

# Cyber-networks, physical coalitions and missing links : imagining and realizing dissent in Malaysia 1998-2008

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**Cyber-networks, physical coalitions and missing links: Imagining and realizing dissent in Malaysia 1998–2008**

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**Abstract**

From September 1998 to March 2008, dissident cyber-networks in Malaysia developed connections with physical coalitions that contributed to the Opposition's historic gains in the 12<sup>th</sup> General Election of March 2008. To succeed in entrenching a 'two-coalition system', however, the component parties of the Opposition coalition (Pakatan Rakyat) must establish its 'missing links', namely, extensive and deep organizational networks in society that would permit the coalition to move from imagining and realizing dissent to institutionalizing it meaningfully.

**Keywords:** Malaysian politics, 2008 General Election, cyber-networks, opposition coalitions, *Malaysiakini*, *Malaysia Today*, Raja Petra Kamaruddin, Anwar Ibrahim

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*Cyber-networks, physical coalitions and missing links:  
Imagining and realizing dissent in Malaysia 1998–2008*

Khoo Boo Teik

In Malaysia's 12<sup>th</sup> General Election, held on 8 March 2008, 49 per cent of the electorate voted for the non-formalized Opposition coalition – made up of Parti Keadilan Rakyat (Keadilan, or People's Justice Party), Parti Islam (PAS, or Islamic Party) and Democratic Action Party (DAP) – and cracked at last the hegemonic hold of the ruling coalition, Barisan Nasional (BN, or National Front). The Opposition made electoral history by winning 82 out of 222 seats in Parliament, thus denying the BN its customary two-thirds majority. Out of the eleven states in Peninsular Malaysia, the principal political arena, the combined Opposition that later formalized their coalition with the name of Pakatan Rakyat (PR, or People's Alliance) took control of the state governments of Kedah, Kelantan, Penang, Perak and Selangor. In fact, the Opposition also won ten out of eleven parliamentary seats in Kuala Lumpur but the national capital, by virtue of being a 'Federal Territory', continued to be administered by the BN-led Federal government.

By the standards of Malaysian elections, the regime had been struck by the most destructive wave of voter dissent or the most disastrous convergence of socio-political conditions ever – hence, the popular use of the terms, 'tsunami' and 'perfect storm',<sup>1</sup> to depict the outcome of the election. No doubt, the two metaphors had to be used with care. A genuine political 'tsunami' would have swept the BN from power altogether. A 'perfect storm' would not have completely bypassed Sabah and Sarawak.

Even so, a watershed had been reached and a 'two-coalition system' might finally take shape within Malaysian politics. Since 1990, various dissident parties had envisaged

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<sup>1</sup> The use of the term, exhilarating for some, possibly recalled the utter shock that the terrible tsunami of December 2004 held for a nation that had hitherto been spared natural disasters of that kind or scale. For the allusion to 'perfect storm', see Steven Gan, *Editorial, Malaysiakini*, 9 March 2010.

and striven to establish such a system (Khoo 2003: 159–64). But, only the present Opposition – hereafter PR (unless clearly inapposite) – had actually advanced towards that goal in 2008. To put it differently, one might say that the PR had progressed from ‘imagining’ to ‘realizing’ dissent, no matter that the PR had a long way to go before reaching its ultimate goal of supplanting the BN in governing the country. To be sure, it would not do to cast imagination and realization as two disparate acts occurring in strictly demarcated phases. But, ‘imagining’ and ‘realizing’ dissent may be depicted as two principal tasks to clarify the qualitatively different networks upon which the PR relied in its progression from *Reformasi* to the ‘tsunami’ at a specific conjuncture that allowed the PR even to get that far.

The first networks to consider are the ‘cyber-networks’ that broadly included the information and communication technology (ICT)-sited or -enabled links between email lists, discussion groups, websites, online media, online forums, blogs, text-messages, etc. These cyber-networks were able to perform different functions, from gathering information to disseminating reports, from rallying opinion to rebutting official claims, and from questioning mainstream news-reporting to constructing alternative media. In short, the PR’s cyber-networks wove a web of counter-hegemonic discourses that helped its organizers, allies and supporters to imagine themselves as a community of dissent.

The PR’s second type of network consisted of ‘physical coalitions’. The term, despite its lexical imprecision, refers to various groupings and organizations, having different structures and degrees of cohesion, which brought together the PR parties, their allies in civil society, and their supporters at large. These coalitions – themselves offline and ground-level networks of people – were formed for a range of political actions that extended from issuing informal appeals to joining ad hoc activities to participating in structured events and to making highly organized interventions. The common objective of these actions was to ‘realize’ dissent through electoral contestation.

