Virtual Civil Society: Malaysia's 2008 General Elections Revisited

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Abstract - This article revisits the 2008 general elections in Malaysia to examine how the internet contributed to the remarkable political change never experienced in the history of this country. The ruling coalition, Barisan Nasional lost its two-thirds parliamentary majority seats it had enjoyed since 1969, while the opposition that capitalized on the internet in the run up to the elections returned to full political limelight. The literature examined provides significant leads to the different political scenarios that herald increased internet usage among concerned citizens, which in the article were ably justified against the political reality in Malaysia. Moreover, through a close study and analysis of Malaysia's political terrain prior to the 2008 general elections, we observed that numerous controversial issues and events that engulfed the ruling coalition government, which were effectively divulged via the internet reduced the ruling government's public confidence and provided the opposition and civil society activists with tremendous leverage in amassing electoral support against the ruling coalition. Based on these observations, the article contends that the intensity of contestations surrounding a particular government coupled with the judicious use of the internet as its channel of dissemination, significantly aids the course of political change.

Keywords : internet, social capital, ruling coalition, opposition, elections, Malaysia.

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VIRTUAL CIVIL SOCIETYMALAYSIAS 2008 GENERAL ELECTIONS REVISITED

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I. Introduction

The 12th Malaysia general elections of March 2008 marked a significant milestone in the history of Malaysian politics. The outcome of the elections was unprecedented following unfolding electoral results and events that completely reconfigured the entire political scene of Malaysia. The elections marked the dramatic comeback of opposition parties to real time opposition politics after almost four decades in oblivion hence, ushered in a new era of politics for a scathed ruling multi-party coalition, the Barisan Nasional that finally lost its two-thirds majority seats in parliament for the first time since 1969.

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It is pertinent that the political change that emerged from the elections was due to numerous contestations from unfolding political issues that ranged inter alia from a deteriorating state of the economy and Political oppression to the increasing precarious state of ethno-religious relations in the country that over the years has left many Malaysians disgruntled. In light of all these, was the formation of a remarkable and resilient social capital among Malaysians, who ardently used the ballot box to bring about change to Malaysia's political landscape. Aside the crucial roles assumed by formal and informal offline networks that informed and wove the fabric of political awareness amongst Malaysians, the internet in the 2008 elections was formidable as it deepened and strengthened the social capital that forcefully swept Malaysia's body politic with powerful winds of change.

The internet in the 2008 elections was an indispensable political instrument for both the incumbent ruling government and the opposition. However, the intensity of its significance was particularly in favour of the opposition, who had used it effectively to expose numerous political issues that engulfed the ruling coalition government. In addition, the internet served as the main credible source of information for most Malaysians, and provides civil society groups and concerned citizens with crucial contents for deliberation as it promotes citizen involvement and engagement. In the 2008 elections, the internet registered its importance by surpassing all other sources of disseminating information so much so that the aftermath of the elections got the ruling coalition government to reckon with the internet as the main driver behind their worst election losses in its history (Ramirez, 2008).

State policy on the media is a fundamental factor that determines the effectiveness of media sources. The mainstream media in Malaysia is controlled by government, with information easily distorted to favour the regime, and ownership of the private media companies are mostly controlled by pro-government elites. Besides, the strict codes associated with media practice, ownership and licensing could be taken as a deliberate ploy to restrict potential media sources,who are likely to justify the neutral roles associated with media practice, which consequently, may be detrimental to the agendas of the ruling coalition. These factors inter alia are tenable justification

behind increased reliance on the internet by Malaysians, which aside from providing credible information, serves as a unifying source of collective social bonding amongst groups that constitute the vanguard for political change like the opposition, civil society activists and minority groups.

Electoral events normally invoke cravings for regular updates among the electorate, and given the nature of the mainstream media in Malaysia, the internet effectively filled the void as it hosted a large array of functions that were directly linked to the 2008 general elections. It is on this note the present article looks back at the 2008 general elections to examine the dynamism of the internet and how it was instrumental to the opposition and civil society activists in bringing about an unprecedented political change. The rest of the article is organized as follows. The next section presents a review of related literature. Section three sheds light on Malaysia's political and electoral landscape. Section four examines the catalysts underpinning internet usage in the run up to the 2008 general elections. Section five analyzes the dimensions through which the internet was used to influence the elections, while conclusions are presented in section six.

