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Politics in Cyberspace: New Media in Malaysia

By Meredith L. Weiss
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Content

Abstract

Internet-based media function increasingly not just for communication, but also as an extension of the public sphere, with the potential to redistribute power among a wider range of entrants and to decentralize debate. Such capacities beg the question of how the current generation of new media will change the landscape of social mobilization and politics. Notwithstanding the presumed-progressive bent of "new media" of all sorts, these media are neither all alike in their ideological leanings or intentions, nor independently capable of identity transformation and mobilization.

I explore these new media in the context of Malaysia since the late 1990s. In doing so, I differentiate among news sites, which transmit (often previously proscribed) information, with potentially significant effects on civicness and mobilization; blogs, which tend to be primarily personalized, monological, and unconcerned with objectivity or professional standards; and social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter, which have eroded the anonymity of online interaction, but may have the potential to bridge social cleavages. "Old media" still populate this landscape, as well, from newspapers and other media sources, to public lectures, to leaflets and other ad hoc publications.

There seems little evidence thus far that the rise and increasing availability and range of new media have given real reason to expect different political outcomes on grounds of new patterns of mobilization, particularly given a persistent "digital divide." What has been happening, though, is an increase in politicization broadly, and especially among urban youth, who form a formidable and aggressively-courted portion of the voting public. Those young voters with a partisan preference are more likely now than previously to exercise that preference, not just by voting, but also by finding and engaging with information and likeminded communities online or off.

At any time, media are critical to movements for sociopolitical change, beyond elections. The spread of online news sites, blogs, social networking sites, and other new media increases the odds of media coverage of all sorts of engagement going forward, and may shift the locus of framing away from the state. All the while, the quantum of information in circulation—unfiltered and

constant—grows accordingly, begging strategies for selecting what to read and what to ignore. The result is unlikely to be revolutionary, and could simply entrench existing patterns of identity politics all the more deeply, but is more likely to make Malaysia more participatory, and hence, more democratic in its politics.

Acronyms

BA	Barisan Alternatif (Alternative Front)
BN	Barisan Nasional (National Front)
DAP	Democratic Action Party
ISA	Internal Security Act
Keadilan	Parti Keadilan Nasional (National Justice Party)
MCA	Malaysian Chinese Association
MIC	Malaysian Indian Congress
MSC	Multimedia Super Corridor
NUJ	National Union of Journalists
Pakatan	Pakatan Rakyat (People's Alliance)
PAS	Parti Islam seMalaysia (Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party)
PKR	Parti Keadilan Rakyat (People's Justice Party)
PPPA	Printing Presses & Publications Act
PRM	Parti Rakyat Malaysia (Malaysian People's Party)
PSC	Parliamentary Select Committee
SEAPA	Southeast Asia Press Alliance
SMS	Short message service
UMNO	United Malays National Organisation

Malaysia's Political Situation

Overview: Communalism and Control

With a population of just over 28 million, Malaysia is comparatively small, yet positions itself as a leading force in Southeast Asia. The polity is distinctive for several reasons. First, it has a markedly stable competitive electoral authoritarian regime, with a federal structure in which state-level governments do have real authority in certain areas. (Local elections, though, were eliminated in the 1970s.) Heading that regime is the Barisan Nasional (National Front, BN) coalition, comprised of the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO, the dominant partner), Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA), Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC), and a cluster of smaller parties. The BN bases its political legitimacy upon a mixture of economic performance and popular sovereignty, even though multiparty elections are far from fully free or fair.

Second, Malaysian politics is largely structured along "communal" (racial) lines. Almost precisely half the population is Malay (14.2 of 28.3 million); all Malays are legally bound to be and remain Muslim (and most Malaysian Muslims are Malay). Malays, plus another 3.3 million indigenes, comprise the privileged category, *bumiputera* ("sons of the soil"). 6.4 million are classified as "Chinese" (regardless of regional/linguistic subcategory), 1.9 million are "Indian" (i.e., of South Asian descent), and fully 2.3 million are non-citizens.[1] A comprehensive system of affirmative action, launched under British colonial rule and stepped up in the early 1970s, funnels economic and educational benefits, as well as a preponderance of positions in the civil service, to Malays. The leading members of the ruling BN coalition are communal parties for Malays, Chinese, and Indians, respectively, and most citizens vote and identify primarily on ethnic grounds. Given this diversity, Malaysian society is also thoroughly multilingual; while all learn Malay in school, most Malaysians (and nearly all non-Malays) speak at least one other language.

Third, Malaysia is an upper middle income state, with a growing middle-class population. In line with former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad's "Vision

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1   Department of Statistics, Malaysia. "Population and Vital Statistics" http://www.statistics.gov.my/portal/download_Buletin_Bulanan/files/BPBM/2011/NOV/05_Population.pdf   (table 2.1), accessed 16 Jan. 2012.

2020" plan, Malaysia aspires to achieve fully developed status within the decade, by the year 2020. GNP per capita stands currently at USD7,760, with a literacy rate of 92 percent and an urbanization rate of 72 percent (and slowly rising).[2] The population of university students was just over one million in 2010 and increasing steadily.[3] Overall, economic development has outpaced political change.

All that is not to say that Malaysian politics is static. There had been rumblings of change previously, particularly at times of economic downturn (for instance, in the mid-1980s) and generally involving new efforts at collaboration among normally-segregated opposition parties. However, circumstances surrounding the Asian financial crisis of 1997-98, and particularly the *Reformasi* movement launched then by deposed deputy prime minister Anwar Ibrahim, kicked off a more enduring drift toward a two-coalition order. The 10th general elections in 1999 saw an unusually energetic effort to forge common ground among Parti Islam seMalaysia (Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party, PAS); the Chinese-based, left-wing Democratic Action Party (DAP); Parti Keadilan Nasional (National Justice Party, Keadilan), newly established by Anwar's wife; and the small, left-wing Parti Rakyat Malaysia (Malaysian People's Party, PRM). Supported also by a broad array of civil societal organizations, this Barisan Alternatif (Alternative Front, BA) coalition did pare down the BN's share of the popular vote and captured a second state-level government (PAS already controlled one). However, it failed either to make greater electoral inroads or to work out serious policy disagreements hindering opposition cooperation (Funston 2000; Weiss 2000).

The still-fractured opposition fared poorly in 2004, before surging anew in 2008: the DAP, PAS, and Parti Keadilan Rakyat (People's Justice Party, PKR, formed of the merger of Keadilan and PRM), coordinated to avoid splitting the opposition vote, together winning nearly half the popular vote, over one-third of parliamentary seats, and five of thirteen state governments.[4] Soon

2   World Bank, Data: Malaysia, http://data.worldbank.org/country/malaysia, accessed 23 Jan. 2012.
3   Kementerian Pengajian Tinggi Malaysia, *Indikator Pengajian Tinggi*, 2009-2010, http://www.mohe.gov.my/web_statistik/indikator_pengajian_tinggi_2009-2010.pdf, accessed 23 January 2012, p. 7.
4   Bridget Welsh, "Election Post-mortem: Top 10 Factors." *Malaysiakini*, 12 March 2008, http://www.malaysiakini.com/news/79677, accessed 7 February 2012. PAS has controlled Kelantan since 1990, and Penang has long evinced opposition leanings, but the more central, urbanized states of Selangor and Perak, along with comparatively rural Kedah, also fell to the opposition in 2008. Perak's state government reverted to the BN a year later, after three Pakatan representatives defected.

after the polls, the three parties united formally in the Pakatan Rakyat coalition (People's Alliance, Pakatan). At each of these junctures, the at least loosely-connected opposition has stressed issues of civil liberties, good governance, equitable development, and alternatives to communalism. Those same issues are likely to surface in the upcoming 13th general elections, due by early 2013, but widely expected to be called in early 2012.

