

## **Looking Back at Malaysia's GE2008: An Internet Election and Its Democratic Aftermath**

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### **Abstract**

Prior to 2008, alternative news sources were already established and exerted influence on the political process. They broadened the variety of topics reported, increased informed participation in political culture and presented political alternatives. However, after Malaysia's 12<sup>th</sup> general election in 2008, the Internet emerged as a major new player in the socio-political landscape. The impact of the Internet, in particular the influence of the Independent News Portal (INP), *malaysiakini.com*, was seen as being partly responsible for changes in Malaysia's political landscape. Thereafter, the Internet's role as 'an agent of political change' became the subject of much debate and controversy in Malaysia. The question of the Internet's influence is especially relevant given that alternative media sources were predicted to exert an even greater impact on the 2013 general election (GE2013). This article explores the influence of alternative news sources and examines the concept of the 'Internet election' with reference to two international examples. It contextualises public debate about the issues and controversies of the 2008 election coverage, and its aftermath, through the perspective of local media practitioners and election observers. The findings are revealing of the distinctive impact of Malaysia's independent online news sources. The article argues that the democratisation of information has the potential to encourage new forms of democratic participation and to have a significant impact on political culture.

**Keywords:** Internet election, Independent Internet Portal (INP), general election, political participation.

## Introduction

The Internet's role in Malaysia is widely recognised as sparking, in earnest, the development of the democratisation of information, as seen in its significant impact on the 12<sup>th</sup> General Election (Kensaku 2008; The Straits Times 2008; Ooi 2008; Stodden 2008; Steele 2009). Since 2008, independent news portals, blogs and social media platforms such as Facebook, have been seen as having the potential to increase broader and more diverse participation in political culture. The 12<sup>th</sup> General Election was described as a 'political tsunami' for the Barisan Nasional (BN), which turned in what was thought to be its worst performance in electoral history (Asli 2009; Star 2008). Since 2008, the BN's downward trend has continued. The idea of a 'tsunami,' an unstoppable force that overwhelms and destroys, has proven to be an accurate characterisation of political participation in Malaysia. Increased information flows have created stronger democratic and oppositional forces. As a result, in 2008, the ruling regime lost almost two-thirds of its majority in Parliament along with control over five of eleven states. Moreover, the 13<sup>th</sup> general election, held on May 5, 2013, saw an increased voter participation of over 80% (Hsu 2013), with the BN again losing more of its share of the overall national vote. At the time of writing, a few days after the 13<sup>th</sup> general election, it appears that the ruling party is confronting a possible challenge to the election result from the opposition. Allegations of corruption in electoral processes arose before GE2013 and protest rallies about this issue were held the week after the election results were announced.

The BN government, in common with its predecessors – multiparty coalitions that have been in power since Malaysia's independence in 1957, rules within a democratic system that is loosely adapted from the Westminster parliamentary system and that is inherited from Malaysia's colonial history. The Constitution guarantees certain rights to the Malay population and establishes Islam as the official religion. Furthermore, the government prioritises the interests of its majority Malay population and upholds Islamic judicial traditions. While freedom of religion is guaranteed under the Constitution, freedom of expression, on the other hand, is tightly controlled. This is particularly the case with the government-owned mainstream print such as *UtU.S.A.n Malaysia* and broadcast media such as *Radio Television Malaysia*. Legislation controlling all media content, such as the controversial Internal Security Act (ISA), which is about to be replaced, and the Printing Presses and Publication Act (PPPA), restrict information and the free circulation of opinions; rights that are characteristic of democracies. Consequently, Malaysia is not seen as a full democracy but rather a 'quasi-democracy,' 'flawed democracy' or 'semi-democracy.'

Despite a lengthy, authoritarian period in power, the BN is not without strong and vocal opponents. When Anwar Ibrahim, the former deputy Prime Minister was sacked in 1998 and sent to prison on charges widely regarded as spurious, he became the focus of political attention on emerging Internet blogs and in the foreign press. Although the Internet's political uses were at an early stage of development, their existence was a factor in the formation of the *reformasi*, a broad issues-based movement advocating change in many aspects of Malaysian life, led by Anwar. Despite agitation for change and better conditions in the country, Abbott's conclusions (2004) suggest that the *reformasi* had not yet gained sufficient momentum to bring about the desired changes from the government.