II. Review of Related Literature

The internet is a collection of networks connected to other networks to form a huge network (McLaughlin et al., 1995) and since it connects people, it becomes a social network, the base for social capital (Ferlander, 2003). The 1990's saw the rise and increased versatility of the internet in unprecedented dimensions. While it has had tremendous positive impacts on political, economic and social development of individuals, groups, businesses and governments; it has simultaneously, inflicted collateral damage when likened to activities of terrorist groups, criminal networks, fraudsters and underground economies (Diebert and Rohozinski, 2010).

Looking at its social benefits, the internet has offered new hope to deliberative groups, proponents of democratic ideals and humanitarian groups as it provides an improved forum for political debate, one that involves geographically disparate citizens, where issue relevance matters, status is less important, and arguments are evaluated based on their strength (Downey and Fenton, 2003). The process of online deliberation literally builds social capital and trust amongst deliberative groups; which is an ongoing bonding process that gathers momentum and the force required to effect change to a particular status quo (see Yang, 2009a).

Social capital is a capability that arises from the prevalence of trust in a society or in parts of it. It can be embodied in the smallest and most basic social group, the family, as well as the largest of all groups, the nation,

and in all the other groups in between (Fukuyama, 1995). It is basically the unison of individuals and groups on the basis of trust, mutual agreement and cooperation, all in a quest to enshrine democratic ideals. It is strategically the ability of citizens to articulate and organize requests for good government.

Robert Putnam delineates social capital as encompassing two forms namely; network capital and participatory capital (Putnam, 1996, 2000). On one hand, he attributes network capital to relations with friends, neighbors, relatives, and workmates that significantly provide companionship, emotional aid, goods and services, information, and a sense of belonging. While participatory capital on the other hand involves engagement in politics and voluntary organizations that affords opportunities for people to bond, create joint accomplishments, and aggregate and articulate their demands and desires.

Participatory capital is usually perceived as contentious particularly in authoritarian regimes that are hegemonic, and always sensitive to public critic and protest. Good examples are China, Malaysia and Singapore, all of which are highhanded and intolerant to social movements and dissent. To make up for this shortfall, civil society groups resort to the internet to strengthen the much needed social capital required to engage and empower society. This assertion complements Kraut et al. (1998); Lin (2001) and Wellman's (2001) theses where they contend that when people are tucked away in their homes rather than conversing in cafes, then perhaps they are going online; chatting online one-to-one; exchanging e-mail in duets or small groups; ranting, and organizing in discussion groups such as newsgroups and political groups. Such online activities marks the genesis of a more purposeful online activism that takes the form of online petitions, protests, sabotage and campaigns that can be found in blogs, internet bulletin boards, podcasts and activities such as website hacking (Yang, 2009b), which are ways of expressing citizen concerns over particular political, social, economic and cultural conditions.

It is logical to stress that the internet reinforces and sets the agenda for what happens offline; this is so given its elusive significance in bringing people together and getting them involved, providing detailed and credible information on crucial issues, and provides a whole range of ways with which people can influence a phenomenon (see Purdam and Crisp, 2009).

Most studies view the increasing use of the internet as a justification against the mainstream media, which increasingly have become political tools with limited power of neutrality to disseminate information and open for critical analysis, contentious issues pertaining to an incumbent government (see Weiss, 2005; Mertzger et al., 2003). This is why Gomez and Chang (2010: 3-4) through a critical empirical analyses of political events in Malaysia and Singapore, argued

that online citizen journalism emerged as a sum total of the activities of individuals and civil society groups aimed at correcting political bias in the mainstream media. Similarly, in Johnson and Kaye's (2004) online survey to investigate how weblogs users view the credibility of blogs as compared to traditional media and other online sources. In their findings, weblogs users judged blogs as highly credible more than traditional sources in terms of depth of information. Based on their findings, Jonson and Kaye (2004) came to the conclusion that blogs are new and better journalism that is opinionated, independent, and personal, and an avenue where so-called professional journalists source story tips, information, and gain access to stories. Lending credence to these studies, Greer (2003) argues that the credibility of information derived from the internet stem to be the force driving more people to go online. We would like to stress here that the online process in search of credible information gradually exposes online users to current and critical events that usually invoke automatic involvement and engagement, which becomes an exercise that is exhibited both online and offline.