Civil Society and Political Culture

Malaysia's formally-democratic order foregrounds political parties in processes of political change. That said, non-party actors and organizations have played significant roles, not least in helping to formulate and build support for new electoral coalitions and platforms (Weiss 2006). In keeping with Malaysia's "semi-democratic" order, civil society operates in a constrained space. A cluster of laws delimits that space, chief among them the Societies Act, but including also the Police Act, the Universities and University Colleges Act, and auxiliary laws restricting speech, assembly, and the press (on which more below). Moreover, civil society is not immune to the communalism that pervades formal politics; while a subset of issue-oriented groups and coalitions do effectively cross ethnic bounds, others cater primarily to members of one ethnic (or religious) community (Weiss 2003). Even so, the presence and activity of a wide and growing range of civil society organizations significantly widens the public sphere in Malaysia, enhancing the democratic character of the polity and expanding possibilities for political change, whether in the direction of Islam, noncommunalism, or something else.

Perhaps even more than in fully democratic or authoritarian contexts, civil society in Malaysia comprises a core part of the public sphere, and also helps to mold political culture broadly. Even within the portion of civil society that is neither apolitical nor regime-supporting, though, serious divisions persist. The main camps within civil society may be defined along a religious/secular axis, a linguistic (and predominantly communal) axis, or in terms of specific issue positions, for instance regarding women's rights. Most important for political developments are Islamist and liberal/left segments, including the political discourses they help to circulate.

Importantly, political life has rarely been violent in Malaysia; those groups that mobilize to support or oppose either a party or a position generally adopt nonviolent tactics, and the Malaysian military has never held anywhere near the political salience of counterparts elsewhere in the region. All the same,

the public sphere is far from a zone of tolerance. Constitutional amendments after Malay–Chinese racial riots following the May 1969 elections removed "sensitive issues" such as the constitutionally-protected special status of *bumiputera* from public debate. Issues related to Islam and racial preferences continue to raise hackles, however, extending to threats (rarely fulfilled) or symbolic acts of violence or aggression.[5] Both civil society organizations and political parties have made serious efforts to bridge those divisions, building coalitions around common issues of concern (for instance, the noncommunal Women's Agenda for Change initiative launched in the late 1990s or Article 11 Coalition for religious freedom in the 2000s, 2007 and 2011 electoral reform initiatives described below, or the Pakatan Rakyat itself). At the same time, factors ranging from BN provocation of particular communities to the effects of polarized new media continue to sustain underlying tensions.

Indeed, media represent an increasingly significant part of civil society and political culture, although that role is not new. Some of the earliest sociopolitical organizations in colonial Malaya and Singapore centered around newspapers, literature, and writing; radical journalists and newspaper unions waged or promoted foundational political contests; and student- or NGO-run media have been critical since at least the 1950s to independent, critical discourse. As will be detailed further below, the scope and scale of independent media have grown exponentially since the late 1990s, as internet-based forms have taken root. "Media activism," or tactics that use media for purposes of social mobilization, have grown increasingly central, in turn, to civil societal repertoires.

The Regional and International Setting

While press laws in Malaysia are determined domestically and are minimally responsive to the international context, the regional and global setting still bear mention. Some aspects that might on face appear germane are hardly so—for instance, the still-developing human rights mechanisms of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), of which Malaysia is a founding member. Moreover, while Malaysia is deeply enmeshed in transnational networks for trade and commerce, international pressure has not had significant impact on local media conditions, even when foreign-run publications have faced penalties for unfavorable coverage. [6]

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5   For instance, a sporadic, but ongoing, volley of outbursts has seen severed pig and cow heads deposited at Muslim and Hindu sites, respectively.
6   Most famously, *Far Eastern Economic Review* reporter Murray Hiebert was jailed in 1999 for contempt of court, based on an article seen to impugn the integrity of a local judge.

The international context matters especially in two ways. First, Malaysians have ready access to non-local television and other media (especially electronic media) through satellite television (available by paid subscription since the mid-1990s[7]) and the internet; and second, local journalists have ties with regional (and wider) networks, particularly for press freedom. The Bangkok-based Southeast Asia Press Alliance (SEAPA), for instance, established in 1998, supports Malaysian journalists and alternative media, even though no Malaysian organizations were among the founding members (who still comprise the Board of Trustees).[8] Meanwhile, Malaysia's Centre for Independent Journalism, launched at the same time (and an associate member of SEAPA as well as a member of the International Freedom of Expression Exchange, IFEX), includes regional and international campaigns and alerts, despite its primarily domestic focus.[9] Journalists also formed a Foreign Correspondents Club Malaysia in July 2011 (officially launched by the prime minister in March 2012), which regularly hosts events and talks, including on sensitive political issues.[10] Violations of press freedom in Malaysia do meet with opprobrium overseas, not least due to these connections—although again, such condemnation seems to have little effect.

Recent Trends and Trajectories

Discussion of political change in Malaysia seldom presumes wholesale transformation. Malaysia already has a multiparty electoral system, albeit one not fully free. Moreover, opposition parties are not just present, but active. Developments since the late 1990s do suggest a trend toward political opening: electoral outcomes have fluctuated to an extent not otherwise seen since the late 1960s, and political debate is increasingly broad and lively.

Regardless, the experience of 2004 should serve to check undue optimism regarding electoral change. That year, the opposition was less well-coordinated than in 1999 or 2008, and less able to present a common platform able to challenge that of the seemingly comparatively reformist, new BN prime minister, Abdullah Ahmad Badawi. It is not clear that with the 13th general elections looming (before March 2013), the opposition is well poised to take on the BN so effectively again. De facto opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim was

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7   Given the structure of subscription packages, only those truly interested in international news coverage would likely book and pay for non-local news channels.

8   See http://www.seapabkk.org/ for details.

9   See http://cijmalaysia.org/.

10   See http://fccmalaysia.blogspot.com/ or Luke Hunt, "Malaysia Gets Press Club," *The Diplomat,* 18 August 2011, http://the-diplomat.com/asean-beat/2011/08/18/malaysia-gets-press-club/.

acquitted in January 2012 of charges—seemingly politically motivated—of sodomy, but the prosecution has appealed that decision, and his ongoing trial, plus sundry related rumors and claims, has prevented his focusing on building his coalition and representing it in parliament. Prime Minister Najib's government faces a string of allegations of corruption and malfeasance, but the economy has not been heavily affected by the global downturn (which has largely skirted Southeast Asia) and Najib has been able to deflect other major threats thus far.

Yet elections are not the only site for political change in Malaysia. Regardless of those results, the public sphere has arguably grown more "democratic" in recent years: more open to new entrants, more accommodating of diverse (even if antagonistic) viewpoints, and more voluble *between* elections. Chief among the reasons for that shift—alongside such factors as rising education rates and urbanization—is the spread of new media, which has lent Malaysians ever greater access to information, including critical viewpoints, as well as platforms to participate.

The Media in Malaysia

Overview: Ownership, Segmentation, and Regulation

Malaysian media have traditionally focused on nation-building, social cohesion, and "responsible" journalism (Kenyon and Marjoribanks 2007, 104), rather than on, for instance, critical engagement or freedom of information. Local media face real constraints. Freedom House gave Malaysia a score of 64 out of 100 for press freedom in 2011 (0 is best; 100 is worst). The organization declared Malaysia's press "not free" (its consistent assessment) and internet "partly free" (Freedom House 2011). The report cited in particular apparent pre-election efforts starting in 2010 to tighten control, from banning books and denying publication permits, to the introduction of draft legislation to regulate online media. Reporters Without Borders, too, has successively downgraded Malaysia in its annual survey of press freedom. When Malaysia plunged from 92nd place (of 169 countries surveyed) in 2006 to 124th in 2007, the organization cited the state's targeting of online journalists and bloggers in particular, and its concern with obstructing or censoring critical voices online. Malaysia has since slipped yet further, to 141 of 178 in 2010; while it rose to 122nd in 2011/12, its actual score (as opposed to relative ranking) was worse.[11]

Part of the problem is structural. Most print and broadcast media are closely tied to the BN regime, with ownership concentrated in party-linked holding companies. Together the UMNO-linked conglomerate Media Prima and Utusan Melayu group, for instance, own nearly all mainstream Malay and English-language newspapers, as well as a number of television channels and magazines. (The Ministry of Information controls primary television channels TV1 and TV2, along with radio stations.) MCA investment arm Huaren Management has owned not just Chinese-language papers, but also still controls the top-selling English-medium *Star*. The leading Tamil dailies are closely tied to the MIC; former party leader Samy Vellu's wife publishes one. And politically-connected tycoons control remaining key print and broadcast media in both peninsular and East Malaysia. Such concentration not only limits the range of perspectives presented and allows the state to manipulate

