotheses are accepted. Social movement effectiveness also has a significant positive relationship with public awareness of social and policy issues ($\beta = 0.482$, $t = 11.756$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that the more effective the social movements are, the more aware the public is of the issues of social and policy concerns. Social movement effectiveness has a positive impact on political responsiveness ($\beta = 0.216$; $p < 0.001$) and policy and legislative change ($\beta = 0.174$; $p < 0.001$). Public awareness has a significant positive effect on political responsiveness ($\beta = 0.398$, $p < 0.001$) and policy and legislative change ($\beta = 0.231$, $p < 0.001$). The highest correlation in the model is that political responsiveness is directly correlated with policy and legislative change with a value of 0.436 ($t = 8.720$, $p < 0.001$). The testimony generally indicates that social movements have a direct impact on policy and legislation as well as because they create a more aware public and more responsive politics.

Table 5. Structural Model Results and Direct Hypothesis Testing

Hypothesis	Path	β	STDEV	T-value	P-value	95% CI	Decision
H1	Social Movement Effectiveness → Public Awareness	0.482	0.041	11.756	<0.001	[0.401, 0.561]	Supported
H2	Social Movement Effectiveness → Political Responsiveness	0.216	0.052	4.154	<0.001	[0.115, 0.318]	Supported
H3	Social Movement Effectiveness → Policy & Legislative Change	0.174	0.049	3.551	<0.001	[0.079, 0.270]	Supported
H4	Public Awareness → Political Responsiveness	0.398	0.048	8.292	<0.001	[0.305, 0.493]	Supported
H5	Public Awareness → Policy & Legislative Change	0.231	0.051	4.529	<0.001	[0.132, 0.331]	Supported
H6	Political Responsiveness → Policy & Legislative Change	0.436	0.050	8.720	<0.001	[0.338, 0.533]	Supported

Note: β = standardised path coefficient; STDEV = standard deviation; CI = confidence interval. The results are based on 5,000 bootstrap resamples.

Public awareness and political responsiveness mediation and sequential mediation effects are reported in Table 6. The results indicate that the relationship between the social movement effectiveness and the policy and legislative change is significantly mediated by public awareness ($\beta = 0.111$, $t = 3.964$, $p < 0.001$), thus supporting H7. H8 is also supported by significant mediation between the effectiveness of social movement and policy and legislative change ($\beta = 0.094$, $t = 3.760$, $p < 0.001$), as political responsiveness significantly mediates this relationship. However, importantly, the indirect (sequential mediation) effect of social movement effectiveness on policy and legislative change via public awareness and political responsiveness is also positive and significant ($\beta = 0.084$, $t = 4.421$, $p < 0.001$), supporting H9. The results show that the impact of social movements is not limited to the direct political pressure that can be exerted: movements can raise public awareness that can in turn lead to greater political sensitivity and eventually to policy and legislative shifts. This combination of substantial direct and indirect effects suggests that the mechanisms through which social movements produce effects are complementary to the direct effects of social movements.

Table 6. Mediation and Sequential Mediation Analysis

Hypothesis	Indirect Path	Indirect Effect (β)	STDEV	T-value	P-value	95% CI	Mediation Type	Decision
H7	Social Movement Effectiveness $\rightarrow$ Public Awareness $\rightarrow$ Policy & Legislative Change	0.111	0.028	3.964	<0.001	[0.059, 0.169]	Partial mediation	Supported
H8	Social Movement Effectiveness $\rightarrow$ Political Responsiveness $\rightarrow$ Policy & Legislative Change	0.094	0.025	3.760	<0.001	[0.048, 0.146]	Partial mediation	Supported
H9	Social Movement Effectiveness $\rightarrow$ Public Awareness $\rightarrow$ Political Responsiveness $\rightarrow$ Policy & Legislative Change	0.084	0.019	4.421	<0.001	[0.049, 0.124]	Sequential mediation	Supported

Note: β = standardised indirect effect; STDEV = standard deviation; CI = confidence interval. Indirect effects were evaluated using 5,000 bootstrap resamples.

Table 7 focuses on the moderating effect of digital activism in the association between social movement effectiveness and public awareness. The interaction term between social movement effectiveness and digital activism is positive and statistically significant ($\beta = 0.126$, $t = 3.231$, $p = 0.001$, 95% CI: [0.050, 0.202]). This discovery confirms H10 and suggests that digital activism enhances social movements' capacity to raise public awareness. The R^2 values of the models before and after the addition of the interaction term were 0.352 and 0.368, respectively, suggesting that the interaction effect contributed to the prediction of the models, although this effect itself was relatively small ($f^2 = 0.027$). The discovery indicates that social movements that are present in a digitally connected environment might receive a larger attention and visibility than those that are mobilised predominantly through traditional mobilisation mechanisms. Therefore, digital platforms can be said to serve as an enabler and reinforce the awareness creation potential of social movements in Malaysia.