Other studies attribute online activism and rising internet communities to the authoritarian disposition of many states around the world. Authoritarian states are characterized by repression and subjugation of human rights and civil liberty. They are highly sensitive to dissent and are readily set to deploy instruments of coercion to defuse and quell any form of dissidence. In such political settings, internet usage is indispensable and critical to civil society groups, as it serves as their only channel of expression and an avenue to clamour for change. Healy (2001) placed emphasis on the importance, benefits and contribution of the internet to modern societies especially those restrained in one form or another from socio-economic and political inclusion. He argued that the internet provides powerful opportunities for people to enhance their lives and change them for good. He went on to suggest that improved access to the internet helps people to develop new skills, improve their employability and confidence, which in turn, regenerate their communities. This is further strengthened by Diamond (2010), who emphasized that the internet serves as a formidable 'liberation technology' that empowers individuals, facilitate independent communication and mobilization, and strengthen an emergent civil society.

All sources of media ought to be agents of social capital, but due to the immense influence social capital has on the political and electoral processes, governments, especially less democratic ones engage in full time war either to gain control of the media sources or to get them completely inactive, merely to safeguard a status quo. Unfortunately, while control of the mainstream media seems feasible, complete overhaul of the internet has remained a mirage for

governments and as such, its credibility and popularity amongst people continue to expand in great magnitude. This is why Rahimi (2003) through an in depth analysis of the different phases of contestations between internet users and authorities in Iran, argue that the internet as a powerful medium of interaction together with its users, are ever defiant to any form of strict control by authorities, hence proves to be hugely effective as an uncontrollable political site of resistance.

Moreover, as political control of the internet becomes more sophisticated, so do forms of resistance. A case in point is Yang's (2009b) observation in China where the government strives hard to control the internet through keyword filtering, site blocking and other means of watching and controlling what people do online. In response, Chinese netizens developed ingenious methods of dealing with internet control, which range from running multiple blogs or the use of overseas servers to host their sites; using chatrooms for secret meetings as well as using the versatility of the Chinese language to create characters that easily beat the best filtering technologies (Yang, 2009b: 35; see similarly, Rahimi, 2008: 46-50).

Numerous websites notably, Youtube, Twitter, Facebook and a host of personal blog sites have become powerful tools of protest and change against political systems. During Iran's 2009 controversial elections for example, Iranians were ardently blogging, posting to Facebook and, most visibly, coordinating their protests on Twitter, with a couple of Twitter feeds taken as virtual media offices for the supporters of the leading opposition candidate (Stone and Cohen, 2009). These inter alia underscore the intensity of the internet as an uncompromising tool of change in a political arena that is fraught with contestations.

iii. Malaysia's Political and Electoral Landscape

The political system in Malaysia since 1957 has been described differently by researchers. Crouch (1996) regards it as 'semi-authoritarian state', that is, a state that integrates and exhibit simultaneously, democratic and undemocratic principles of political administration. Closely in tandem with Crouch (1996), is Case's (1993, 2001) description of Malaysia's political landscape as a 'semi-democracy' and 'pseudo democracy' given the fact that the government constrains and at the same time allows elements of democratic governance to thrive. Following a similarly trend, Jesudason (1996) regards Malaysia as a 'syncretic state', that is, a doctrinaire and responsive state that justifies economic development by structuring politics and social life in the country.

In addition to the country's contrasting shades of political governance, is the existence of a multi-racial society with deep cleavages along ethnic and religious

lines. Such primordial ethnic cleavages bred suspicion, hatred and antagonism, with the inter-racial riots of 1969 that claimed many lives justifying this claim. Authoritarianism was perceived as the panacea for the stability of the country's diverse and precarious race relations, as well as a conduit through which economic progress can be sustained.