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11   Reporters Without Borders, "Press Freedom Index 2011/2012" (and drop-down list for other years), http://en.rsf.org/spip.php?page=classement&id_rubrique=1043 (accessed 7 February 2012).

media coverage, but encourages self-censorship among journalists and editors (Mustafa 2005, 30-32; Zaharom 2002). International media have historically been more openly critical, but have met with penalties for being so, particularly amid the 1997 financial crisis and attendant political unrest (Rodan 2005, 142-6, 160-2). In addition, Malaysia does have a complement of local "alternative" media, including publications linked with opposition parties and NGOs. While not immune to bans or other penalties, these media do present critical perspectives. Traditionally, too, media have been comparatively more free in less central or more opposition-leaning areas, for instance Sarawak or Penang. In that vein, the Pakatan-led Selangor state government launched the nonpartisan, community-oriented *Selangor Times* in 2010 with an open editorial policy, taking advantage of a loophole exempting federal and state government publications from publishing permit requirements.[12]

The real root of the problem, though, is constraining legislation. Although Article 10 of the Malaysian constitution grants freedom of expression, a number of specific laws, along with well-entrenched norms, limit that right. All citizens' speech is curbed particularly by the Sedition Act and the Internal Security Act (ISA, an initially-anticommunist law which allows preventive detention without trial for a wide range of offenses),[13] but media are subject to additional controls. The most targeted of these laws are the Printing Presses & Publications Act (PPPA) of 1984 for print media, which requires that all periodicals obtain an annual (and easily-revocable) permit, and the Broadcasting Act of 1988 for television (Wang 2001, 80-83).

While internet access is pervasive and growing, most Malaysians still obtain their news through print and broadcast media. An opinion survey shortly after the 2008 elections, for instance, found that the internet was the main source of election-related news for only 9 percent of respondents, at least in part reflecting disparities in internet access. At the same time, a minority of respondents rated mainstream media even somewhat favorably in terms of truthfulness, fairness, objectivity, breadth of opinions covered, or ethics.[14] Moreover, mainstream media in particular, like the population they

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12 See "Selangor, the place we call home," *Selangor Times,* 26-28 November 2010, p. 2.
13 Prime Minister Najib announced in September 2011 that his government would repeal the ISA and replace it with new, more targeted security laws. See Shannon Teoh, "Najib announces repeal of ISA, three emergency declarations," *Malaysian Insider,* 16 September 2011, http://www.themalaysianinsider.com/malaysia/article/najib-announces-repeal-of-isa-three-emergency-declarations/.
14 The reputable Merdeka Centre surveyed a random sample of 1,203 Malaysians of voting age. See Centre for Independent Journalism, "Media Independence Survey 2008," available for download at http://www.cijmalaysia.org/images/documents/media%20independence%20survey%202008%20-%20main%20findings%20charts.pdf (especially pp. 10, 33, and 39).

serve, remain stratified by language (and thus, ethnic community). While traditionally, Chinese-language media have been comparatively more outspoken, opposition to Huaren Management's takeover of *Nanyang Siang Pau* and *China Press* in 2001 centered around the realization that monopoly control by an MCA-linked entity would undoubtedly quell those last relatively independent outlets; their sale five years later to the tycoon who already owned the other two leading Chinese dailies triggered protests anew against his media monopoly.[15] Regardless, old media remain crucially important. That larger media landscape ultimately helps shape and constrain the space for new media.

Legislation

Traditional media are subject to the Printing Presses and Publications Act as well as other legislation, and pushed toward self-censorship to avoid potential penalties. These laws are actively enforced, with both immediate and deterrent effect. Such efforts, which simultaneously limit the free flow of threatening ideas and promote the circulation of regime-supporting messages, represent a linchpin of authoritarian praxis in Malaysia (Rodan 2005).

The state has impeded the progress of independent print media, even beyond specific, well-known crackdowns such as against *Utusan Melayu* in 1961, or 1987's Operasi Lallang, when two newspapers lost their licenses. For instance, the government has used licensing restrictions to limit the circulation of opposition party publications, most notably, PAS's widely-read *Harakah*; banned popular publications *Ekslusif, Detik,* and *Wasilah;* and impeded the circulation of international media such as *Far Eastern Economic Review* and *Asiaweek*. Television and radio are similarly hobbled (Wang 2001, 73-8).

Such efforts continue. In 2010, for instance, *The Star* received a "show cause" letter (i.e., threatening disciplinary action unless adequate justification were offered) after an article criticized the caning of three women under *syariah* (Islamic) law. With its editor accused of "insulting Islam," the paper issued an apology, plus spiked a likely-controversial piece on syariah by prominent columnist Marina Mahathir (daughter of the former PM). That same year,

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15 UMNO's takeover of *Utusan Melayu* had triggered similar protests four decades earlier. Anil Netto, "Dire Straits: If you can't beat 'em, buy 'em," *Asia Times Online*, 31 May 2001, http://www. atimes.com/se-asia/CE31Ae02.html; SEAPA, "Chinese Merger Harms Competition in Malaysia and Abroad," 12 February 2007, http://seapa.wordpress.com/2007/02/12/chinese-media-merger-harms-competition-in-malaysia-and-abroad/.

three opposition parties—PKR, DAP, and PAS—received show cause letters regarding their newsletters, although the latter two licenses were ultimately renewed. Over two dozen books were banned or seized under the PPPA in 2010, as well, embroiling also online news organization *Malaysiakini*, as the publisher of banned books of political cartoons. A senior producer from television station ntv7 resigned that year, citing "unreasonable restrictions" on broadcasting, while a radio deejay was dismissed after complaints about his interviews with an opposition politician and a gay pastor (Freedom House 2011). In the clearest violation of press freedom the following year, *Utusan Malaysia* journalist and National Union of Journalists president Mohamad Ha'ta Wahari was dismissed for criticizing his paper's editors.[16]

Challenges, Shortcomings, and Opportunities

So straitened a regulatory environment clearly stands to curb print and broadcast media, even as it underscores the value of less curtailed options: online media. Mainstream media are demonstrably limited in what they can and do cover. As media scholar Mustafa Anuar notes, the BN makes clear to local media that they are expected, if not to partner with the state toward nation-building (including by touting the BN government's accomplishments at election time and ignoring or belittling its adversaries), then at least not to challenge the state (Mustafa 2005, 27-8). Critics may overstate the extent to which mainstream media work to support state objectives, yet these media do substantially acquiesce, even if only instrumentally (George 2006, 42), as recent surveys confirm.

Specific examples abound. Cherian George, for instance, documents the manifestly different coverage in local print and online media of alleged radical religious terrorist cells in late 2001 (George 2006, 1-3). In 2006, Information Minister Zainuddin Maidin warned newspapers against covering "unnecessarily contentious" issues, a warning that played out almost immediately in a complete lack of coverage of protests against a fuel price-hike. (A BN-linked protest against a visit by US Secretary of State Condoleeza Rice the previous day, on the other hand, got full coverage.)[17]   Five years later, PM Najib's Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission summoned media executives to warn private broadcasters against discussing the forthcoming

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16   Centre for Independent Journalism, "People Must Reclaim Media; Make Their Voices Heard," 3 May 2011, http://cijmalaysia.org/2011/05/03/people-must-reclaim-media-make-their-voices-heard/.

17   "Zam's Warning Scares Media Off Demo," *Aliran*, 20 July 2006, http://aliran.com/84.html.

demonstrations against electoral malfeasance (see below)—although the government did want these media to warn people against taking part.[18]

These tendencies are especially clear at general elections. Reviewing coverage of the 2004 elections in two English-language and two Malay-language dailies (and Chinese-language dailies more summarily), Mustafa finds a clear bias in favor of the BN and against opposition parties, plus little space in the mainstream media for deep, open discussion of issues (Mustafa 2005, 32-41). Likewise, Jason Abbott's study of mainstream Malay-language newspapers[19] both between electoral cycles (taken as a control) and at the time of the 2008 elections finds a similarly clear pro-government, anti-opposition bias (Abbott 2011)—even though by this point, "new media" were sufficiently entrenched that one might have assumed the traditional media would change their tack to win back waning credibility.