## *I. Cyber-networks and a community of dissent*

In the wake of the ‘tsunami’, no less a PR opponent than the Prime Minister, Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, conceded that the BN had lost the ‘cyberspace war’.<sup>2</sup> Perhaps Abdullah was being self-serving when he paid that backhanded compliment to the PR’s cyber-networks that had battled the pro-state print and broadcast media, and sought to offset other structural advantages that the BN enjoyed after a half-century’s exercise of power.<sup>3</sup> That the regime did not earnestly try to rein in the ICT-based alternative media and blogosphere was only partly explained by its adherence to a no-censorship guarantee embedded in the Multimedia Super Corridor project that former Prime Minister Dr Mahathir Mohamad launched in 1996. It was partly because the BN was complacent with its monopoly of its proven instruments of propaganda, that is, the print and broadcast media that were heavily controlled by via selective ownership of press and broadcasting stations, tight regulation and constant oversight.<sup>4</sup> And, maybe, it was partly due to the regime’s grudgingly realistic stance that the Internet could not be effectively policed; hence, for example, Mahathir’s mere advice to users to be guided by their values when surfing.

The dissident cyber-networks started to form with *Reformasi*, the inchoate movement of dissent triggered by mass outrage against the maltreatment of Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim – sacked by Mahathir on 2 September, expelled by UMNO on 3 September and imprisoned by the regime from 20 September (Khoo 2003: 100–8). Tech-savvy dissidents set up numerous pro-*Reformasi* email discussion groups, websites and

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<sup>2</sup> ‘Internet served a painful lesson’, *New Straits Times*, 26 March 2008

<sup>3</sup> It was self-serving to the extent that it diverted attention from the non-technological causes of the BN’s losses. Disgruntled UMNO figures blamed Abdullah’s poor leadership and forced his resignation as Prime Minister and UMNO President just over a year later.

<sup>4</sup> ‘We thought the newspapers, the print media, the television were important but young people were looking at text messages and blogs,’ Abdullah was quoted as saying in ‘Internet served a painful lesson’, *New Straits Times*, 26 March 2008.

online forums, many linked to one another.<sup>5</sup> They did this out of compulsion, aware that the Opposition parties and civil society dissidents had been routinely misrepresented, maligned or shut out by the state-controlled mass media. But they also did it by choice since their expressions and reports of anti-regime activity as well as state repression could be disseminated far more effectively, quickly, experimentally, and creatively.

*Reformasi* brought an unintended fulfillment of the regime's slogan, *Cintai IT!* (Love IT) as the *Reformasi*-minded and the merely curious surfed the Internet to post information, access materials and connect with other people. Soon *Reformasi* websites carried countless and diverse postings, including: announcements of *Reformasi* events; reproductions and translations of news reports; unofficial transcripts of Anwar's trial proceedings and transcripts of interviews; press releases and eyewitness accounts of protests and public events; economic and political analyses; summaries of public talks; letters, appeals for support, petitions, and reminders on voter registration; rebuttals of official statements, diatribes against leading politicians, denunciations of senior public officials, and accusations against corporate figures; police reports, copies of official and purportedly official documents; poems, modern fables, photographs, and cartoons; and recordings of speeches and video clips.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, an immeasurable amount of Internet material was downloaded, circulated by email, reproduced in what print media existed for the *Reformasi* movement, and redistributed in the forms of facsimiles and photocopies to those not connected to the Internet.

Many characteristics of cyber-space 'elsewhere' probably fit these cyber-networks. Within the cyber-networks, those who chose to could remain unnamed and yet 'go public', show no identity and still 'belong'. That included people who managed websites with names such as *Mahafiraun* (Great Pharaoh) or *Mahazalim* (Great Tyrant) that derided their

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<sup>5</sup> For analyses of the Internet's connection to *Reformasi* politics, see Abbott (2001), Hilley (2001), Khoo (2003, 2008), Brown (2004), George (2006), Tan and Zawawi (2008), Steele (2009) and Tan (2010). Tan (2010: 291–96) gives a detailed list of pro-*Reformasi* websites.

<sup>6</sup> Of course, not all the material was verifiably correct or honest; suffice it here to note that, 'Impressions, fears, opinions, and conclusions are all traded equally on the Web' (Ayres 1999: 141).

target – Mahathir. Likewise, free of censorship but not liberated from worries of state retribution, some well-known websites were anonymously maintained, in Malaysia or abroad; but their designations made clear the concerns and objectives of those who kept, supported and visited them: *Laman Reformasi* (Reformasi Website), *Jiwa Merdeka* (Soul of Independence), *Anwar Online*, and *freemalaysia*. Whereas many people might well be nervous about the risks of ground-level dissident activity, they could imagine engaging in dissent on the Internet precisely because, there, to engage was to imagine. Significantly, though, the cyber-networks were not wholly faceless. There were websites of established organizations, such as Opposition parties and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Still other sites had webmasters, such as Sabri Zain (*Reformasi Diary*) and Raja Petra Kamaruddin (*The Malaysian* and *Kini*), who disdained to conceal their names or goals. At a critical point, just before the November 1999 general election, Steven Gan and Premesh Chandran founded *Malaysiakini*, the first online news portal (Steele 2009).