The semi-authoritarian nature of the political system, coupled with the pattern of political mobilization on ethnic lines, promoted by political parties, is an irrefutable reason why elections has been characterized by the following: a single coalition party the Barisan Nasional (BN) that monopolized and consistently controlled the majority of contested seats in the parliament, while agents of social capital like the electronic and print media are strictly controlled by the state. The mainstream media literally does not serve as a conduit for dissenting voices, neither does it present the expectations and outcry of ordinary Malaysians and consequently, shuns contestations that emanate from the opposition and civil society. In addition, there are numerous draconian laws, of which, the dreaded Internal Security Act (ISA), is used to selectively intimidate opposition as it authorizes detention without legal recourse, renewable indefinitely at the command of the Minister of Internal Security.

Electoral processes and outcomes in Malaysia, except in 1969 have always been routine, with the ruling coalition, Barisan Nasional, consistently claiming election victories which puts it in the hegemonic position of running the government. The independent electoral commission seems to have lost its apolitical status given the excessive interference in the affairs of the commission by the incumbent government (Ufen, 2008). Furthermore, the ruling coalition indulges in gerrymandering of constituencies, which gives it unfair leverage over opposition parties during elections. In the same vein, the control of massive public funds by the ruling government helped to enshrine an electoral and the political system that is fraught with money politics, cronyism and ethnic patronage, all of which saturates electoral ethics and distorts the outcome of political and electoral events in favour of the ruling coalition government (see Gomez, 1994, 1999). All these, inter alia, attribute to the fairly weak electoral competition from the opposition.

iv. Catalysts of Political Change

To screen the influence of the internet in the 2008 general elections, it is imperative to briefly examine the obtrusive political issues that invoked public electoral concern; with the internet as the site for credible information, deliberation and assessment of socio-political and electoral events. This is necessary given the fact that certain social, political and economic conditions stem to act as the drivers that define the direction and intensity of internet usage.

a) The Reformasi Spirit

The genesis of the change that was observed in the 2008 general elections dates back to the 1998 Reformasi movement initiated by Anwar Ibrahim and his supporters following his dismissal from office as the deputy prime minister and finance minister by the former Prime Minister, Mahathir Mohamad. The movement which swept across the country pulled an astonishing confluence of about 30,000 to 100,000 people in demonstrations and rallies against the long-standing Barisan Nasional coalition government, demanding for an end to cronyism and for democratic freedoms (Clarke, 1998). The movement was a wakeup call for a bourgeoning and frustrated middle class and the poor, and a real test of social capital among Malaysians as it never turned racial, but more issue based, which continued until Anwar Ibrahim was arrested and jailed in late 1998. Still very fresh in the minds of many, the 2008 elections provided a convenient rallying avenue for the Reformasi movement, which in the words of Welsh (2008) is a 'spirit that lives on' among a large array of supporters viz. Malays, non-Malays, civil rights groups and a sizeable number of non-governmental organizations.

b) Ahmad Abdullah Badawi's Blunder

The high hopes for change many Malaysians had in the government of Ahmad Abdullah Badawi, who succeeded Mahathir Mohamad that ruled the country for 22 years, resulted in the ruling coalition's landslide victory in the 2004 general elections (see Table 1). Badawi's popularity was quickly dashed barely a year after he assumed office. It started with his failure to meet up his election promises such as checking and putting an end to corrupt practices and improving racial and religious relations amongst races and groups. Instead, poverty aggravated as inequalities continued to widen, increased price hikes of basic essentials like petrol, food stuffs, housing and healthcare, raising the cost of living without any improvement in income.

Tackling corruption which was one of his major campaign promises became even more conspicuous yet, with little or no effort to bring corrupt officials to book. Many examples of Badawi's failures abound. There were alleged accusations leveled against his former deputy, Najib Razak, now Prime Minister being involved in the murder of Altantuya Shariibuu, a Mongolian model and translator as well as profiteering from the government's purchase of Rusian fighter jets and French submarines – all of which were never investigated. Another example was the corrupt practice evident in the authorization of thousands of so-called approved permits (APs) by the minister of international trade and industry, Rafidah Aziz, allowing well-connected Malays to buy imported passenger cars at discounted rates.