General elections, one of the essential components of democracy, are held every five years in Malaysia. After GE2004, there were signs that the voting public had a desire for change. It is no

coincidence that in 2007 – a year that saw mass rallies by the Hindu Rights Action Force (Hindraf), demanding Indian ethnic rights, and the Coalition for Free and Fair Elections (Bersih 1.0), demanding electoral reforms – Internet penetration had significantly increased, especially in urban areas.<sup>1</sup> For the first time in the nation's electoral history, therefore, the Internet impacted on election results, and it came to be seen as a new agent in the country's political landscape; one that gave a communicative power to *reformasi* and minority groups. *Malaysiakini.com*, in particular, was able to provide a platform for those seeking alternative information. *Malaysiakini.com* is a popular Internet portal for news media formed by an independent group of individuals, including former mainstream journalists, frustrated with the restrictions on mainstream reporting. The site exerted an even stronger influence by the time of the 2008 election. The role of the INP *malaysiakini.com* was recognised at the time due to significant differences in its coverage of national political issues. Conversely, mainstream and government-owned media were seen as less successful (*The Straits Times* 2008) due to the restrictions imposed on them by government ownership that resulted in a pro-BN agenda.

Research on GE2008 has raised a number of questions about the nature of relations between the press, the government, and movements for social change in recent years. This article looks back at GE2008, building on previous research on the subject such as Abbott's work on democratisation (2004), Steele (2009), who emphasised *malaysiakini.com*'s promotion of democratic discourse and challenge to the ruling BN party, and Rajaratnam (2009), who compared the news coverage of *malaysiakini.com* with *The Star* on election issues during GE2008. This article's primary focus is the Internet's political potential for strengthening democracy and increasing political participation in Malaysia. It aims to define the term 'Internet election,' as it refers to the Malaysian experience, and to consider its impact. The study is partly based on statements of media practitioners – both INP and mainstream journalists – who participated in the 2008 election coverage, gathering the post-election reflections of election journalists on their understanding of the Internet's impact.

### **The Democratising Potential of the Internet**

Since the mid-1990s, scholarly observers have predicted that the Internet would play a unique role as a tool that promotes democratisation and political transformation, particularly in the context of regimes that control oppositional or divergent voices by imposing restrictions on free speech (Grossman 1995; Perrit 1998; Barber 1998-99; Abbott 2001). In countries where freedom of speech is fiercely guarded, the Internet has provided citizens, civil society movements, and opposition political parties with more influence and access to the public sphere, thus demonstrating convincingly that democratic diversity of opinion can exist and that the governments can change hands peacefully through fair electoral processes. As a commentator (Perrit 1998) argued while the Internet was still in its infancy, the Internet not only performs as a communication channel but also as a medium for political changes and regime transformation.

Dutton and Lin (2001) argue that the widespread diffusion of the Internet and highly publicised Internet events, such as the 1999 web-orchestrated protests at the World Trade Organization (WTO) in Seattle, and Howard Dean's unsuccessful web-centred campaign for the Democratic

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<sup>1</sup> Bersih was organised by an NGO coalition demanding electoral reform; Hindraf emerged out of Indian ethnic groups' dissatisfaction with racially based policy. The rallies added to public anger when media coverage detailed incidents of demolished temples and the detention of Hindraf protesters under the Internal Security Act (ISA).

Party's United States primary elections in 2003, demonstrate that Internet technologies have transformed into instruments that can be used to increase political participation. The so-called 'Arab Spring,' a series of protests and demonstrations across the Middle East and North African countries in 2012, shows that the Internet, particularly its social media platforms, were capable of raising awareness about the state of repression, corruption and censorship in diverse regimes (Howard 2011). More confrontational phenomena, which are enabled by Internet platforms, include mobilised civil resistances, strikes, demonstrations, marches and rallies. Mobilised conflict elsewhere arose with citizens' demands and lack of government reforms on human rights issues, corruption, declining economic, poverty, and youth unemployment. An increasing number of Internet-savvy youth in these countries are credited with being responsible for forcing change through the so-called 'youth quake,' which sees autocrats and monarchies as 'anachronisms' (Reverchon & de Tricornot 2011).