It may not be truly necessary to be able to tell precisely ‘when to apply the label “community” to ... resulting [Internet] interactions’ (Bimber 1998: 146). Suffice it that the cyber-networks steadily occupied a ‘continuum of communities, identities, and networks ... from the most cohesive to the most diffuse’<sup>7</sup> by drawing in and linking to political parties, NGOs, ‘alternative media’, different groups and countless individuals. Besides, those who engaged with the cyber-networks availed themselves of the

powerful counterhegemonic use of the Internet ... [its] ability to communicate intersubjective knowledge – as much an attribute of hypertext as innate in the Internet. People from different places, with radically variant experiences, are able to convey a notion of what it is like to be them, to live their lives, via the Net (Warf and Grimes 1997: 267).

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<sup>7</sup> ‘... the distinction of real and imagined or virtual community is not a useful one, and that an anthropological approach is well suited to investigate the continuum of communities, identities, and networks that exist – from the most cohesive to the most diffuse – regardless of the ways in which community members interact’ (Wilson and Peterson 2002: 462).



Applied to Malaysia's multi-ethnic society, the Internet's ability 'to communicate intersubjective knowledge', facilitated by the 'surfing' quality of Internet exploration might have served to bridge to some degree socio-cultural distances. The habit of Internet users to move from one site to a wholly different one, culturally speaking, and virtually crossing rural-urban, inter-ethnic and inter-religious divides in the process, moderated the alien feel to the physical communities one met or often did not meet in everyday life. Sabri Zain's *Reformasi Diary* was an outstanding example of how to manage 'intersubjective knowledge' creatively and responsibly. Entry after entry in the diary recorded how, energized and transformed by *Reformasi*, 'someone like him' could move between the Street and the Net, so to speak, from participating earnestly in protests and demonstrations to uploading eyewitness accounts conscientiously thereafter. On the ground, the crossings of socio-cultural divides were daily multiplying (Khoo 2002). As Sabri (2000) has captured it so well, almost unimaginable before *Reformasi*, elderly Chinese read PAS's *Harakah*, the Selangor Chinese Town Hall Civil Rights Committee forum featured an all-Malay panel, Malays in large numbers attended the 'Chinese' DAP forums, Malays kept a vigil for DAP's Lim Guan Eng whose defence of an under-aged Malay girl had led him to prison, and the oft-arrested and severely-bashed Tian Chua became a hero to the predominantly Malay protesters. On the Internet, the linking of the Opposition's websites could encourage

greater interaction and negotiation between supporters of Malaysia's often divided opposition. A PAS supporter in Kelantan may have little inclination or opportunity to engage with the West Coast, Chinese-based DAP. One click, however, can bring him from the PAS Web site to the DAP's. Arguably, this represents the greatest counterhegemonic potential of the Internet for the opposition (Brown 2004: 88).

Thus, for a civil society easily fragmented along ethnic and cultural lines, the cyber-networks permitted dissidence/dissidents increasingly to imagine itself/themselves a community unified by dissent, not one split by dominant, narrowly communitarian narratives that served authoritarian purposes.

Even so, it would be judicious not to over-rate the impact of Internet intervention in the political process between *Reformasi* and the ‘tsunami’. The proliferating pro-*Reformasi* websites, indicative of the Opposition’s edge over the regime on the Web, apparently failed to win the ‘wired’, ‘tech-savvy’, urban voters to the Opposition’s cause in the November 1999 election. Ironically, the mostly ‘un-hooked’, rural, Malay electorate, placed at the poorer end of the urban-rural digital divide, swung heavily against UMNO then (Maznah 2003). At the 2004 general election, moreover, despite four and a half more years of expanding Internet penetration, growing sophistication of users, and improving quality of ‘counter-hegemonic’ websites, the BN (newly led by Abdullah Badawi) gained its largest ever victory. Keadilan, regarded as ‘Anwar’s party’, was reduced to a single parliamentary seat that was held by his wife, Dr Wan Azizah Wan Ismail. To compound the dissidents’ disappointment, the strenuous, even heroic, efforts of the online Free Anwar Campaign and its kindred websites raised the domestic and international awareness of Anwar’s plight but he remained in prison for six years.<sup>8</sup>

It might be briefly noted that the *Reformasi* milieu had been much dampened by various developments. In the 1999 election, PAS and Keadilan inflicted considerable losses on UMNO. But the Opposition coalition (Barisan Alternative, BA, or Alternative Front) failed to dent BN’s domination principally because DAP made no headway among the non-Malay voters (who rallied to Mahathir just as they had done in 1995). Anwar remained in prison, and in 2000 several leading *Reformasi* figures were swept into prison without trial. The BA itself was divided by PAS-DAP differences, to some extent exacerbated by the worldwide repercussions of ‘September 11’ and was soon moribund.<sup>9</sup> The Malay cultural revolt that sparked *Reformasi* failed to ignite a nation-wide revolt, thus confining the ‘imagined community of dissent’ as much as it restricted political dissent as a whole. Between 2000 and 2004, the number of blogs and websites grew tremendously, but ‘[i]nter-

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<sup>8</sup> More than that, several of his staunchest allies were imprisoned under the Internal Security Act in 2000. Anwar was only released in September 2004, five months after the BN’s huge victory.