Yet these constraints on mainstream options do present an opportunity for new online media. Less closely regulated than their progenitors, internet-based news sites, blogs and discussion forums, and social networking tools have come to play an increasingly critical role in expanding and liberalizing the public sphere.

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18   Jahabar Sadiq, "Private Broadcasters Told to Ignore Bersih, Warn People Against Protests," *Malaysian Insider*, 30 June 2011, http://www.themalaysianinsider.com/malaysia/article/private-broadcasters-told-to-ignore-bersih-warn-people-against-protests/.
19   The study as a whole also codes Chinese- and English-language papers.

The Internet in Malaysia

Overview: Economic Ambitions and Broader Implications

Malaysians gained access to the internet in the mid-1990s. Understanding the internet more in terms of technology and economic competitiveness than as a political threat, and eager to attract Western investors to populate an ambitious Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC), the Malaysian government opted for non-interventionist policies. A loose regulatory regime eschewed censorship (which seemed impossible, regardless) beyond maintaining existing laws for sedition, defamation, and the like (George 2006, 63-69). Constraints have been tightened somewhat since then, however, and new regulations are in the works.

What the state may not have fully foreseen is the extent to which the internet has transformed political, as well as commercial, life in Malaysia: at least in urban areas, the internet has expanded the space and shifted the character of the public sphere. Moreover, these changes extend to the internal workings of the media sector. Particularly seen in contrast to monopolistic ownership of mainstream media outlets, the inherent atomization of the internet represents a potent basis for a more democratic media order, while careers in alternative media increasingly attract students and recent graduates. That the internet functions increasingly in Malaysia as elsewhere not just for communication, but also as a social setting, lends it potential to redistribute power and open debate across ever more decentralized networks (Gong 2009, 4). Especially transformative is the rise of applications for online social networking, which may curb anonymity, allow symmetric or asymmetric connections, and knit together online and offline communities. These tools, too, may change previously private acts, like voting, into public ones, as individuals post or tweet their "status" (Linnarz 2010, 11), add "badges" (icons or images signaling support for particular causes) to Facebook profiles, or "check in" at particular venues. Such capacities beg the question of how the current generation of new media will change the landscape of social mobilization and politics.

Expansion and Usage

Statistics for internet penetration and related metrics are imprecise at best, not least since so many access the internet through cybercafés, public or workplace computers, or smartphones. Malaysia's current internet penetration rate is somewhere between 38 percent, also the Southeast Asian average,[20] and 60 percent. A 2006 survey found 59 percent of Malaysians online for at least an hour per day,[21] while both the World Bank and Freedom House estimate around 55 percent had access in 2010.[22] Summary statistics notwithstanding, Malaysia, like elsewhere, experiences a "digital divide" in access, compounded by differences in language across websites and networks (and communities thereby forged). Most notably, 80 percent of broadband networks in Malaysia are in urban areas (Freedom House 2009, 80-81)—although the rise of smart phones, among other developments, may be whittling away that disparity. Compounding Malaysia's digital divide is limited media literacy: internet access aside, a majority of Malaysians lack a clear understanding of media ownership and regulations in the country, or of the concept of "media independence," suggesting comparatively uncritical media consumption.[23]

Relatively little Malaysian internet usage is politically-oriented; entertainment is a bigger pull. Most Malaysian blogs, for instance, are not political in focus. As of a 2007 survey, 16 percent of Malaysia's top-fifty bloggers[24] wrote on politics; the highest ranked of these (at number 4) was Jeff Ooi's "Screenshots," followed (at numbers 10 and 11, respectively) by "Rocky's Bru" (blog of media activist Ahirudin Attan) and DAP leader Lim Kit Siang's blog.[25] The most comprehensive survey of Malaysian bloggers to date, with over 1,500 blog

20   TonyoCruz, "Nielsen: SG, MY, PH have highest internet penetration in region." *Asian Correspondent*, 12 July 2011, http://asiancorrespondent.com/59750/nielsen-sg-my-ph-have-highest-internet-penetration-in-region/, accessed 7 February 2012.

21   David Dizon, "New Media Challenges Malaysia's Traditional Press," *abs-cbnNEWS.com*, 18 July 2008, http://www.abs-cbnnews.com/sardines/07/18/08/new-media-challenges-malaysias-traditional-press-0, accessed 13 August 2011.

22   World Bank, "Data: Internet Users (per 100 people)," http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/IT.NET.USER.P2 (accessed 7 February 2012); Freedom House 2011.

23   Centre for Independent Journalism, "Media Independence Survey 2008," pp. 5-6, available for download at http://www.merdeka.org/pages/02_research.html.

24   The author relies on Technorati rankings, explaining that choice in detail.

25   Gaman, "50 Most Influential Blogs in Malaysia," Sabahan.com, 6 February 2007, http://www.sabahan.com/2007/02/06/50-most-influential-blogs-in-malaysia/ (accessed 11 August 2011). While these data are now slightly out of date, the trend seems consistent. For instance, a listing two years later of Malaysia's five most influential bloggers (using different criteria) included no political blogs, although one (Screenshots) earned a "notable mention." "Most influential bloggers in Malaysia," BestBlogsAsia, 28 April 2009, http://www.bestblogs.asia/influential-bloggers-malaysia.php.

readers (over half of them bloggers themselves) as respondents, found that the majority prefer personal journals to sociopolitical blogs; most of those inclined toward more political content were male and older, compared with the largely younger (and generally well-educated, middle- or upper-class) respondents. An even lower proportion of bloggers themselves prefer political blogs, and only 6 percent have such blogs. Instead, the overwhelming majority use their blogs to recount their "personal experiences," generally in English (Tan and Zawawi 2008, chap. 4). The vocal, politicized minority consists largely of politicians, activists, and journalists. Moreover, most other bloggers are not just comparatively apolitical, but largely communal in their perspectives (Tan and Zawawi 2008, 79-81). Given those realities, the regulatory tale tells only part of the story, yet goes far to explain why unfettered new media have had the effect they have on political life.

Government Policies

The Malaysian state has responded with ambivalence to the rise of new media. State elites themselves make use of these tools, yet worried about social and political implications of unhindered, open-access platforms, they have backtracked from their initial hands-off approach. New media remain largely unregulated, but not entirely so.

The Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission, established in 1998, oversees both content development and regulation for telecommunications, broadcasting, and online communications (Mohd Azizuddin 2009, 111). However, in a bid to style itself as a globally-embedded "Asian Silicon Valley" through development of the MSC, Malaysia had initially offered a Multimedia Bill of Guarantees, pledging not to censor the Internet, and had offered internet service providers relaxed licensing requirements. The government periodically noted that it could take a harder stance at any time, however (Kenyon and Marjoribanks 2007, 111; Rodan 2005, 152). As early as 1998—still in the aggressive early bloom of the MSC—Mimos, the government-linked operator of Jaring, one of Malaysia's two internet services at the time, collaborated with Malaysian police to track down several internet "rumor-mongers" who had sparked fears of riots in Kuala Lumpur. They were detained under the Internal Security Act (ISA). The process intimated (despite reassurances to the contrary) that Jaring subscribers were subject to surveillance. [26] On the other hand, Mi-

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26   "Internet Users Arrested for Spreading Riot Rumors," *AsiaBizTech*, 17 August 1998, http://web. archive.org/web/20010307122417/http://www.nikkeibp.asiabiztech.com/Database/98_ Aug/17/Mor.03.gwif.html.

mos denied involvement when access to a pro-Anwar website was blocked not long after (Wang 2001, 79).