The extent to which the Internet is used for political discourse and expression varies between countries and depends in large measure on the limits and controls set by the state. Existing surveys show that the Internet has enhanced political discourse in the U.K. and U.S. (Hansard Society 2010; Rainie & Smith 2008), by increasing online political participation. The Internet can, for instance, be used for mobilising party supporters, gathering volunteers, as a tool of political marketing strategies during campaigning periods and for e-voting. Significant changes among citizens and political candidates using the Internet for political campaigning have led some to refer to the sum of these experiences as 'Internet elections.' The concept of 'Internet elections' is found in multiple sources such as Pew Research Center's Internet & American Life Project (2004 & 2008) and Hansard Society's Audit of Political Engagement (2010). The Internet can displace traditional forms of campaigning style, communication, fund-raising and other electoral activities, as is demonstrated later in this article with regard to the U.S. and U.K. First, however, it is important to describe the specific conditions of the media landscape in Malaysia, with a focus on alternative online news portals.

Prior to the development of online news media, mainstream media consisted of print and broadcast media owned or influenced by the BN government and its inner circle. For many years, the credibility of Malaysia's mainstream media has been in doubt due its perceived failure to cover news items that are critical or hostile towards the BN government; issues pertaining, for instance, to alleged nepotism, cronyism, corruption and the political elite's business activities (Ho, Kluver & Yang 2003). In Malaysia, mainstream media consistently report 'good news about government leaders and cooperation between ethnicities while promoting a single national identity,' to summarise scholarly comment (Lent 1979; Sani 2005). Furthermore, media is considered a tool for national unity (Khattab 2008). In contrast, *malaysiakini.com* became a distribution platform for alternative interpretations and commentary on government actions in 2008, and for criticism of government failures and weaknesses.

### **Malaysia's Media Landscape**

Part of the reason for the popularity of alternative news can be illustrated by the following anecdote, which highlights key operating differences between the independent journalists and those of the mainstream media. When key states were lost to the opposition and the BN's majority collapsed in 2008, the mainstream media representatives had to wait for the official election

results to be announced by the government spokesman. Meanwhile, their colleagues at *malaysiakini.com* were already reporting the results to their subscribers. Live news updates were posted by university students, citizen journalists and volunteers trained by the portal. Consequently, world news sources such as *Channel News Asia*, *Al-Jazeera* and the BBC relayed the 2008 electoral results according to early *malaysiakini.com* reports. Thus, *malaysiakini.com* played a prominent early role as a recognised and authoritative news provider and authentic interpreter of election results, while mainstream news personnel were hampered by traditional time-bound news reporting schedules and the old-established way of operating alongside, rather than independently, of the government.

It is significant that during the 2008 poll campaign, *malaysiakini.com* had the highest numbers of paid online subscribers. Moreover, its daily page hits nearly tripled in July 2008 and it became the most visited INP in Malaysia (Alexa.com 2008). *Malaysiakini.com* also received attention and international recognition and acclaim for its independent reporting (Wong 2001; Nain 2002; Plate 2001). By contrast, mainstream media outlets appeared to be losing their credibility because of their perceived pro-government stance (Chin 2003), and mainstream news websites, such as *thestar.com*, did not see any significant increase in traffic.

Another factor that accounts for the success of *malaysiakini.com* is the relative urban-to-rural distribution of Internet penetration rates. The Malaysia Communication Multimedia Commission (MCMC) figures reveal that Internet penetration in the country's urban areas was relatively high at 85.3% in 2008. In the same report, Internet penetration was only 14.7% in rural areas. High urban Internet penetration in 2008 may be a significant factor in explaining the substantial growth in readership for alternative news, as coverage of political issues not reported elsewhere is most likely to appeal to the interests of city-dwellers. Parenthetically, big cities, such as Shah Alam in the Selangor state, had the highest subscribers for *malaysiakini.com* at the time (Alexa.com 2008).

However, rural areas have also been exposed to the influence of alternative media. This is mostly thanks to Section 3 of the Internet Law – ‘No Censorship of the Internet’ – in the MSC Communication and Multimedia Act of 1998 that commits to the liberal governance of the Internet. This allowed opinion leaders critical of the government and the opposition to disseminate content from *malaysiakini.com* to rural areas. They did this by circulating political pamphlets and reproducing *malaysiakini.tv*'s videos on important events. Notable examples came in the form of the video compact discs such as *A Cry for Royal Help* and *Hard Questions, No Answers*, which were widely distributed to areas where Internet access was poor or non-existent.