<sup>9</sup> Just as Gagasan Rakyat expired after the 1990 election, although DAP performed well then whereas Semangat 46 failed to win sufficient Malay support.

networked computers are cultural products that exist in the social and political worlds within which they were developed, and they are not exempt from the rules and norms of those worlds (Wilson and Peterson 2002: 462). In that political ebb, the prospects for reform having receded, the cyber-networks of dissent that *Reformasi* inspired lost their vibrancy.

Yet, two nodes had laid the basis of a resurgence of the cyber-networks. One node was *Malaysiakini* which positioned itself as the country's first independent and professional online news service (Steele 2009: 107–8) that provided, in its own words, 'all the news that matters'. Like the proverbial 'Internet start-up', *Malaysiakini* began with its founders' very limited personal finances and some external 'angel' funding support. But it also had plenty of goodwill from an informal pro-*Reformasi* network that included a diasporic following. Within a relatively short time of its commencement, *Malaysiakini* had become one of those 'E-zine news media' websites that would

develop and present original content using traditional journalism approaches. Staff editors create some of the core content by assigning fresh news stories or analysis pieces to paid contributors with journalistic training and experience. E-zines may salt this core content with links to other media, streamed audio and video segments, discussion forums, blogs, and so on (Beers 2006: 117).

By providing space for readers' letters, popular comments, and guest columns, *Malaysiakini* became a hub with expanding links to subscribing readers, 'free-loading' surfers, NGOs, political parties, and other 'refugees from the controlled mass media'. The last named group intriguingly included some 'mainstream reporters' with whom *Malaysiakini* had a discreet 'symbiotic relationship': the mainstream reporters would sometimes share news materials with *Malaysiakini* reporters (when the latter were shut out of official events) or even supply *Malaysiakini* with copy they could not publish in their own newspapers (Steele 2009: 104). With time, by adding a 'TV' section, *Malaysiakini* became more multimedia. By adding free sections in Malay, Mandarin and Tamil, it

became multi-lingual, comparatively more ‘national’ (if not fully Malaysian in the full scope of major languages) than the typical monolingual Malaysian newspaper, and closer to broadcast media having services in different languages. Since it tenaciously declined (within reason!) to follow the controlled media’s proclivity for suppressing news of ‘sensitive issues’, dissenting views, and criticisms of the regime, *Malaysiakini* was periodically harassed by the authorities. In one infamous incident, when the editors refused to reveal the name of a letter-writer, the police raided *Malaysiakini* and confiscated all its computers. As so often happens, the petty and futile state harassment only heightened *Malaysiakini*’s credibility and hardened its network’s opposition to the regime.

In an instructive ethnographic study of *Malaysiakini*, Janet Steele rejects ‘the popular belief that it is the Internet that challenges the Barisan Nasional’s stranglehold on power’; instead, she concludes that ‘the norms and values of independent journalism ... made *Malaysiakini* such a threat to government authorities’ (Steele 2009: 108). But, surely, it was *minimally* the Internet *and* independent journalism at work: in the prevailing circumstances a print or regular broadcast version of *Malaysiakini* was simply inconceivable. In general, it has been argued:

What makes cyberspace so different ... from the rest of the capital-intensive, mass media such as television, newspapers, radio, or cinema is not which discourse is dominant – for market-popularity is dominant in all technologically based mass forums – but, rather, that cyberspace alone is very cheap to enter (Whitaker 2004: 474).

Consequently, ‘this cheapness ... renders the Internet, unlike any other mass medium, open to identity-resistance popular activity that is almost unfiltered’ (Whitaker 2004: 474). What made cyberspace attractive ‘elsewhere’ made it attractive and empowering for the pioneering venture of *Malaysiakini*: relative ‘cheapness’,<sup>10</sup> and insulation from censorship

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<sup>10</sup> That *Malaysiakini* began with very limited financial resources makes this point the more persuasive.

and suppression. More than that, as the controlled media increasingly lost its credibility its former status of undisputed ‘official voice’ was steadily degraded. Facing the state’s near-monopoly of the media, enforced in various ways, alternative non-state media had to rise to a daunting challenge:

to somehow circumvent this media near-monopoly by creating an alternative ‘local media’ and an alternative ‘official voice’.... Simply creating an alternative ‘public sphere’ ... and then trying to flood the state or the world with its contrary identity-resistance popularity via ‘community’ owned newspapers and radio stations would not do (Whitaker 2004: 491).

In its design (as an online news service), by its practice (of journalistic autonomy), through its association (with anti-government blogging conferred by official harassment), and via its interactivity (with a believing and contributing audience), *Malaysiakini* was ‘pro-Opposition by default’ (Brown 2005: 85). But *Malaysiakini* was more than that. It emerged as an *unofficial* ‘official voice’ of the cyber-networks of anti-authoritarian resistance.