Thus far, the government has regulated the internet primarily through general media-related and libel laws (Mohd Azizuddin 2009, 112). Among the most notorious such instances, police raided prominent news site *Malaysiakini* in 2003 in connection with its publication of a letter deemed seditious; its computers and servers were confiscated, temporarily shutting down the site.[27] The editor of the online *Malaysia Today*, Raja Petra Kamarudin, was likewise charged with sedition, then detained under the ISA, for an article he published on his site in April 2008.[28] Bloggers are not immune: the UMNO-linked New Straits Times Press set a new precedent in filing defamation suits against two critical bloggers, Jeff Ooi and Ahirudin Attan, in 2007 (Abdul Latiff 2011, 241). [29] This attack sparked the formation that year of the National Alliance of Bloggers (a.k.a. All-Blogs) as a step toward greater cooperation within the sector (Tan and Zawawi 2008, 24-29). Again in 2010, blogger Irwan Abdul Rahman (a.k.a. Hassan Skodeng) was charged with publishing false information on his blog, with a possible penalty of up to a USD1,600 fine and one year's jail (Freedom House 2011). Moreover, students overseas, some of whom have taken up blogging, have been warned that, should they be found to be spreading "misinformation" about Malaysia, they could lose their scholarships (Wang 2001, 78). And censorship, too, remains on the table. After *The Economist* was forced to black out parts of a 2011 article on the Bersih 2.0 protests for electoral reform (detailed below), but left them intact online, Prime Minister Najib called for a review of censorship laws, to encompass both print and electronic media.[30]

Perhaps even more debilitating than these attacks, though, is the simple fact of limited resources. *Malaysiakini* successfully introduced subscriptions in 2002, and still averages 50,000 daily visits (or 3 million page views per month) (Kenyon and Marjoribanks 2007, 110). Other sites, though, failed either to attract subscribers or to round up sufficient funds by other means (Kenyon and Marjoribanks 2007, 111-12). Indeed, Rodan notes that the 2003 raid on

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27 Dave Brewer, "Raid Silences Malaysian News Web Site, CNN.com, 20 January 2003, http://edition.cnn.com/2003/WORLD/asiapcf/southeast/01/20/malaysia.raid/index.html.

28 "Raja Petra Sedition Trial Starts," *Malaysian Insider,* 6 October 2008, http://www.themalaysianinsider.com/litee/malaysia/article/Raja-Petra-sedition-trial-starts/; Linnarz 2010, 9.

29 For details, see SEAPA's alert on the case (and subsequent coverage): http://seapa.wordpress.com/2007/01/19/in-malaysia-news-group-and-media-executives-sue-bloggers-for-libel/ (accessed 7 Feb. 2012).

30 Liz Gooch, "In Malaysia, Freedom of the (Virtual) Press," *New York Times*, 8 September 2011.

Malaysiakini seemed targeted also to compromise the site's commercial viability, not just by loss of time and equipment (two of the servers were returned, but only after two months and threats of legal action), but by compromising its ability to operate consistently and raising fears among subscribers, then numbering around 3,000, about confidentiality (Rodan 2005, 170).

Malaysia is now in the process of instituting a Media Consultative Council, first mooted over a decade ago on the lines of those found in many other countries. At that time, critics raised concerns that the government's purpose was to regulate and sanction both mainstream and online journalists more effectively, especially given the prevailing hostile climate (Rodan 2005, 165). While supporters note the real need for a body (which Malaysia does not yet have) to maintain standards and ethics in journalism,[31] critics today still fear it will introduce further controls. Nearly three-fourths of National Union of Journalists (NUJ) members, surveyed in 2003, supported such a council to cover print, electronic, and online media, although fewer—about two-thirds— thought it would promote greater press freedom, as the government claims. The NUJ itself only supports formation of the council if laws governing the media are repealed or revoked and a Freedom of Information Act is passed.[32] Ongoing consultations do not bode well for press freedom. 2001's draft bill, for instance, allocated just one of the Council's twenty-four seats for a representative of the journalists' union and press association, even though journalists would be the primary group affected.[33] Moreover, electronic media have been included in inaugural meetings, but only to a limited extent: only Blog House Malaysia (an officially-registered association) represents "new media," whereas "alternative" (but still officially accredited) portals such as *Malaysiakini* and *Malaysian Insider* have not been invited.[34] Plus, several of those who were invited, disagreeing with the government's involvement, declined to attend.[35]

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31   For instance, Joseph Loh and Rashvinjeet S. Bedi, "Pressing for a Media Council," *The Star*, 26 October 2008, http://thestar.com.my/news/story.asp?file=/2008/10/26/focus/2369659&sec=focus.

32   Ibid.

33   Ibid.

34   Clara Chooi, "Press Bosses to Silently Protest against Putrajaya's Media Council Plan," *Malaysian Insider*, 22 July 2011, http://www.themalaysianinsider.com/malaysia/article/press-bosses-to-silently-protest-putrajayas-media-council-plan/.

35   Tarani Palani, "The ball's in your court, minister tells media," FMT News, 18 October 2011, http://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/2011/10/18/the-ball-is-in-your-court-minister-tells-media/.

All told, and current developments notwithstanding, this comparatively lax regulatory framework of both formal policies and informal norms has created or preserved important space for independent news sites, bloggers, and other online voices since the mid-1990s. The contrast in framework for these "new" versus mainstream media goes far to explain why so much political—and especially oppositional—discourse has moved or developed online in that period.

Political Use of New Media in Malaysia

Overview: Expanding the Political Sphere

Media activism has been a staple of Malaysian civil society since before independence, dating back to networks of progressive journalists, writers, and "pen-friends," and extending to Malaysia's inaugural modern-day nongovernmental organizations (Weiss 2003). Human rights group Aliran, in particular, launched in 1977, has not only sustained a well-known, critically-engaged magazine, the *Aliran Monthly*, for decades, but supports initiatives such as Charter 2000, which calls for independence in news media, including such provisions as a Freedom of Information Act and autonomous media council (Kenyon and Marjoribanks 2007, 107).

What media scholar Cherian George dubs "contentious journalism" today is in line with that legacy. As a genre of internet-based alternative media praxis, contentious journalism aims at "challenging the consensus that powerful interests try to shape and sustain through mainstream media" (George 2006, 3). Such efforts lend alternative media, George argues, qualities akin to those of a social movement, including an emphasis on political engagement from the margins (to disrupt state control over information and ideas), a sense of common purpose, and social networks for mobilization (George 2006, 91). Yet the specific qualities of new media confound easy comparison—and the political significance of new media in Malaysia extends beyond the impacts of contentious journalism specifically.

Key Patterns: Information, Identity, Mobilization

The political impacts of new media in Malaysia fit a loose three-part classification: media for information, identity-building, and mobilization. Any serious analysis of the political power of new media thus requires taking these media not as an undifferentiated quantum, but as a bundle of discrete platforms and tools. Disaggregating in this way not only permits assessment of the nature and extent of political effects, but also helps illuminate the connections between online and traditional media on the one hand, and of new media with electoral and civil societal campaigns, on the other.

The first of these categories is perhaps most obvious. Where mainstream media are curtailed, new media break an information blockade, disseminating information otherwise not widely accessible in the general public. Such efforts may be quite transparent. When Huaren Management took charge of Nanyang Press Holdings for the MCA in 2001, for instance, Chinese-language news sites proliferated, as if to compensate (Rodan 2005, 158-9). Or more recently, a 2010 book on Malaysian leaders, banned from print publication, was instead posted online, effectively circumventing the Home Minister's edict (Freedom House 2011). More broadly, though, readily available alternative news sites, as well as less structured flows of tweets and other updates from across the gamut of sources, present information on opposition parties and figures, government scandals, civil societal campaigns, and more. The relative freedom of online media has created the possibility for a sort of investigative journalism long largely proscribed (or at least, spiked before publication) in Malaysia—even if a paucity of editors and filters complicates the task of telling truth from fiction. Nevertheless, those issues that lend themselves to catchy headlines, interesting multimedia treatments, or 140-character tweets may be all the more likely to dominate this more open news environment. In addition, even when more information than ever before is readily available on these issues, Facebook fan pages and the like require only thoughtless acquiescence, not careful consideration—so information dissemination may be more wide than deep. Relatively more important, but less glamorous or readily-legible causes may get short shrift in the 24-hour news-cycle environment—and entertainment dwarfs attention to any political cause in most citizens' online use.

The record thus far is even more mixed on the second of these dimensions, identity-building. The blogosphere, for example, remains reasonably polarized. If we understand collective identity as, "an individual's cognitive, moral, and emotional connection with a broader community, category, practice, or institution" (Polletta and Jasper 2001, 285), the relevant "we" for political mobilization requires not only specification, but continual re-delineation (Melucci 1995, 51). If new media allow or encourage citizens to adopt new collective identities, we might expect patterns of collective mobilization to shift accordingly.