*Malaysiakini.com* has long since had the reputation for promoting ‘greater transparency and public accountability in Malaysia via new communication technology’ (Tong 2004). It has since become recognised as an agent of democratic change through its upholding of a more independent journalistic ideology that contrasts with the country's dominant ‘development journalism’ approach. Researchers have recognised the online newspaper as an exemplar of its form (Chin 2003) and as a blueprint for encouraging democratic civic discourse (Steele 2009). *Malaysiakini.com* is also known for investigative reporting or ‘contentious journalism’ (George 2006).

After 2008, *malaysiakini.com* remains the main alternative news medium and continues to grow its networking potential among civil society movements, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), university students, the middle classes and opposition group leaders. Even government journalists turn to it for breaking news. Subscription statistics reveal nearly 5000 visitors daily (Alexa.com 2012). The portal's varied opinion and editorial content has been designed to encourage engagement in online political participation, through channels such as *Video Testimonies by Citizen Journalists* (cj.my) and *malaysiakini.tv*, as well as the 'Letters,' 'Column' and 'YourSay/Vox Populi' features. These allow people to post information and to exchange ideas, and they improve website popularity, thus increasing return visits.

### **The Question of 'Internet Elections'**

Scholars have defined an 'Internet election' as the strategies employed by political candidates and parties to achieve more favourable electoral outcomes through use of the Internet. This definition includes online campaigning, web-based applications, as well as other ways in which the Internet drives electoral results, or has an impact on the media's political agenda. Parsons considers that an 'Internet election depends on the numbers influenced by the Internet' (2010: 1). This criterion seems to privilege the practices in western democracies with organised political parties and good-to-excellent connectivity.

Sen (2010) argues that the 'Internet election' is a 'hyper-partisan' activity that occurs among the Internet community during a campaigning period. Sen also notes the importance of blogs, online news, and the ability to observe those who are actively engaged online during the period, have the potential to speed up political discourse, and create faster news cycles, broadening diversity in political opinion. Williams and Tedesco (2006) define the Internet election based on perspectives of the United States Presidential elections. They argue that the notion of the 'Internet election' can be tracked through the growth of online news consumption and other Internet uses by political parties, candidates and the public during the campaign period. An 'Internet election' can also be defined by its revolutionary features and by the ability of committed users to interact and mobilise in chat rooms, through email, forums, meet-ups and blogs during a campaign. Two examples, the U.S. in 2008 and the U.K. in 2010 are provided to illustrate particular definitions of the 'Internet election.' The Malaysian elections will then be discussed in relation to these two examples. It should be noted that the U.S. 2004 Presidential election, despite its failure to deliver results for Howard Dean, sparked a truly global debate on Internet elections.

### **United States (2008)**

The 2008 United States Presidential election was the first example of a modern political campaign to use social media and to develop innovative ways of reaching new targets in the voting population. Barack Obama used a low cost and efficient method of campaigning with his website, *my.BarackObama.com* (Lyons 2008) to mobilise voters, increase Democrat participation and engagement, raise campaign funds and recruit campaign volunteers. His campaign was heavily reliant on social media strategies to connect and persuade younger voters and to encourage democratic participation. This election became known as a 'social media election' (Hesseldahl, MacMillan & Kharif 2008), where platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, and Flickr provided voters opportunities to share their experiences with photos and videos. The grassroots approach and social media engagement also helped voters get a wider range of information about

candidates and political parties' position on certain issues. In 2008, voters monitored online videos and followed social media movements, which broadcast their own thoughts on political candidates and electoral processes. Pew Internet & American Life Project (2008) indicated that 46% out of 309,842,000 of U.S. population used the Internet for getting information about campaigns, used email to discuss campaign related matters, and social networking for getting political news and sharing their views. Thus, the Internet was utilised in various ways to mobilise support from voters and to increase Americans' participation in democracy.

### **United Kingdom (2010)**

The U.K. experienced an 'Internet election' on 6 May 2010 (White 2010; Dale 2010; Tall 2010). It was so named because of the increased use of social networking websites in the campaign period, as well as the use of Twitter and Facebook by political parties. The party websites proved capable of generating increased political participation. For instance, Nick Clegg's Facebook page reached nearly 70,000 fans before the television debates and other independent Facebook groups formed with great success (Tall 2010). Moreover, membership of the Liberal Democratic Party increased to 160,000 within a few weeks. New campaign techniques were also employed using Facebook, with pages providing links to political parties' websites and the Electoral Commission for voter registration. Twitter became a popular way to broadcast supporters' comments (Jones 2010), and younger voters (those between 18 and 24 years of age) used Twitter to engage in the campaign forums (YouGov.co.uk). In another notable example, more than 42,000 people followed Nick Clegg's Twitter feed. These examples indicate that U.K. political parties' were quick to adopt the communicative potential of the web, particularly in their political marketing strategies.