Also the affirmative action policy which has from the early 1970's been one of unfair advantage

enjoyed by the Malays was given additional boost as delegates from the UMNO party congress voted in favor of the extension of the policy. Ethnic tensions was intensified on Badawi's watch when delegates attacked the non-Malay and non-Muslim Chinese and Indian population, referring to them as pendatang (recent arrivals), with a prominent UMNO leader who was also the education minister waving a keris (a traditional Malay dagger) insinuating a repeat of the 1969 bloodshed should the so-called pendatang challenge the rightful privileges of the Malays. All these, coupled with his strained relations with his predecessor, Mahathir Mohamad, over cancellations of some of Mahathirs's prestigious development projects added insults to injury as Mahathir mounted series of severe attacks criticizing Badawi as incompetent, wishy-washy and ineffectual - these among other things, bred distrust, loss of confidence in Badawi's government especially by the working class and the poor.

Table 1: Number of Seats won in the National Parliament by the Ruling Coalition and the Opposition 1959-2008

Year	Ruling Coalition	Opposition	Total
	Seats	Seats	
1959*	74	30	104
1964*	89	15	104
1969	95	49	144
1974	135	19	154
1978	130	24	154
1982	132	22	154
1986	148	29	177
1990	127	53	180
1995	162	30	192
1999	148	45	193
2004	198	20	219
2008	140	82	222

With the exception of Sabah and Sarawak (West Malaysia).
Source : Compiled from Election Commission of Malaysia.

c) Tactical Comeback of the Opposition

The understanding and cooperation that reigned among the three opposition parties over the 2008 elections was remarkable. In spite of their religious and ideological differences, consensus on approach and direction to be taken was always realized, which made it possible to field one opposition candidate for each constituency, with this; it guaranteed undivided votes for the opposition. In addition, the opposition parties' message of "change" premised on a more equitable and practical redistribution of national wealth, the dismantling of monopolies, and a more responsible government were consistent and penetrating, hence, attracted more support. Furthermore, they backed their messages with contentious revelations that discredited

the ruling coalition's alleged corrupt government. An example is the posting of a video clip showing a prominent lawyer V.K. Lingam on the phone, brokering Supreme Court appointments. To further consolidate their cohesive strategies, they presented as electoral candidates, professionals and business men with credible credentials that would make change feasible. This is in sharp contrast to the ruling coalition that was rather complacent and was not arduous in their efforts to woo voters' confidence.

d) A Confident Malay Electorate

The unjust treatment of Anwar Ibrahim by the government of Mahathir in light of trumped-up charges of sodomy and corruption leveled against him did not go down well with both Malays and non-Malays. The Malays felt that the authorities' handling of Anwar Ibrahim impinged an important cultural norm which holds that a ruler must always respect a subject's dignity, even when that subject has erred, and Mahathir was seen to have breached this implicit social contract (Chin and Huat, 2009: 75). The Malays advertently expressed their displeasure on the false promises and the continued arrogance and over-confidence of the ruling coalition that went ahead to call for elections in March 2008 far before the original specified date of May 2009 – a ploy to boycot Anwar Ibrahim from contesting as he was due to be released around that period. In light of these, a more enlightened Malay electorate saw good reasons why the Barisan Nasional-led government deserves a payback via the ballot box.

V. THE INTERNET AND THE 2008 GENERAL ELECTIONS

The emergence and rising trend of internet usage has been ongoing long before the 2008 general elections (see Table 2). Moreover, there have been quite a number of socio-political blog sites such as that of the recalcitrant blogger, Raja Petra Kamarudin (www.malaysia-today.net), those of the opposition party members viz. Anwar Ibrahim (anwaribrahimblog.com), Lim Kit Siang (blog.limkitsiang.com), Jeff Ooi (Screenshots at www.jeffooi.com), Tony Pua (www.tonypua.blogspot.com), Nik Azmi Nik Ahmad (www.niknazmi.com) and those of human rights activists like Malik Imtiaz Sarwar (malikimtiaz.blogspot.com), Susan Loone (www.sloone.wordpress.com), M. Bakri Musa (www.bakrimusa.com); and a host of similar blog sites that unveil, deliberate and challenge political issues in the country. Alongside these blog sites, is the outstanding role of Malaysiakini, the only independent online newspaper that reports groundbreaking news on unfolding developments in the country.