Online communities hold out the promise of parameters significantly different from those of real-world communities. In the Malaysian case, for instance, such communities might meaningfully transcend boundaries of ethnicity and religion, offering new possibilities for bridging persistent sociopolitical cleavages. Not all new media allow or foster such innovation, however; some

media forms encourage mere passive consumption; language constrains participation in most; and some tend to knit already-formed clusters more tightly together, even if they could potentially do otherwise. That said, it is the *possibility* of new or newly-defined, mobilizable collective identities that make new media especially important for more than straightforward information access, and particularly for political change.

In some cases, too, new media may enable communities to emerge in a way otherwise unlikely. The Malaysian (and regional) gay, lesbian, and transgendered community offers a good example. The community has gained coherence and voice through vibrant online forums, beginning with earlier tools such as IRC (internet relay chat) and listservs, then extending to websites, blogs, professionally-run news and networking sites such as the Singapore-based Fridae.com, and even the recent proliferation of affirming "It Gets Better" YouTube videos (which spread rapidly from the US to global viewers and producers). Given factors from homophobia and "closeting," particularly among Muslims in Malaysia, to the vagaries of geography, this community would almost certainly be less cohesive, supportive, and empowered if not for new media activism.

Lastly, the role of new media in mobilization is ultimately most salient in assessing the potential of emergent tools to change political behavior. It is here that we see most clearly the links—potential or real—between new media and social movement campaigns, in terms of networking, recruitment, agenda-setting, and concrete action. This category is tethered to the others: bloggers, for instance, gain followers through information dissemination, may forge newly-defined communities, and may take physical action by joining protests, running for office, or other activities. The potential for new media in transnational networking, including in terms of "boomerang effects" by which activists in one country lobby their own government to press a more repressive other government to reform (Keck and Sikkink 1998) fits within this category, as well.

Still, internet use need not augment political participation. In the US, for example, with its comparatively free media, data suggest that internet use does not predict or increase political participation at all (although some of the same factors that predict internet usage also predict political participation). Even those who purposefully pursue political information online are no more likely to vote than otherwise-similar others (Bimber 2001, 61-2). Even so, given that providing or obtaining critical information is so much more inherently

purposive and even subversive in Malaysia, we might expect more of a connection. Indeed, causality is impossible to prove, but, for instance, youth were not only the most likely to be online in 2008, but also represented an especially critical and courted voting bloc.

The specific campaigns explored below demonstrate these different patterns, albeit with intent to be more illustrative than comprehensive.

Tools and Tactics: From *Surat Layang* to Social Networking

"Independent" or "alternative" media have a long history in Malaysia, but never before with the breadth of readership they now command. Broadsheets and anonymous or pseudonymous pamphlets, for instance, or mysterious *surat layang* (flying letters), have peppered the political scene since before independence, complemented by more recent versions: everything from cassette tapes of dissident lectures to recurrent "sex tapes" such as those plaguing Anwar Ibrahim today. Those early tools, however, tended to be not only less potentially far-reaching than blogs and other online variants, but inherently less interactive. The novel communication tools that helped spur mobilization starting in the 1980s-90s—particularly first faxes, then text messaging (short message service, SMS)—too, are more a static (and real-world) conduit than most of the online media discussed here. New media options range from listservs and news or other websites, to blogs and social networking tools. Operating largely in cyberspace, these resources open up a new, and largely unbounded, only loosely-monitored domain within the public sphere. As such they offer novel complements to more traditional tools and tactics.

Among the trailblazers of the current technological wave in Malaysia were online discussion lists, from such pioneers as soc.culture.malaysia and Sangkancil, to a host of lists (generally largely monolingual) specific to opposition parties and coalitions, the plight of Anwar Ibrahim, and more during the Reformasi movement of the late 1990s. At that time, Malaysia already had a comparatively high rate of internet penetration, but in the six months following Anwar's arrest in September 1998, internet service provider TMNet registered 14,000 new subscribers, well beyond its average number of 6,000 (Rodan 2005, 153).

Political websites, too—some of them basically bringing the email listserv format to a new home, but others more innovative and interactive—

proliferated as Malaysians flocked online. Dozens of Reformasi websites appeared in both English and Malay, both overtly pro- (or anti-) Anwar and less partisan. It was on these websites, and not in mainstream media, that Malaysians could find coverage of the many rallies and demonstrations in progress nationwide. Such sites projected Anwar's messages to the public, however concertedly the mainstream media blocked them out, and supplied activists, foreign journalists, and others with a wide range of materials and critical perspectives on the regime. (At that point the BN coalition had yet to develop a significant online presence.) Even if these early listservs and websites could not be expected significantly to shift political identities or mobilization, since they targeted the already-"converted," they did serve to get unfiltered news and opinions into the public sphere.

Given regime antipathy, the most transgressive sites tended to rely on offshore servers and anonymous editors, recognizing the limits of the their legal limbo. In 1999, a government committee identified forty-eight sites responsible for "defamatory accusations," with *freeMalaysia* and *Mahafiraun* deemed particularly reprehensible, and yet no legal action could be raised against the sites (Rodan 2005, 153-4). Like news sites, these websites raised awareness and facilitated information flows—albeit with few controls on the quality of that information—and also helped to advertise upcoming events. As such, political websites facilitated mobilization, but would be unlikely to reach those not already self-identified as part of the constituency in question; the reader must actively seek out these sites.

These developments help in part to explain the elevated visibility and engagement of middle-class urban youths and groups such as civil servants— those with ready access to the internet—in the Reformasi movement and 1999 general election. Yet dampening the *independent,* or at least readily discernible, effect of online forums on mobilization was the reality that individuals from those categories traveled within Malaysia, sharing what they had learned online, and that online postings themselves spread not just electronically, but also in print-outs and speeches; input from various sources thus grew muddled (Weiss 2006, 158-9). Moreover, pro-opposition websites and email lists seemed to work on about the same level, and with a similar reach at that point as pro-opposition print media—and all carried their share of hyperbolic or false information (Weiss 2000, 430-1).

More recent arrivals on the media landscape include blogs and social networking sites, especially Facebook and Twitter. Their dynamic, interactive

nature shapes these media forms' political effects. Malaysian political blogs represent a combination of current and campaign events, commentary, feedback, and reader interaction, whether substantive or shallow. While more visitors likely "lurk" than comment, these sites are generally designed to allow the reader a sense of personal connection with the blogger (Gong 2009, 12-15). Indeed, blogs, as "an immediate, horizontally linked dialogical space," offer "a structure that is closer to conversation than any traditional news medium," thus expanding both public space and options for political participation (Woodly 2008, 110). They function in Malaysia, argues Rachel Gong, in three (overlapping) ways: for agenda-setting, with blogs' messages filtered through cellphones and other devices even to mainstream media and offline citizens; as interactive social settings that create a real sense of community; and as a means of collective mobilization, for instance for campaign events (Gong 2009, 6-8).

Even so, blogs hardly constitute an open marketplace for ideas and information, given group polarization and the dubious value of the information presented (Sunstein 2008, 88). Without editors and publishers, the quality of information in blogs in particular may be suspect, and misinformation or rumors can cascade rapidly through the blogosphere (Woodly 2008, 117). Indeed, about half the bloggers in Tan and Zawawi's aforementioned survey use pseudonyms, and an even larger proportion do not always check their facts, calling into question the reliability of information found in these sites (Tan and Zawawi 2008, 55-57). Overall, online news sites and blogs represent something of an escalation of past forms of media activism, now no longer relegated only to limited-circulation, license-dependent, alternative print publications.

Social networking tools such as Facebook and Twitter, both used extensively in Malaysia, take the interactive, real-time nature of blogs a step further. However asymmetric (non-mutual) as its relationships may be, Twitter, for instance, can extend and enhance in-person interactions and foster a sense of interpersonal commitment and genuine community. Such effects are particularly likely when that online community has at its core a group of individuals who know (or at least, know of) each other and interact regularly through various communications technologies as well as in person (Gruzd, Wellman, and Takhteyev 2011, 32-34).