In the U.S. and U.K.'s 'Internet elections,' political parties actively, and opportunistically, used the Internet to communicate directly with the electorate, rather than going through the traditional channels and established mass media.

### **Malaysia (2008)**

In contrast to the U.S. and U.K., Malaysian's 2008 'Internet election' was characterised by civil society leadership's unrestricted and critical usage of independent news portals. Scholarly analyses and media reports of the 2008 election show that one of the most powerful factors in the unprecedented swing to the opposition was the provision of alternative Internet news platforms and discussion forums. The Internet thus provided Malaysians with a diversity of political coverage and a robust critique of the government. Distrust of the government and government-owned mainstream media was a powerful factor underpinning citizens' enthusiasm for alternative perspectives. Influential events such as the Hindraf and Bersih rallies (the latter demanding electoral reforms) in 2007, had not been reported accurately, and had been downplayed or ignored by mainstream media. Furthermore, government mishandling of these rallies – the police deployed tear gas and water cannons against demonstrators – aggravated the electorate and prepared the ground for popular resistance. The inadequate reporting of these events, due to the restrictions placed on broadcast and print media's coverage of events critical to the government, generated strong feelings among Malaysian protestors as well as those who were unhappy with the government for other reasons.

Discontent led to what has been called *kebangkitan rakyat* ('the rise of people') against the ruling party. A number of political factors, such as the government's lack of transparency, allegations of corruption, the heavy-handed crushing of oppositional movements and perceived media bias against the proponents of change, explain the surge in the anti-BN movement. However, the government's missteps were undoubtedly compounded by the increasing popularity of independent Internet news as a grass-roots medium. As online news is not subject to the same regulation as mainstream media, it can operate more speedily than time-bound print or broadcast media, as shown in the anecdote related earlier, and thus came to be regarded as a more first-hand, experience-based, accurate and current source of news.

Internet news portals benefit directly from a favourable regulatory environment. This is thanks to the Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC) initiative, which promotes Malaysia as a high-tech cyber-hub with only minimal regulation of the Internet. Citizen journalists and independent online news sites are the unexpected beneficiaries of this provision. Internet news sites do not require the annual permit applications that print news require and are therefore not so deferential to the BN. The growth of these portals is therefore due in large measure to the government's promise not to regulate the Internet. The former Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi commented on the political upset in the 2008 general election, attributing it to the Internet factor: 'We certainly lost the Internet war, the cyber-war. It was a serious misjudgement. We made the biggest mistake in thinking that it was not important' (Agence France-Presse, 24 March 2008).

In 2013, the increased number of INPs and blogs provide a sharp counterpoint to the state-influenced media. The government has largely kept its promise regarding direct censorship of the Internet, although INPs claim that media regulators have blocked and even closed down several websites during important events. The government's closing of controversial web portals is viewed as an attempt to curtail further online criticism. Many fear that closures could be expanded to other websites. This would be seen as a serious breach of the original contract but, as yet, has not been ruled out.

### **Journalists Look Back**

The research aim in the case study is to better understand the GE2008 period and its aftermath, through the opinions, perspectives and practical experiences of media practitioners and journalists from both the INP and mainstream media. In 2011, extensive interviews were conducted in 2011 with ten of Malaysia's media practitioners and journalists. Three years after the event, and after much public debate, the interviewees were able to provide in-depth and insightful individual reflections. The interviewees are leading figures in the country's media industry and all participated in the 2008 general election reporting process in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Respondents from the prominent INP and mainstream media discuss the practicalities of reporting and their experiences during the 2008 election campaign. The respondents are categorised according to numeric identifiers numbers to ensure anonymity. INP respondents are referred to as R1 to R5, and mainstream media journalists are categorised as R6 to R10.