A second and significantly different type of hub was developed by Raja Petra Kamaruddin when he created *Malaysia Today* in 2004. ‘RPK’, as a devoted following affectionately later called Raja Petra, ran several series of political analyses and commentaries, namely *No Holds Barred*, *The Corridors of Power*, and *The Khairy Chronicles*. Tireless and prolific, RPK brought to *Malaysia Today* the tough attitude he had demonstrated in running the *Free Anwar Campaign*. Within the cyber-networks, RPK became a legendary blogger. Yet, he could be more accurately characterized as one of a ‘small subset of bloggers [who] assign themselves the role of news source, analyst, and interpreter ... electronic pamphleteers, self-appointed editor/commentators who use their own highly selective filter to note, deconstruct, annotate, and re-spin news items produced elsewhere’ (Beers 2006: 118). But it was not any reliance on ‘news items produced elsewhere’ that made *Malaysia Today* the most popular blog in Malaysia. It was, rather, RPK’s relentless outpouring of exposés of alleged corruption and wrongdoings in high

places. By Malaysian standards, RPK had no peer in uncovering plots and revealing conspiracies, ‘naming names’ and detailing links, and providing documentation that, if genuine, could only have been ‘leaked’ by ‘deep throats’, wherever these were placed. Not only did RPK constantly taunt debased power, he obstinately dismissed threats of litigation and police action.

An internationally known campaigner for Anwar’s freedom, who had been briefly detained under the Internal Security Act for his *Reformasi*-era defiance of authority, RPK asked no one’s leave to criticize Opposition politicians and leaders either, including Anwar himself.<sup>11</sup> Not for nothing was RPK a motorcycle-loving, half-Malay half-Welsh scion of a minor branch of Malay royalty. No other blogger had RPK’s *attitude*. Others might be critical but tread cautiously near matters such as interethnic or interreligious relations. RPK alone would seize every sensitive political bull by the horns. He taunted, mocked and bashed the Malays and Muslims (although he was ‘one of them’), the Chinese (even though his wife was ‘one of them’), and the Indians or ‘Others’ (even if it was politically incorrect to do so). Yet, loose cannon that he was, he displayed something of a libertarian tolerance, albeit spiced with sarcasm and scolding, towards the acerbic, bigoted or obscene among his followers. As RPK took on an iconic status within the cyber-networks, the blogrolls of other websites increasingly linked to *Malaysia Today*. Over time, *Malaysia Today* added news reports from domestic and international media, while several well-known bloggers and guest columnists, writing in English and Malays, linked their output to *Malaysia Today*.

Within two years of its existence *Malaysia Today* had become the most popular blog, far and away the single most influential blog in the Malaysian cyber-networks of dissent. At heart, RPK bears out the observation that ‘... the irreverent personal voice that tends to thrive on the Internet is well suited to puncturing claims of authority designed to

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<sup>11</sup> At the *Dialog dengan Persatuan-persatuan* (Dialogue with societies), Sunway Hotel, Penang, 4 June 2006, Anwar was asked for his response to RPK’s complaint that Anwar had been recently quiet on critical issues. Anwar replied, ‘Petra supported me via the *Free Anwar Campaign*, then *Malaysia Today*. Now he makes this bit of criticism. Give him some credit. He has a right to disagree. He represents the kind of media (policy) we should have.’ Author’s notes.

suppress debate' (Beers 2006: 124). But, never before had any Malaysian made such a powerful use of such an incorrigibly irreverent attitude! There was a muckraking core to RPK but there was more to *Malaysia Today* than muckraking. Neither a party organ, nor specifically addressed to organized groups of people, *Malaysia Today* was consistently putting out RPK's challenges to his readers and PR supporters to determine and to carry out what was to be done to eject the present regime. It has been suggested that, 'If muckraking asks "what went wrong yesterday, and who is to blame?" then future-focused journalism asks "what might go right tomorrow and who is showing the way?" (Beers 2006: 121). One could say of RPK and *Malaysia Today* that their 'future-focused journalism', sharpened by a highly personalized style of dissident discourse, intuitively spoke to the cyber-networks' online anti-regime and 'pro-change' yearnings that, offline, were burdened by impotent rage.

Most certainly, *Malaysiakini* and *Malaysia Today* do not and cannot represent the spectrum of views, opinions and sentiments expressed in the large number of websites and blogs that were central to the dissident cyber-networks. But the foci of these two vastly popular sites went to the heart of the dissident discourses of the time: cleanse and reform the public institutions. To put it lightly, if one craved for news that was hidden from public view, one hooked onto *Malaysiakini*;<sup>12</sup> but for the lowdown on dirt in high places, one hit onto RPK. Above all, *Malaysiakini* and *Malaysia Today* illustrated the influential roles that certain hubs performed in keeping the dissident community visible in cyberspace, and imagined to be alive and intact, which was all the more crucial as offline political contestation went the way of the regime until March 2008.