Table 7. Moderation Analysis of Digital Activism

Hypothesis	Moderating Path	β	STDEV	T-value	P-value	95% CI	R^2	ΔR^2	f^2	Decision
H10	Social Movement Effectiveness $\times$ Digital Activism $\rightarrow$ Public Awareness	0.126	0.039	3.231	0.001	[0.050, 0.202]	0.368	0.016	0.027	Supported

Table 8 presents the results of the hypothesis testing regarding the explanatory power, predictive relevance and the overall results of the structural model. According to the model, 36.8% of the variance in public awareness, 28.7% of the variance in political responsiveness and 54.1% of the variance in policy and legislative change can be explained. The somewhat high R² value for policy and legislative change suggests that the social movement effectiveness, public awareness and political responsiveness, together, explain a significant amount of the final result. The Q² values for public awareness, political responsiveness and policy and legislative change are all positive, suggesting that the model has predictive relevance of the endogenous constructs. In addition, support for all ten hypotheses is found at the empirical level, both direct, mediation, sequential mediation and moderation. The findings in general offer solid empirical evidence for the suggested conceptual framework and suggest that the effectiveness of social movements can impact policy and legislative outcomes directly and indirectly, and that digital activism can strengthen social movements' capacity to raise public awareness.

Table 8. Explanatory Power, Predictive Relevance and Overall Hypothesis Testing

Endogenous Construct / Hypothesis	Relationship or Construct	R ²	Adjusted R ²	Q ²	β / Effect	P-value	Decision
Public Awareness	Explained by SME and SME × DA	0.368	0.361	0.241	—	—	Moderate explanatory power
Political Responsiveness	Explained by SME and PA	0.287	0.284	0.196	—	—	Moderate explanatory power
Policy & Legislative Change	Explained by SME, PA and PR	0.541	0.536	0.389	—	—	Substantial explanatory power
H1	SME → PA	—	—	—	0.482	<0.001	Supported
H2	SME → PR	—	—	—	0.216	<0.001	Supported
H3	SME → PLC	—	—	—	0.174	<0.001	Supported
H4	PA → PR	—	—	—	0.398	<0.001	Supported
H5	PA → PLC	—	—	—	0.231	<0.001	Supported
H6	PR → PLC	—	—	—	0.436	<0.001	Supported
H7	SME → PA → PLC	—	—	—	0.111	<0.001	Supported
H8	SME → PR → PLC	—	—	—	0.094	<0.001	Supported
H9	SME → PA → PR → PLC	—	—	—	0.084	<0.001	Supported
H10	SME × DA → PA	—	—	—	0.126	0.001	Supported

5. Discussions

The results of this research show empirical evidence of the ability of social movements to make a meaningful contribution towards policy reforms and changes in legislation in Malaysia. The model shows that the effectiveness of the social movement exerts a positive and significant impact on public awareness, political responsiveness and policy and legislative change. The results also indicate that public awareness and political responsiveness can be important mediation processes and that digital activism further enhances the connection between social movement effectiveness and public awareness. Overall, these results indicate that the impact of social movements is not solely direct and is not confined to protest action alone. Instead, the movements can influence institutional outcomes by engaging a process of making the movement visible to the public, raising political pressure, and inducing institutional action through collective mobilisation.

The strong positive correlation between the effectiveness of social movement and public awareness lends credence to H1, which aligns with the theoretical argument that social movements can alter public agenda through introducing previously ignored issues to the public. Amenta and Polletta (2019) stress the importance of cultural impact of social movements in reshaping the understanding and discussion of social issues. The present

results add to this discussion since they illustrate that citizens' perceived effectiveness of movement is positively related to their awareness of social and policy issues. Effective movement communication can mobilise citizens and draw the attention of the public, thereby raising the visibility and salience of specific issues. This is also aligned with Amenta et al. (2018) who view social movements as actors which aim to affect political processes and institutions through collective mobilisation. The outcome points towards the possibility that the ability of movements to influence the understanding of the public may form an integral first step towards the political implications of collective action in the Malaysian context.