Table 2 : Internet Usage and Population Growth in Malaysia

Year	Users	Population	% of Population	Usage Source
2000	3,700,000	24,645,600	15.00%	ITU
2005	10,040,000	26,500,699	37.90%	C.I. Almanac
2006	11,016,000	28,294,120	38.90%	ITU
2007	13,528,200	28,294,120	47.80%	MCMC
2008	15,868,000	25,274,133	62.80%	MCMC
2009	16,902,600	25,715,819	65.70%	ITU
2010	16,902,600	26,160,256	64.60%	ITU

Source: Internet World Stats – Usage and Population Statistics.
http://www.internetworldstats.com/asia/my.htm

46

The momentum of internet usage as well as the large array of bourgeoning blog sites has been evident right before the 2004 general elections, but why was its impacts only felt with great intensity in the 2008 elections? As earlier asserted, the internet is only a force used to meet an end and not an end in itself. This is so given the nature of the internet, with its effects shaped by actions of governments, civil society and individuals. Most importantly, the degree and shades of socio-political and economic events within a political system determines the effects of the internet since controversy is good for business, disagreement raises interest and together with anonymity is the buildup of site traffic (Yang, 2009b). This serves to explain the infant and timely arrival of Badawi, whose gentility, alluring persona as well as an appropriate replacement for Mahathir (who perhaps has overstayed his welcome) enjoyed unparalleled public support with little or no contestation, but optimistic expectations prior to the 2004 general elections. Sadly, the blunder witnessed during Badawi's premiership awakened and aggravated an existing angst that forcefully backfired following the outcome of the 2008 general elections.

a) *Independent Online News Site*

Prior to the 2008 general elections, web postings and activities of Malaysiakini as well as blog postings on sites of opposition members, human rights groups and supporters of the opposition were crucial to the elections. For instance, aside the credible and up-to-date information made available by Malaysiakini, which is rare in the mainstream media; Malaysiakini in March 2008, provided free access for the duration of the election campaign and attracted 2,134,301 unique visitors that month with a monthly average traffic of one million unique visitors for the year (Malaysiakini.com, 2008). The online news site in the 2008 general elections practically filled the void created by the mainstream media so much so that its success heralded the arrival many independent online news and information operations, which amongst many others include; Malaysian Insider (www.malaysianinsider.com), Malaysian Mirror (www.malaysianmirror.com) and Free Malaysia Today (www.freemalaysiatoday.com).

b) *Independent and Opposition Blog Sites*

The series of controversial information that Raja Petra Kamarudin's Malaysia-today.com disseminates puts him in the fore front as a prominent blogger, who was forced into exile after charges of sedition and criminal defamation were leveled against him. He had always made the Barisan Nasional-led government uneasy and his efforts prior to the election period were highly instrumental. For instance, his blog uploaded classified cabinet papers on the RM12.5 billion Port Klang Free Zone scandal, though accessibility was short lived, allegedly blocked by the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (MCMC) (Malaysiakini.com, 2009). He also implicated the prime minister, Najib Abdul Razak, and his wife, Rosmah Mansor, in the murder of a Mongolian lady, Altantuya Shariibuu; and associated the inspector-general of police, Musa Hassan, with organized crime. All these constitute powerful accusations that aroused public interest both online and offline, which further infuriates and alienates public trust in the Barisan Nasional-led government.

Opposition blog sites were also instrumental to the 2008 elections. These blog sites were well coordinated in that the messages they sent to readers were coherent, uniform and targeted the key issues of the government and its response to the economy and inflation, its treatment of minorities, the erosion of public confidence in the judiciary, the police and the prime minister. Furthermore, opposition blog sites provided information about candidates and reported on events, exposed the ruling coalition's excesses and also served as an avenue to solicit donations. For instance, money politics was exposed online when a candidate of the Barisan Nasional during his campaign offered RM200 cash to residents over 60 years, though he lost the election (Lee, 2009). Online donations recorded some successes such as the online donation drive by blogger-turned candidate Jeff Ooi who raised tens of thousands of dollars online, which aided his landslide victory; and Badrul Hisham, who contested in elections against the prime minister's son-in-law, raised more than RM30,000 within a week (Sufian, 2010).