## ***II. Physical coalitions***

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<sup>12</sup> Thus did *Malaysiakini* compete with the international media's reputation for reporting what was not reported by the domestic media, a significant advance for domestic counter-hegemonic efforts.

Suddenly struck the ‘tsunami’ and evidently a new appreciation of the power of the Internet dawned: ‘Journalists, commentators, and parliamentarians themselves credited – or blamed – the Internet. With five well-known bloggers elected to Parliament, the election of 2008 seemed to spell an unambiguous victory for online media’ (Steele 2009: 91). What had happened to make the PR’s cyber-networks so seemingly effective now? An important answer lies in their synergistic connection to another form of network – the physical coalition to ‘realize dissent’ through ground-level mobilization, organization and contestation.

In 2007, a critical year, three large-scale marches and protests took place in Kuala Lumpur, each the work of a new coalition of dissent and anti-regime protest (Khoo 2007). In chronological order, there was a 2,000-strong ‘Lawyers’ March’ to the ‘Palace of Justice’, Putrajaya, on 26 September. On 10 November, there was a 40,000-strong BERSIH rally that proceeded to the Palace to deliver a petition to the King. Finally, a ‘Hindu’ rally of about 30,000 protestors took place on 25 November.

The Lawyers’ March was led by the Bar Council and supported by NGOs and Opposition parties. The marchers called for the head of the then Chief Justice for his alleged complicity in the manipulation of senior judicial appointments, including his very own. Exasperated with the ‘rotten state of the house of Denmark’, the protesting lawyers and social activists demanded an end to the corruption, hence subversion, of a key institution of state. The BERSIH Rally was organized by Gabungan Pilihanraya Bersih dan Adil (Coalition for Clean and Fair Elections). From different locations in Kuala Lumpur, the rally wound its way to the Istana Negara (National Palace) to hand a petition to the King. BERSIH and the participants of the rally demanded a cleansing of the electoral system to break the crippling shackles the Opposition faced in every election. The ‘Hindu rally’, called by an ad hoc Hindu Rights Action Front (HINDRAF), drew its supporters predominantly from Indians (but not necessarily Hindus) who converged on Kuala Lumpur from different parts of the country. Their destination was the British High Commission to



which the HINDRAF leaders had prepared to hand a petition to Queen Elizabeth II, ostensibly to the historical restitution of the rights of Indian indentured labor that the colonial state had imported into British Malaya. In effect, HINDRAF protested ‘Indian marginalization’<sup>13</sup> and neglect under the present regime.

In each case, the organizers represented a dissident hub. For the lawyers, the Bar Council had traditionally been the hub of the legal profession. On the matter of the reform of the judiciary, successive executive committees of the Bar Council had rallied the profession, strongly supported by many NGOs and the Opposition since the first judicial crisis of 1988. The BERSIH coalition was new in name and the specific demands it made. But the coalition’s main movers, Opposition parties and known NGOs, had been pressing in vain for basic changes to the electoral system that fundamentally disadvantaged the Opposition. Only HINDRAF was truly new. Its protest against conditions of Indian marginalization was not itself startling: NGO activists, the Malaysian Socialist Party, academics, and even some BN politicians had disputed the issue, or organized around it without agreement on how to frame or solve it. There was even less agreement on depicting the issue as a ‘Hindu’ matter but that became a non-issue with non-Hindu Indians and non-Indians who chose to support the HINDRAF rally. The HINDRAF demand for the restitution of socio-economic grievances going back to colonial labour policies was novel for not adhering to the standard, dominant narratives of inter-ethnic socio-economic inequalities in Malaysia that set ‘Malay political power’ against ‘Chinese economic power’. The newness of HINDRAF lay in its eruption as a social movement, its strong interjection into the political process as almost an ‘Indian *Reformasi*’, and its rejection of the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC) as the accepted representative of the Indian community within BN.

The slogans of the Bar Council, BERSIH and HINDRAF marches varied and the phraseology of their protests differed. But their underlying messages had much in common:

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<sup>13</sup> Since not just HINDRAF leaders but many NGO activists and politicians use it to describe the ‘Indian condition’, this phrase is maintained here although its meanings are not entirely clear.

Judicial *reform*, Electoral *reform*, Social *reform*. The marchers came from different backgrounds: mostly lawyers in the first march, mostly Malays in the second, and predominantly Indians in the third. Together, the three marches extended the boundaries of dissent beyond those of *Reformasi* itself. Now *Reformasi* experiences were re-lived. The regime responded to the BERSIH and HINDRAF rallies with police repression and violent assaults on peaceful mass protests. In turn, the popular resentment loosened the BN's hold on the Malay vote that had been retrieved by Abdullah's 'de-Mahathirizing' administration, and over the Indian vote. No 'Chinese' rally of any size was organized. But, ironically, the Chinese support that had saved Mahathir and UMNO against the Malay voters' revolt in 1999 was fast fading, too. By 2007, UMNO had so brazenly expressed its disregard for non-Malay sensitivities – summed up by its leaders' open boasts that *ketuanan Melayu* (Malay supremacy) would be upheld, the New Economic Policy (NEP) retained, and the Malay Agenda timeless,<sup>14</sup> Chinese voters were ready to punish the BN, especially its 'Chinese-based parties' that would or could not curb UMNO's excesses.