The positive relationship between effectiveness of the SM and political responsiveness is supported by H2. This discovery suggests that social mobilisation can facilitate the political actors and government institutions to identify and respond to the demands of the public. This finding is aligned with the political process view of Amenta et al. (2018) that stressed the role of institutions and politics in the outcome of movements. A political cost for the policymakers can occur because the social movements can bring an issue to the forefront of public attention, thus creating incentives for political actors to respond to movement demands. Similarly, Somma and Medel (2017) illustrate how the connection between social movements and institutional politics can change over time, as movements are likely to be more involved in formal political processes. Based on the present finding, it is possible to conclude that social movements in Malaysia can act as an external source of political pressure and at the same time provide political opportunity for civil society to interact with political institutions.

One of the main findings of the study, and in accordance with H3, is that the effectiveness of social movements is a major direct factor in determining policy and legislative change. This finding is in line with Amenta, Caren and Stobaugh (2012) showing that social movements can help bring about political reform and shape the historical paths of political change. It also corresponds with the argument of Amenta et al. (2018) that movements seek to influence not only public opinion but also concrete political institutions, processes and outcomes. The finding indicates that with sufficient collective mobilisation, the political pressure is able to have an impact on the political agenda and legislative processes. Importantly, this influence was still present after adding public awareness and political responsiveness to the model, suggesting that social movements can impact policy in other ways that are not directly addressed in this article.

The positive influence of public attention on political responsiveness confirms H4 and offers proof for an important relationship between public attention and institutional response. The role of raising awareness can make policy issues salient to citizens, the media and political actors, and thus enhance the political salience of movement demands. Amenta and Polletta (2019) contend that cultural and interpretive shifts that movements produce can be far-reaching political consequences. The current research elaborates this argument by offering an empirical route by which awareness can have an impact on political responsiveness. If a social problem becomes known and talked about, it might be easier for policy makers to feel pressure to recognise the problem and provide solutions to the public's wants. The finding is especially significant in the current scenario of Malaysia where public communication is more and more being taken place at both traditional and digital platforms.

There is a strong link between public awareness and policy and legislative change, which supports H5. This indicates that awareness is not just an attitudinal product, but can have actual institutional outcomes. As people learn about social issues, policy solutions, and legislation, they can be better equipped to seek policy changes and challenge government actions. This finding aligns with Amenta and Polletta's (2019) cultural impact lens and the politics-outcomes umbrella of Amenta et al. (2018). It also accounts for why movements may invest significant resources in framing, communication and public education, even when it seems as though the legislation is not likely to be enacted in the near

future. They can contribute to the social and political environment in which policy change is more likely to occur through creation of long-term awareness.

There is a strong direct link between political responsiveness and policy and legislative change (H6) in the structural model. The path coefficient of 0.436 shows that political responsiveness has a significant role in the process of social demands being translated into formal policy outcomes. The institutional perspective posited by Amenta et al. (2018) that the outcomes of movement are partly caused by the response to movement demands by the political institutions, is consistent with this finding. It is also in line with studies such as Cummings (2018) which stress the relationship between social movements and law change and McCammon and McGrath (2015) who show how legal institutions can be brought into play by social movements in order to achieve change. The discovery is further proof that mere mobilisation does not ensure reform. Institutions are essential to the process of policy and legislative change, as they are the institutions that recognise, process and respond to society's demands.

The findings from the mediations offer additional clues to the processes through which social movements and policy and legislative change are related. H7 is supported because public awareness plays a significant role in the link between social movement effectiveness and policy and legislative change. One of the reasons that social movements affect outcomes is that the movements initially change the information landscape of social issues. Movements can make certain issues more salient, foster the public discourse and exert pressure for institutional response by raising awareness. This discovery fits well with Amenta and Polletta's (2019) claim that movements can have cultural impacts beyond their political agenda. Reflects the possibility that policy implications of social movements may be manifested in shifts in perceptions and salience.

This is also seen in the support for H8, which shows that political responsiveness is a variable that exists between the effectiveness of a social movement and policy and legislative change. This finding in itself is significant, as it suggests that political institutions are important in transmitting collective mobilisation and formal policy outcomes. Demands can be created within social movements, but demands have to confront political institutions for them to be translated into policy and legislation. The result is consistent with movement outcomes literature, especially Amenta et al. (2018) which highlights institutional processes as an important variable in the outcomes of movements. It also confirms Somma and Medel's (2017) claim that the link between movements and institutional politics can develop through interaction and the emergence of new political opportunities.

H9 was supported by the significant sequential mediation effect, which is also an important contribution of the study. The notion of the pathway from the effectiveness of social movements to public awareness, to political responsiveness, to policy and legislative change implies that influence takes time and that it is cumulative. That is, movements can first make an issue salient and comprehensible to the public; this can produce greater political motivation for change on the part of policymakers; and this can lead to the formal policy or legislative change. This finding offers an integrated explanation of the influence of movement that incorporates the cultural and institutional explanations that are highlighted in the literature. It is also in line with the idea of Anria, Garay and Rich (2026) that the policy implications of social movements should be seen as multiple pathways and not simply a direct link between mobilisation and policy.