### **Providing Further Context for the Interviews**

The surge in the popularity of Internet news in the Malaysian political landscape has been attributed to a widespread distrust of the mainstream media's coverage of political issues and



events. Mainstream media were seen to have reported issues related to ethnic privileges and government weaknesses (asiasentinel.com 2008; Gatsiounis 2008), among others, inaccurately and unsatisfactorily. One can even ask to what point the mainstream media's approach to covering politics contributed to the BN's poor electoral performance. After the 2008 general election, most of the mainstream media had headlines stating that the '(BN) government had won a simple majority in the 12<sup>th</sup> Malaysia's general election.' However, the also widely quoted the former prime minister's statement to a journalist, 'Why ask more questions? We have lost, we have lost.' This was posted in red as a headline, and used to impart the impression that the BN had lost its political authority, despite the overall results.

Thanks to the policy forbidding Internet censorship in Malaysia, citizens were able to watch all the ensuing street demonstrations on INPs. They could also observe first-hand how the BN ill-treated certain groups. For example, the public witnessed how authorities mishandled demonstrators that participated in the big rallies. Hundreds of images flooded *malaysiakini.com* and blogs, showing protesters with reddened eyes from chemicals, coughing, screaming, and running for safety. Mainstream media reports, on the other hand, tended to highlight how the demonstrations damaged the public infrastructure in the city of Kuala Lumpur and disrupted local businesses and trading. These facts can easily be substantiated, but the news agenda was clearly biased and determined from a political perspective.

Starting from 2007, minority ethnic groups began to manifest their dissatisfaction after the government was perceived to have mishandled significant cases related to religious matters. Among the country's population of 28,334,135 (Department of Statistics Malaysia 2010), the largest ethnic group is the Bumiputera/Malays/Indigenous (67.4%), followed by Chinese (24.6%), Indians (7.3%) and others (0.7%). Ethnicity and religious beliefs are highly correlated in Malaysia (Population and Housing Census, 2010). Race is a significant and divisive force in politics: political parties are ethnically based, and this also divides the population socio-politically. Since Malaysia is a multi-ethnic and multilingual society, tolerance and the need for unity keep the country in a tenuous equilibrium. However, Malaysian citizens are highly sensitive to matters concerning race and ethnicity.

### **Opposition on the Net**

The Internet was skilfully utilised by opposition parties to their advantage (Smeltzer & Lepawsky 2009), since the government respected its 'open Internet' promise. The fact that a number of bloggers became opposition Members of Parliament proved that the Internet could be successfully utilised to gain political advantage. Jeff Ooi, a political blogger and candidate from the opposition party, Democratic Action (DAP), won his parliamentary seat in the 2008 election along with other members of parliament, who are prominent bloggers. Political manifestos and tracts by activists and opposition parties were distributed on the Internet. Furthermore, their efforts to release them in the form of CDs for circulation in remote areas helped increase voter participation. Some of the political campaign events were instantly reported on the INPs and political blogs. For instance, *malaysiatoday.com* covered the Bersih rally, which demanded clean and fair elections. *Malaysiatoday.com* described the rally in a detailed account under the heading, 'Walkers are Gathering in Hundreds near Jalan Melayu – Malaya Road Gate' (2008). It should be stated that the site was blocked at 3.30 p.m. on 10 November 2007 (the day of the rally) by the government, although reports were available later that day.

Civil society movements have been subject to tighter control after the opposition increased its share in the 2008 vote. At present, the Internet is seen as a medium for free speech and a challenge or threat to the BN. On the other hand, INP readership outstrips mainstream media readership (Voice of America 2008). Kaufman (2008) states that in 2008, blogs, text messages and streamed videos became the most influential information for Malaysians, with 70% of voters influenced by blogs (bernama.com 2008). Ultimately, it can be argued that the ruling regime underestimated the Internet's potential, and that if it had been more technology savvy, the outcome of the election could have been different. For instance, the BN's only launched its own website, *bn2008.org.my*, two weeks prior to the election.

GE2008 was the first election where the Malaysians witnessed political campaigning via websites. Opposition leaders' personal websites such as *limkitsiang.com*, from the Democratic Action Party (DAP) and *anwaribrahim.com*, from the Pakatan Rakyat Party-PKR are closely followed by voters. In contrast, the BN government was seen as having taken a 'sledgehammer' approach (Moten 2009), employing traditional methods such as billboards and posters focused on BN's achievements, with the slogan 'Security, Peace and Prosperity.' Moten states the BN bought 1,100 full pages of colour ads in mainstream print media in order to attract voters. Overall, Malaysia's political parties and candidates used a mixture of traditional and contemporary campaigning methods in the 2008 election, with posters, political rallies, small group discussions (*ceramah*) and door-to-door efforts. In remote areas, Internet campaigning and text messages via mobile phones were used. By contrast, with 93% of Internet subscribers concentrated in urban areas by 2005 (Zaitun & Crump 2005), the Internet was undoubtedly the most persuasive communication tool among urban dwellers, younger voters and internet-literate voters (Mohamad 2008).