As a ruling coalition of ethnic parties, dominating a severely gerrymandered electoral system, BN used to profit from an asynchronous pattern of ethnic opposition. Moments of Malay and Chinese electoral revolts only once converged in 1969.<sup>15</sup> Critically they did not in 1990 or 1999 when anti-regime sentiment ran high (Khoo 2003: 160). But by the beginning of 2008, the BN's electoral coalition had frayed as never before. And, as rumors swirled of an early general election, the all-important question was whether a new dissident coalition could form to do serious battle with the BN.

If, [a]t certain historical moments and under specific political, economic, and communicational circumstances, a certain node attracts many links and becomes a hub,

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<sup>14</sup> Officially replaced by a National Development Policy in 1991, the NEP, originally scheduled to end in 1990 was never terminated in practice. But with a difficult recovery from the 1997–98 financial and economic crises, Malay political and business elites wanted to keep and threatened to extend NEP's 'restructuring' that discriminated against non-Malays. As for a Malay Agenda, no one really knew what it meant beyond a chauvinistic assertion of the special position of the Malays in the country.

<sup>15</sup> Despite the presence of many outstanding Indian oppositionists in the nation's electoral history, by the 2000s BN had come to regard Indian support as being so loyal it could be taken for granted.

which in turn tends to attract more links’, then Anwar Ibrahim returned to the political scene as *the* hub that would ‘end up connecting communities of links (i.e., people of sometimes different political persuasions) across time and space, in ways that create the potential for people within the network (who [might] not necessarily know each other) to link up with each other’ (Hau and Shiraishi 2009: 335). Several factors made him the ideal hub of opposition and dissent then. Anwar had spent much of his political career leading networks and coalitions of dissent – as a student leader during the Baling protests of 1974, as the President of Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia coordinating the anti-Societies Act movement of 1981, and as the icon of *Reformasi* in 1999 (Khoo 2003: 86–96). In 2008, he was strategically well placed to act as the fulcrum about which would turn the Opposition parties, the BERSIH Coalition, HINDRAF and the cyber-networks. It was obvious to partisans and observers alike then that only a new ‘second coalition’ of Opposition parties might take advantage of the BN’s fraying coalition. Not only did Anwar resume formal politics, but, doing so, he retrieved for the ‘imagined community of dissent’ the combative spirit and purpose of *Reformasi* and the ‘link’ that the BA of 1999 missed precisely because he was in prison. And, finally, if ever different tendencies and programs ever went in search of an ideological hub, those associated with PAS, DAP, Keadilan and HINDRAF’s political offshoot that called itself Makkal Sakhti (People’s Power) found one in Anwar who now proffered a more inclusive New Malaysian Agenda of institutional reform, multiculturalism and social justice ‘for all’.

### ***III. Missing links***

In the run-up to the 12<sup>th</sup> General Election, the cyber-networks and the physical coalitions of dissent campaigned with the full array of tools available in cyberspace – mobile phones, email, blogs, websites – and the interventions of an enlarging corps of

website managers, online professional journalists, bloggers, netizens, commentators, and, simply, mobile-phone owners who were simultaneously angry voters. Between them, these networks and coalitions deployed text-messages, email lists, Internet postings, video-clips to overcome the controlled media's reflexive shut-out of the Opposition. People who had not previously imagined themselves 'dissidents' sent appeals for funding, relayed notices of Opposition events, forwarded campaign materials, and transmitted calls for volunteer workers and polling observers. Old-school networks were reactivated and diasporic contacts established through cyber-space. The cyber-networks and the physical coalitions converged. At times the meetings were tangential, merely linking people on the margins of politics to activists they knew personally. For most people, the convergences were brief, as when they attended the Opposition's election rallies and events within the short but relentless campaign period. Nor was it unusual for contacts to remain within cyber-space almost: many discreet supporters of the Opposition transferred campaign contributions from their ATMs to the special bank accounts of specific candidates.

The electoral outcome was startling for a political system used to finding that the BN's structural advantages, institutional powers and incomparably greater resources would somehow end high Opposition aspirations at the close of the campaigning period. Suffice it to note that not even *Malaysiakini*'s redoubtable Steven Gan expected anything close to the final results. Overnight, PKR stopped being the one-seat party that UMNO had threatened to send into oblivion after the 2004 general election. Instead the PKR added 30 more to the sole seat held by its official leader, Wan Azizah, and held the highest number of seats within PR. Nor was PAS any longer beleaguered with a precarious one-seat majority in Kelantan (that PAS had ruled since 1990). Not only did PAS secure 38 out of 45 seats in Kelantan, now the party ruled Kedah for the first time, led the PR government in Perak (despite the DAP's larger representation in the state) and formed part of the Selangor government. For the first time, too, DAP (which had contested elections since the mid-1960s) took power in Penang by completely defeating its non-Malay rivals, namely, the Gerakan Rakyat Malaysia (that had ruled or led the government in Penang since 1969) and

the Malaysian Chinese Association. With Keadilan having 31 seats in Parliament to DAP's 28 and PAS's 23, it was possible now to imagine further, and envisage a second coalition in the making that would cooperate on less inequitable power-sharing terms.