In Malaysia, the BN now makes at least as effective use of these tools as opposition politicians and supporters. For instance, nearly one million people have "liked" PM Najib's primary Facebook page, close to three times the

number who have "liked" opposition icon Anwar Ibrahim's.[36] Similarly, Najib has well over 400,000 Twitter followers, compared with Anwar's 131,000. (Tellingly, Anwar himself follows nearly 15,000 others, and has issued nearly 16,000 tweets; Najib follows a mere 39 and has issued 2,300 tweets.)[37] While these numbers hardly prove depth of support, Najib has the most followers of any Malaysian politician, some of whom express effusive praise. With elections approaching, he began to respond directly to tweets and, for instance, to poll followers for reactions to recent populist policies, rather than just posting more official updates, in early 2011.[38] Social media should not thus be presumed "oppositional" in leanings, nor likely to upset the current regime—yet by their nature, these tools force a degree of responsiveness and transparency that could shift the timbre of BN governance.

Responses: Crackdowns, E-Government, Regulations

The Malaysian government has taken two distinct tacks in coping with the rise of new media. The first is to make better use of these tools itself; the second is to crack down on online troublemakers.

Aware that opposition candidates and parties made far better use of cyberspace in the 2008 general election than they (see Case Study III below), BN leaders have taken on social media and developed a more vibrant web presence in earnest, developing online "e-government" portals for citizen action and input as well as delivery of government services (for instance, Mohsin and Raha 2006-07), and using Twitter and other communications tools more aggressively. For instance, determined to court the youth vote more aggressively, UMNO Youth chief Khairy Jamaluddin hosted a "tweetup" at a local restaurant in 2010, engaging in a frank, in-person discussion with some of his online followers.[39] PM Najib himself followed up with a tea for his "online friends" in early 2011, noting the launch of a new "1Malaysia" mobile site to cater to cellphone-toting youth, and promising similar gatherings elsewhere in the country. He explained, "If we want to engage with them, we have to utilise cyberspace to communicate with the rakyat [common people]. That is why I started my new Facebook and Twitter accounts."[40]

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36   Per http://www.facebook.com/, as of 7 February 2012.
37   http://twitter.com/NajibRazak and http://twitter.com/#!/anwaribrahim, as of 6 February 2012.
38   Shibani Mahtani, "Najib's Twitter Following Grows," *Wall Street Journal*, 3 February 2012, http://blogs.wsj.com/searealtime/2012/02/03/najibs-twitter-following-grows/.
39   Carolyn Hong, "Twitter is tops for politicians," *Straits Times*, 5 March 2010.
40   Asrul Hadi Abdullah Sani, "Najib hosts tweetup, eyes youth vote," *Malaysian Insider*, 20 February 2011, http://www.themalaysianinsider.com/malaysia/article/govt-to-reach-out-to-youth-vote/.

Moreover, concerned to sustain control over information flows and emphasize their own messages more systematically, state officials and their allies have worked proactively to improve mainstream media to make them more competitive (for instance, giving greater coverage to opposition politicians, so interested readers will feel less urge to look elsewhere). Without having to resort to significant overt censorship, the state has used available tools to crack down on and deter dissident media activism, even while working to optimize its own use of new media. These efforts started early, in the Reformasi period. In one notable case then, two Malaysians were detained and charged under the ISA for spreading rumors via email of impending riots in Kuala Lumpur.[41] Rumor-mongering, via the internet or SMS, has met with a similarly stiff response on several occasions since then. For instance, five individuals were detained under the act in 2007 for allegedly spreading rumors via text-message about unrest in Johor ahead of Malaysia's fiftieth anniversary of independence. [42]

The vehemence of the state's response to the mere act of spreading rumors reflects the slipperiness of the media in question: authorship may be hard to trace and the flow of information, once released, is nearly impossible to check. Another incident from the Reformasi period reveals official fumbling with new standards to prove culpability. Prominent academic and social critic (and then-Anwar-supporter) Chandra Muzaffar successfully faced down charges of contempt of court regarding an online statement, which the prosecution had downloaded, criticizing the conduct of Anwar's trial. Ruling it impossible to prove Chandra's authorship of the statements in question, the judge dismissed the charges.[43] On the other hand, in a bizarre 2007 case, Wee Meng Chee, a 24-year old Malaysian undergraduate in Taiwan, nearly lost his citizenship after parodying Malaysia's national anthem on YouTube. Although Wee used the pseudonym, "Namewee," his identity was easily traced—and since he both appeared in the video and posted it on his blog (plus apologized when confronted), his authorship was not in doubt. The case exemplifies the "viral" capacity of online messages: the video received nearly half a million "hits" within a matter of weeks, and received thousands of comments.[44]

Moreover, it is not only official responses that dampen online discourse. The 2010 case of Azwan Ismail, a gay Malay-Muslim who created a YouTube video

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41 "Two held under ISA over rumours," *New Straits Times*, 12 August 1998.
42 "Malaysia: Stiff penalties for using SMS to stir up unrest," *Straits Times*, 6 September 2007.
43 "Judge throws out contempt of court charge against Anwar ally," AFP, 21 August 1999.
44 For the full saga, see "Special Report: The Negarakuku Saga," *Malaysiakini*, 23 August 2007, http://www.malaysiakini.com/news/71511.

as part of a local version of the "It Gets Better" project coordinated by LGBT rights network *Seksualiti Merdeka* (Sexuality Independence), is illustrative. Azwan's video, viewed over 140,000 times in its first week, met with not just slurs and appeals to return to the right path, but threats of violence and murder, for him and others involved with the campaign. In this case, the state was not the primary culprit—although religious authorities threatened not to prosecute those making death threats, but Azwan himself for contravening Islamic teachings. [45]

Together, these developments caution against too-hasty glorification or dismissal of the political potential of new media in Malaysia. As the case studies to which we now turn make clear, new media have played, and will likely continue to develop, important roles in terms of information dissemination, identity-building, and mobilization—yet the direction of change need not be "progressive" or opposition-leaning, nor are the implications for electoral politics and BN stability at all straightforward.

Case Study I: Breaking The Information Blockade (*Malaysiakini*)

Given the constraints mainstream media face in Malaysia, simply making a wider range of information available offers the possibility of informing and freeing debate. Opposition party publications such as PAS's *Harakah* and DAP's *Rocket*, as well as NGO publications such as Aliran's *Aliran Monthly* or Suaram's *Hak* and independent magazines such as *Detik* in the past have long helped to serve that function—and circulation of these surged in the Reformasi period of the late 1990s. Such efforts were stepped up dramatically then, however, not just with the escalation of listservs and proliferation of blogs, but especially with the launch of reputable, dedicated online news sites.

The key media development of the Reformasi movement was the rise of these news sites, spurred by increasing evidence of bias in mainstream media and Malaysians' search for more credible sources of information (Rodan 2005, 151). About one-third of internet activity in Malaysia now consists of visits to online news sites (Liow and Afif 2010, 46). Beyond the fact of making information available that would otherwise likely be suppressed, the availability of truly

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45   Sylvia Tan, "It Gets Better in Malaysia project calls for greater understanding of LGBT issues after death threats," *Fridae*, 21 December 2010, http://www.fridae.asia/newsfeatures/2010/12/21/10503.it-gets-better-in-malaysia-project-calls-for-greater-understanding-of-lgbt-issues-after-death-threats.

independent, but reliable news has served both to undercut the credibility of the mainstream media (and by extension, the government that controls those media) and to lend a sense of empowerment to investigate and critique.