## **Interview Data**

### **Respondents on GE2008 as an 'Internet Election'**

Most respondents from both INPs and mainstream media agreed that the 2008 general election was an 'Internet election' because of the increased flow of online information. Key figures were involved with INPs and the dissemination of relevant and influential political information and views online. For instance, respondent R1 confirms that the 'Internet is the main factor. People get to know all the information through the Internet. They knew the information openly without any purpose of hiding. It has the potential to transform people's minds and hearts before the election.' Another INP respondent agreed that INPs can lead to changes in the country, stating, 'We need a strong and united opposition, a vibrant independent media, and in 2008, this quality was present to a certain measure with the presence of *malaysiakini.com* and bloggers. The third ingredient is to have vibrancy in society.' Another INP journalist believed that the news on the Internet is able to influence public perceptions more easily than the mainstream media.

The five mainstream media respondents recognised that the Internet had a unique potential for circulating information more widely but were more critical about its potential. One stated that people expressed and exchanged their views and ideas through the Internet. 'People get more access to opinions on the Internet, both good and bad'. There is a general view that print and broadcast media have lost their credibility because certain public events were not reported in the detail expected by readers. As another respondent argued:

INPs gave exposure to oppositions' talk (*ceramahs*) and activities. They reported how many people turned up to the talks, what issues were discussed and the public sees that, because they do not have alternative sources (in mainstream media). Even myself, after I leave my office, I will check *malaysiakini.com*. If the RTM and TV3 were doing their job, why would the public want to go to the Internet?

A sense of professional frustration is evident in the journalist's admission that s/he reads the online portal after work, and there is an acknowledgement of the general popularity of *malaysiakini.com*.

There is also a perception among the mainstream media group that INPs are oppositional media, and therefore that all their reporting is anti-government. Respondent R8 stated:

Before the 2008 election, people thought that whatever was said by the opposition was right, and furthermore [that] the Internet focused on the opposition's issues and also Hindraf issues. Thus, people thought the opposition was right and the government was wrong.

This comment identifies the popular view that commentary by the opposition is somehow more authoritative.

### **Question of Mainstream Media Credibility**

There were mixed reactions among the respondents when questioned further on whether the country's mainstream media had really lost their credibility. Mainstream media's lack of coverage on certain issues that had been prioritised by INPs was thought to be an issue worthy of further exploration. For instance, R2 affirmed that 'issues like government spending were not reported properly [and] civil society issues, ethnicity issues don't appear in mainstream media, right?' Other INP respondents stated that the mainstream media had no claim to objective truth telling. However, while most mainstream media journalists admitted that mainstream media appeared to have lost credibility, one disagreed. R6 raised the question of whether credibility is a matter of political viewpoint: 'Mainstream media or any other media may have lost their credibility among those who [don't want to] believe them. There are still lots of people who believe them.' The respondent thus expresses the view that the media landscape is inhabited by equally biased and partisan news sources. The question of why certain events are not fully reported by the mainstream media was not discussed.

### **INP Efficiency**

The perception of the mainstream media's lack credibility is partly due to the greater efficiency in news coverage by the INPs. R4 insisted that INPs are the first to be contacted for any issue related to minority groups. 'When the church was torn down, we were the few people who went there to report about it. When temples demolitions occurred, we were first to provide them coverage.' These remarks highlight the idea that reporting all events as they happen by following witness reports and other sources has the effect of building public trust and credibility. It also corresponds with a free press model of journalism. The lack of a need to check for the government's

interpretive framework or to practise self-censorship not only increases the speed of reporting, but also facilitates news gathering from non-traditional sources.

The 'efficiency' of the INPs is also clearly seen by their equal coverage of the diversity of opinion within the opposition, as mainstream media provide insufficient coverage of this kind. The INP respondents argue that INPs, by their provision of coverage to the opposition, bring more balance to the media landscape. However, government officials and the mainstream media still consider the INP to be a medium that belongs to the opposition. In the words of one INP respondent, '[INPs] are important when it comes to Anwar's issues, as [there is] no medium to highlight them' (R5). Another respondent said, 'I disagree that we are an opposition website because at the end of the day, it doesn't stop us from criticizing PAS about certain of their policies regarding women [and] it does not stop us from criticizing PKR about what is happening on direct collection' (R3). Mainstream news reporters again did not comment directly on the news gathering practices that restrict them.