The result of the positive moderation of the relationship between social movement effectiveness and public awareness shows that H10 is supported. The awareness-generating capacity of social movements is strengthened by digital activism, which is reflected in the positive interaction coefficient. This is especially significant in the context of today's social movements, as the ability to spread information quickly, to organize mass action, to target geographically diverse populations and to keep the public's attention through digital means, can all be important factors in the success of a movement. While not conceptualising digital activism as a formal 'moderator', the studies included in the theoretical foundation all focus on movement communication, cultural influence, mobilisation

and institutional engagement, which helps to understand the reasons why digitally enabled movements might be more visible. Digital activism in the Malaysian sense can thus be seen as an empowering enabler that enhances the communicative and mobilisation power of social movements.

The results also have significant implications for the understanding of the relationship between social movements and formal political institutions. As Lima (2019) warns, the presence of social movements in participatory governance processes does not necessarily mean that they are influencing the process. The current results indirectly reinforce this concern in that they demonstrate the importance of political responsiveness as a key pathway to actual policy and legislative outcomes. Political institutions can be unresponsive, and public awareness and mobilisation can lead to a lot of social discussion but little institutional effects. In a similar vein, Gillooly (2020) shows how the institutionalisation of social movements can transform their relation with political structures. Constructive institutional responsiveness may thus be crucial for translating social mobilisation into lasting policy results and in sustaining civil society's ability to voice society's demands as the Malaysian findings indicate.

The results regarding policy/legislative change are also aligned with the literature on movement influence continuing beyond the initial policy/legislative change. Spalding (2023) highlights how movements can continue to have an impact on policy implementation, and Suh (2014) illustrates how the success of a policy can shape what comes next for a social movement and for institutions of politics. This indicates that policy reforms cannot be considered as the last step of social mobilisation. Movements can keep tracking implementation of a policy or law, promoting additional changes and/or contesting unanticipated effects. Hence, the positive relationship observed in the current study should be interpreted as a process of continuous interaction between civil society and political institutions rather than a one-off change.

The results also lend weight to the view of a non-exclusive movement influence on legislation. Amenta et al. (2018) separate various political institutions, processes and outcomes that movements can affect, while Cummings (2018) and McCammon and McGrath (2015) illustrate that legal change can be achieved in a variety of institutional ways. Thus, the policy and legislative change construct in the current study is a more comprehensive understanding of institutional change. In the Malaysian context, social movements might try to make changes by revising a policy, by taking steps to change the administration, by going through the legislative process in parliament, by engaging with the law or by changing how a policy is implemented. This diversity further supports the notion that social movements are actors that act in various institutional arenas.

Theoretically, the results lend support for an integrated explanation of social movement consequences. The importance of social movement effectiveness is a representation of resource mobilisation arguments, and public awareness is an expression of cultural arguments. Political process arguments are reflected in the importance of political responsiveness, and the institutional literature on law and policy is reflected in the ultimate outcome of policy and legislative change. The results revealed a significant sequential mediation pathway, which means that these are not mutually exclusive explanations. Rather, they can be combined into one process, whereby movement capacity leads to awareness, which in turn leads to political pressure, which in turn leads to the responsiveness of political institutions and finally, to policy and legislative outcomes.

The findings have a number of practical implications for the Malaysian policy makers and civil society organisations. Policymakers need to see social movements as a possible source of policy information, not as a source of political pressure or opposition. Worthwhile consultation processes can help governments recognise social issues when they are first developing. Secondly, civil society organisations must not just mobilise, but educate the public, advocate with evidence and continue to communicate as this seems to be a key pathway to policy influence. Third, government institutions need to improve the mechanisms for responding transparently to legitimate demands of the public. Lastly, the

positive effect of digital activism shows that both movements and public institutions should be aware of how to communicate digitally to enable informed and inclusive public engagement.

On the whole, the results show that while social movements in Malaysia have a great influence in the process of policy change and legislative change, it is a combination of mobilisation, awareness creation and institutional responsiveness that enables these social movements to become influential. The most robust pathway in the study is through political responsiveness and the sequential mediation results show that awareness can facilitate and reinforce institutional response. Against this backdrop, digital activism also increases the potential of movements to spread awareness to the public. The results are important to the existing literature on social movements, which has been limited to answering the question of whether or not social movements lead to political change, and offering an explanation of how social mobilisation can be translated into policy and legislation. In doing so, the study points to the necessity of an “open, responsive and digitally connected political landscape” to transform “collective social demands into meaningful institutional reform.”