In spite of the ruling coalition's efforts at improving websites and recruiting 'cybertroopers' to counter pro-opposition messages, Anwar Ibrahim's website was observed to have defied this move given the fact that his website stood above other websites and

displayed recent political and electoral developments in the country when keyword "politics" is keyed and searched for in any of the main internet search engines (Ahmad Rizal Mohd Yusof, 2008). While other opposition blog sites recorded quite a considerable number of online visitors, Anwar Ibrahim's blog site was perceived to have record highs of 15,000 visitors in the period leading to the elections.

Mahathir's resort to blogging to discredit his successor also paid off. This literally provides an unwavering justification to the online community, amongst whom are prospective voters, that the Barisan Nasional, with its leader, Ahmad Abdullah Badawi is steering the country into a perfect storm. With such infighting in the Barisan Nasional-led government, it may not be surprising that some members within the party may own and have operated disguised websites specifically to feed the public with disparaging and pernicious information about happenings in the government of Ahmad Abdullah Badawi, simply for some ulterior motives.

c) Mobile Telephony and Visual File Sharing

Short message service (SMS) and video uploads, sharing and playback were efficiently utilized by the opposition and their supporters. Barrage of SMS carrying useful campaign messages and election updates were used to saturate voters in different constituencies. The messages were used to inform voters on current electoral developments and provide leads to opposition websites were they can find comprehensive election gist and guides. The use of the SMS as a campaign tool was amplified when on the eve of the election day, a pre-recorded audio message by Anwar Ibrahim was sent to several tens of thousands of voters in targeted constituencies asking them to vote for change.

Video uploads unto file sharing websites like youtube assisted the opposition to cushion their denial of campaign space on the mainstream television channels. The opposition largely utilized youtube to showcase its events and speeches. Similarly a large number of user generated materials, which in many ways portray a somewhat negative image of the ruling coalition were found on youtube. An example is the video clip of V.K. Lingam, a prominent lawyer on the phone, brokering Supreme Court appointments. Another example is the more popular video clip showing the Malaysian prime minister asleep at various public events. These video clips send different messages to voters, one of which may be the insinuation of unserious and corrupt officials that constitutes the ruling coalition government.

VI. CONCLUSIONS

The internet with its power to forge a resilient social capital and effect change in a particular political arena has time and again, been proven to be a powerful

force to reckon with. In the run up to elections, the flow of information and channels of communication are indispensable to galvanizing public support. However, we have argued that the intensity of contestations that shrouds a government together with the types of information and messages fed unto the internet stem to define the degree to which the internet can forcefully drive the course of change. This is consistent with the opposition that systematically utilized the internet to woo voters by capitalizing on a large array of controversies that haunt the ruling coalition.

Hard lessons have been learnt by the ruling coalition so much so that it is left with little or no option but to change course if it aspires to return to its full political glory. Currently, the only noticeable change in Najib Tun Razak's government is the reconciliatory "1 Malaysia" policy that is hoped to unite all Malaysians irrespective of ethnic and religious differences. This effort is in the right direction, but it is not enough to win back the support of the electorate, who have come to understand that power resides with them. After all, policies that have long been abhorred by most Malaysians such as the Internal Security Act (ISA) and the affirmative action policy of the NEP are still very well protected by the present government. With these policies still in place, the electorate would rather align further with the opposition, with the hope that the opposition would make way for real time change. Though, this also depends on the sustainability of the cohesion binding the opposition and how well they justify the mandate given to them by the electorate.

For now, the internet has come to remain a major force to reckon with in Malaysian politics, with both the ruling coalition and the opposition well aware of its impacts when space is created for controversy. The internet and its online community have literally become the whistle blowing organ against government actions, which is most welcome for good governance.

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