### **General Discussion**

From the interviews, it can be concluded that the Internet election has impacted the government-owned media landscape. After the 2008 general election, more INPs have been established with various outlets and different agendas, such as *The Malaysian Insider* and *Free Malaysia Today*. The growth of INPs and the volume of news circulated by them, has affected print media sales, just as online news has impacted print news globally. In Malaysia, there are regulatory and political reasons to reduce the competition between online and print in the news sector.

The mainstream media news editors and journalists are now trying to understand the 'political circuits' used by INPs to get their news sources, and are ready to confront the opposition in their reportage with a promise of 'better' explanations to the public. In addition, the mainstream media has now adopted some changes in the news gathering processes, as journalists from the mainstream media are encouraged to observe and refer to INP news before leaving for their news assignments. This indicates a change comparable to the regular checking of competitors in free press societies, for market reasons as well as newsroom efficiencies. As for the government, efforts have been taken to review the existing media laws that constrain mainstream media reporting. The ISA was replaced by legislation that has yet to come into force, the Security Offences (Special Measures) Act. Changes are being proposed to the Printing Presses and Publication Act (PPPA) (1984) that would curb mainstream practice with annual printing permits and give the Minister of Home Affairs power to suspend and revoke the newspaper.

### **Conclusion**

After 2008, there was a degree of optimism that the popularity of INPs in national political discourse would strengthen the opposition coalition and ultimately result in Malaysia becoming less of a 'flawed' democratic system. The results of GE2013 indicate that the troubled and unequal relationship between mainstream media and independent media and the undemocratic nature of the government's dealings with media are not improving. At present, the different types of media in the country set the agenda for their respective readers. The rally to support Anwar Ibrahim's challenge of the GE2013 results – seen around the world courtesy of foreign news agencies, relays from *malaysiakini.com* and social media – and the inflammatory headline from *UtU.S.A.n*

*Malaysia* reporting on BN's perception of Chinese Malaysians on 7 May 2013, '*Apa lagi Cina mahu?*' ('What Else do the Chinese Want?'), indicate that the newly re-elected Prime Minister may need to work quickly to restore stability in race-relations and regain party support from the disaffected.

Since 2008, Malaysia's media landscape has nonetheless seen a number of significant changes. More INPs now exist and Malaysians have an increased access to online news – both free and subscription-based. During GE2013, *malaysiakini.com* reached 4.3 million readers on election night, receiving an additional 1.3 million hits on its mobile version. Furthermore, the website increased its free access time in 2013.<sup>2</sup> This demonstrates a degree of sophistication on the part of *malaysiakini.com* (2013) and underscores that it understands the importance of its contribution to civil society. As this article has argued, INP growth and development is helping to forge additional democratic spaces in Malaysia, and may serve to mobilise the next stage of more inclusive democratic participation in the country.

INPs in Malaysia have proven to be successful because of their capacity to use the 'experiential' aspect of the Internet, as well as their ability to make public debate more informed, diverse and vibrant – challenging the ruling government with critical oversight. This combination of factors develops a more democratically diverse public sphere. Thus, INPs can be recognised as a diversifying model for mobilization and resistance against authoritarianism. This plurality of opinion plays an important role in sustaining the reform movements in Malaysia for the future. As for the 'Internet election,' which in 2008 facilitated the first real losses to a once firmly entrenched ruling party, there has been less mention of the Internet in GE2013 coverage. This is probably because, as elsewhere in the world, Internet uses are normalising. Indeed, although the 'Internet election' in Malaysia had its own distinctive characteristics, using the Internet for democratising a political culture is becoming more common. Malaysian politics have been opened up to global scrutiny through YouTube clips of Malaysian citizens participating in *vox populi*, blogging, rallying in the streets, and bringing controversial issues to the attention of the polity. The Internet, therefore, serves as one of the ways in which citizens may be able, in time, to challenge Malaysia's status as a 'semi-democracy.'

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<sup>2</sup> In 2008, free access had been given for a week; in 2013, access was free from 17 April 2013 onwards, with the General Elections taking place on 5 May 2013.

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