6. Conclusions

The study was an examination of the effects of social movements on policy reforms and legislative change in Malaysia, using an integrated framework that combines social movement effectiveness, public awareness, political responsiveness, digital activism and policy/legislative changes. The findings help to offer strong empirical evidence that social movements do have a significant effect on formal policy outcomes. Social movements do not only act as tools of protest or public dissent, they can also have an impact on the policy process through raising public awareness, stimulating political reaction and contributing directly to policy and legislation.

Results reveal that effectiveness of social movements can be expected to have a significant positive impact on public awareness, political responsiveness and policy/legislative change. This reinforces the fact that what mobilises more, communicates well, and involves citizens more is more likely to have political and institutional consequences. The results echo a wider literature on social movements that highlights how social movements can impact political institutions, public discourse, and policy processes (Amenta et al., 2018; Amenta & Polletta, 2019). The results thus support the notion that collective mobilisation can become a significant strategy of institutional change when groups are able to transform social issues into politically salient issues.

One of the significance of the study is that it identifies mechanisms by which social movements can impact on policy outcomes. Political responsiveness has a significant mediating role, as does public awareness, between the effectiveness of a social movement and policy and legislative change. More significantly, the sequential mediation pathway points to how the effectiveness of social movements can impact the awareness of the public, that enhanced public awareness can, in turn, positively affect political responsiveness, and that greater political responsiveness can, in turn, help pave the way for policy and legislative change. This finding suggests that movement influence needs to be viewed as a process, not a direct mobilisation/reform causal link.

Digital activism and its relevance in today's social mobilisation is also highlighted in the study. The role of significant moderating effect suggests that digital activism contributes to the intensity of the relationship between the effectiveness of social movements and the public's awareness. Digital platforms thus can help social movements to increase their communication, visibility and mobilisation capacity. In the Malaysian context, this implies that the influence of social movements is being more and more mediated not only by traditional collective action, but also by their capacities to function within digitally-mediated public spaces.

The study makes a theoretical contribution by combining the cultural, mobilisation and institutional approaches in a single empirical analysis. Public awareness is the

cultural and communicative aspect of movement influence, social movement effectiveness is the mobilisation capacity, political responsiveness is the institutional response and policy and legislative change is the ultimate political outcome. The important direct and indirect relationships indicate that these dimensions are interconnected. This integrated perspective follows other studies that have found how movements can impact political institutions, legal systems, policy implementation and broader cultural understandings (Amenta et al., 2018; Cummings, 2018; McCammon & McGrath, 2015; Spalding, 2023).

The results also have significant public policy implications for Malaysia. Government institutions need to acknowledge and accept the role of legitimate social movements in policy learning and democratic governance. While there are no guarantees that concerns of the society will be addressed prior to their escalation into full-blown political conflicts, institutionalized processes for consultation, public debate and stakeholder engagement could provide the space for this to happen. Meanwhile, civil society organisations need to intensify their evidence-based advocacy, public communication and digital engagement. Increased institutional responses can allow for the legitimate demands of social mobilisation to be translated into constructive policy discussion and change, if applicable.

However, the study has a few drawbacks. The empirical analysis is cross-sectional and hence does not allow for an adequate temporal causal analysis of the social mobilisation and the policy change. Additionally, evaluations of the effectiveness of social movements, public awareness and political response are also based on the perceptions of the respondents, which can create common-method and/or subjective-response bias. Moreover, the findings in Malaysia are not directly generalizable to other contexts where they might be applied due to the political and institutional situation in Malaysia. Future studies might draw on longitudinal designs to assess the impact of specific movements on specific policy changes over time; a mix of survey and objective measures of legislative change; and comparative designs with other Southeast Asian countries.

Future research may also explore if there are differential policy consequences of various social movements. Different institutional opportunities or constraints may be observed for movements on environmental protection, gender equality, labour rights, corruption, ethnic issues or democratic reform. Likewise, future studies might be able to separate online from offline mobilisation and look at whether digital activism leads to long-term structural shifts or mainly to a greater short-term public visibility. Qualitative case studies might also further support the current quantitative results to show how the movement demands become part of policy agendas and parliamentary debates and legislative processes in specific steps.

Declarations

Ethics and Guidelines: The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki. The ethical approval specifically covers the research procedures and data collection activities conducted for this study.

Consent to participate: Written informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. Consent was obtained using a standardized written form, signed by each participant before participation in the survey.

Consent to publish: The authors have provided consent to publish.

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