As such, it would be pleasant to end this account on a euphoric note reminiscent of the night of the 'tsunami'! After all, it took a decade of cyber-activism and coalition-building to produce and sustain the cyber-networks and the physical coalitions that reaffirmed on 8 March 2008 that 'the potentials of the Net are realized in articulation with other spaces and flows – the flow of money, goods, and bodies, for example – rather than in a struggle that constructs itself solely through some cyberreality' (Froehling 1997: 304).

The realities of political contestation and state power, however, demand that dissent must go beyond imagining and even realizing. Dissent lasts and can be defended to the extent that it is socially and deeply rooted, to which end other networks are necessary, too. Over more than five decades of uninterrupted rule, the BN, and especially UMNO, has used state power, resources and channels to penetrate all strata and areas of society, including all forms of official institutions, voluntary societies, business associations, youth clubs, community bodies, etc.<sup>16</sup> The breadth and depth of BN's presence and influence in society has been such that UMNO and leaders used to say, complacently, that they might not draw large crowds at election campaign rallies but their supporters were would deliver at the ballot boxes.

By comparison, it might be summarily noted, the PR parties generally lack deep or extensive networks that bind them to stable structures in physical communities throughout the country. Among them, PAS has had the strongest and most disciplined party structures and membership. Over half a century of political organization and contestation and about 40 years of experience in state government have given PAS well developed ties to rural

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<sup>16</sup> Many more networks operate at the same time, but there is no space to discuss others, including, say, networks of non-representative institutions of power, such as the nine Malay rulers, the uniformed forces and the senior ranks of the bureaucracies, with all of whom the regime has long been intimately associated.

communities, religious schools and related institutions, associations of *ulama*, Islamic NGOs, and student groups. Most of PAS's networks used to be localized, in Kelantan and Terengganu notably, but in the past two decades they have spread to other states and some of the larger urban centers. The DAP, though, has always been a cadre party dependent on 'mass support' of a largely unaffiliated kind.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, until the failed experiments with Gagasan Rakyat in 1990 and BA in 1999, not even the staunchest DAP supporters expected the party to take power anywhere. Being a party of protest, therefore, DAP's fortunes followed what has been called a pendulum pattern – rising with torrents of dissident Chinese voter sentiment at some elections, and slumping when the sentiments turned pro-regime at other elections. Without mass card-carrying members, and finding that its links to the associations, guilds and societies of the Chinese communities, once the fixed repositories of dissent, had weakened, the DAP would have to construct new and extensive networks if it is to remain a serious contender for power. Meanwhile, Keadilan has had too little time to organize its party structures. For certain campaigns in the past, Keadilan had had to rely on PAS for organizational and other forms of assistance. Anwar's six-year absence and the constant state repression of its leadership left Keadilan and will leave it even less time to organize as a nation-wide party. From *Reformasi* to the 'tsunami', Keadilan had to resort to mass protests to reach the populace. It has had considerable success with that strategy but again Keadilan will have to embed its presence and influence in social networks that it does not presently have. If or when Keadilan does that on a large scale, it will have to negotiate with DAP and PAS to preempt any potentially destructive competition with them over overlapping claims to particular constituencies.

Hence, if the strategic goal is to democratize and liberalize the political system so that 'regime change' becomes possible on the basis of a 'two-coalition system' the PR presently suffers from the absence of a third type of network that maintains stable links to 'permanent' social bodies, including trade unions, community organizations, and civic

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<sup>17</sup> It might be useful to recall that the DAP began as a Peninsular Malaysian offshoot of the People's Action Party (PAP) of Singapore. Yet, on this issue, the two parties could not be more different today. The PAP is, arguably, more rooted in Singaporean society than, say, UMNO in Malay society.

associations. 'Missing' those links could compel the PR to depend overly much on its cyber-networks and physical coalitions. Already HINDRAF and Makkal Sakhti have been split between pro-BN and anti-regime components, and the latter are not clearly pro-PR either. In the past year, Keadilan suffered several defections of elected representatives who were selected to stand in certain constituencies mostly because there was 'no one else' to nominate and, pre-'tsunami', there seemed to be 'no chance of winning anyway. But as networks go, what PR has may not be all that much if it turns out that

All that a network requires is a *minimum* motive – not necessarily ideational, but personal, professional, and even financial – for a link to be created. A network does not imply any uniformity of ideas nor consistency, let alone equal intensity, in the level of political (or even personal) commitment, nor a linear path or teleology in the development of ideas (Hau and Shiraishi 2009: 336).

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