Most prominent among these sites was (and still is) the nonpartisan, professionally-produced *Malaysiakini,* launched by veteran, frustrated journalists Steven Gan and Premesh Chandran (with financial support from SEAPA and the New York-based Media Development Loan Fund) in time for the 1999 elections (George 2002, 160-1, 165). Explains Rodan, two loopholes facilitated *Malaysiakini*'s rise: lack of any legal requirement (yet) for licensing of online publications, and the government's stated commitment not to censor the internet (Rodan 2005, 154-5). At the same time, thwarted in their efforts to obtain press accreditation, *Malaysiakini* and cognate sites have been challenged to cover official functions and press conferences. For instance, even though *Malaysiakini* had finally received a first-ever batch of ten press passes in mid-2008, UMNO denied it and five other sites—*The Nut Graph, Malaysian Insider, Siasah, Merdeka Review*, and the Chinese-medium *Laksou*—accreditation to cover its annual general assembly the following year; the Malay-medium *Agenda Daily* was the only site so accredited. (Moreover, while the Information Ministry had approved a total of ten news portals for recognition—and press passes—in 2008, it still declined to recognize bloggers).[46] Broader government efforts not just to introduce constraining legislation, but to discredit *Malaysiakini* and their editors (as through the aforementioned 2003 raid) compound the difficulties of such halting accreditation (Pang 2006; George 2002, 168-72; Rodan 2005, 156-7). Regardless, subscription-based *Malaysiakini* outpaced the (free) website for print daily *The Star* for the first time in 2008 as the most-read Malaysian news site (and fifteenth most-visited website overall); its Malay and Chinese language sections each came in second in their categories, after the websites of mainstream papers *Sin Chew Daily* and *Utusan Malaysia*, respectively.[47]

Malaysiakini aims primarily to present news, especially perspectives not already covered by mainstream media, as well as to remain commercially viable. Its editors have struggled to strike the right balance between political engagement and neutral apathy: the site has intrinsic, ancillary aims also of boosting standards of journalism, free speech, social justice, and democracy through independent—nonpartisan, but not apolitical—reporting (George

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46   "Malaysiakini is No 1 news site," *Malaysiakin*i, 8 July 2008, http://www.malaysiakini.com/news/85773; Rahmah Ghazali, "New media denied passes by ruling party," *Malaysiaini*, 24 March 2009, http://www.malaysiakini.com/news/100853.

47   "Malaysiakini is No 1 news site."

2006, chap. 8). Toward these ends, too, *Malaysiakini* maintains a nonprofit training arm, the Southeast Asian Centre for e-Media, launched in 2004 to train independent media and civil societal groups to use electronic media "towards the enhancement of press freedom, democracy and human rights,"[48] as well as a program to train and support "Citizen Journalists" across Malaysia.[49] By now, the field of online news sites is ever more crowded; the shifting array of similar ventures include *Malaysian Insider, Malaysia Today*, the blog-like *The Nut Graph*, and more.

Explains Masjaliza Hamzah, executive officer of the Centre for Independent Journalism in Kuala Lumpur, by taking advantage of relaxed controls on online media, sites such as *Malaysiakini*, have "managed to challenge the authoritative ways in which news is defined and formed in Malaysia."[50] Cherian George is even more blunt. He defines "alternative" media as those that "democratize access to the media, inviting voices and viewpoints that are underrepresented in the mainstream for want of status, skill, or capital." Within that category, "contentious" media are those that "directly and explicitly challenge the authority of elites in setting the national agenda and in forging consensus. … These websites are engaged in more than just a struggle against government domination. They also embody competing normative notions of journalism and its role in democracy" (George 2006, 4-5). Moreover, new media are tied closely to progressive networks, both centered around press reform itself, and around human rights and other issues, extending also to international media networks. Not only did those partners come immediately to *Malaysiakini*'s aid in 2003, but the vehemence of their support demonstrated the extent to which online media are cementing new coalitions in civil society (George 2002, 172-4). While *Malaysiakini* operates first and foremost to liberalize access to news and informed opinion, it is this sort of bridging capacity—ancillary to *Malaysiakini*'s primary functions, but more purposeful a focus among some of its allies—that may represent new media's greatest long-term political potential in perennially-polarized Malaysia.

Case Study II: Organizing across Cleavages (Bersih 2.0)

A 2011 protest campaign in support of electoral reform exemplifies the potential of new media to sidestep ossified patterns of social cleavage. Social

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48   "About Us," Southeast Asian Centre for e-Media, http://seacem.com/about-us/ (accessed 7 February 2012).
49   "About Us," Citizen Journalists Malaysia, http://cj.my/about-cjmy/ (accessed 1 April 2012).
50   Quoted in Liz Gooch, "In Malaysia."

networking tools have been especially effective thus far in this regard. Over 11 million Malaysians are currently on Facebook, trailing only (much-larger) Indonesia, India, and the Philippines within Asia.[51] Malaysia's most prominent recent episode of social mobilization centered its strategy around the application, using it to build both a sense of (pan-racial, pan-religious) collective identity and community, and a plan for on-the-ground mobilization.

The organizers of the sixty-two NGO Coalition for Clean and Fair Elections, better known as Bersih 2.0, opted to remain truly a nonpartisan, "civil society-driven" people's movement—contra its progenitor, a cluster of politicians and NGOs that joined forces in 2005 in the Joint Action Committee for Electoral Reform, then forged the first NGO/political party Bersih coalition in 2006. Unable therefore to rely on the support and networks of even opposition political parties, Bersih 2.0 tried nationwide "roadshows" to get its message out, only to find these hampered by arrests. Instead, Bersih 2.0 relied on the internet—specifically Facebook—to mobilize supporters for its capstone rally in Kuala Lumpur on 9 July 2011 (Sheriff 2011).

The movement started as a call for reform, but the state's harsh response, amply described and discussed online, mobilized ever more supporters: the authorities deregistered Bersih 2.0 and declared it an illegal organization, prohibited the planned demonstration, and detained over two hundred people in the weeks before the event.[52] In the words of the coalition's chairwoman, lawyer and former Bar Council president Ambiga Sreenivasan, "A government that comes across as such a great bully repulsed a lot of people. And I think that is why we had the numbers and the momentum that we did. … That's why you saw on that day, ordinary citizens, and these are not even members of political parties, from all walks of life, old, young, all races, all religions. Where have you ever seen that?"[53]

The rally on 9 July 2011 brought a diverse mix of an estimated nearly fifty thousand Malaysians to the streets of Kuala Lumpur. Updates on where to

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51 Lim Yung Hui, "Facebook in Asia: More than 150 Million Users but Slowing Growth in Quarter 2 2011," GreyReview, 1 July 2011, http://www.greyreview.com/2011/07/01/facebook-in-asia-more-than-150-million-users-but-slowing-growth-in-quarter-2-2011/, accessed 13 Aug. 2011. From March-April 2010, the rate of increase in Facebook users in the US was .5 percent; in Malaysia, it was 13 percent, or an astounding 364 percent for the preceding year (Kenyon and Marjoribanks 2007, 110).

52 Liz Gooch, "A Reluctant Symbol for Electoral Reform in Malaysia," *New York Times*, 8 August 2011.

53 "Q&A: Malaysia's Ambiga Sreenivasan," *Wall Street Journal*, 12 July 2011, http://blogs.wsj.com/dispatch/2011/07/12/qa-malaysias-ambiga-sreenevasan/.

go and where to avoid swirled over smartphones as well as blogs, news sites, Facebook, and especially Twitter as riot police cornered swarming marchers, deploying tear gas and water cannon, and arresting even bystanders wearing yellow t-shirts (symbol of the Bersih movement). All told, over 19,000 Twitter users tweeted that day about the rally (Sheriff 2011), although participants may have avoided excessive tweeting that day to prevent the authorities' getting wind of their plans.[54] (The police, perversely, claim less coordination among themselves—specifically that they did not purposefully corral, then tear gas, crowds, but simply were unaware of their counterparts at the other end of a key underpass.[55])

The rally ended in over 1,700 arrests, then the standoff continued over Facebook in the days that followed. Within two days, over 100,000 people (responding at a rate of up to five per second) had "liked" a Facebook page calling on Prime Minister Najib to resign.[56] Meanwhile, online coverage of the Bersih 2.0 protest helped certain iconic images to go viral, as of "The Lady of Liberty," a woman in her 60s who stood down water cannons with daisies. Blog posts proliferated online, too, including by Marina Mahathir, who wrote effusively of her experience.[57] More enduringly, though, as Ambiga puts it, in proving that Malaysians from different ethnic and religious communities could work together and that the middle class was not "too comfortable to step up to the plate," Bersih 2.0 "exploded many myths" about Malaysians.[58] Particularly as newly-mobilized citizens followed or joined the protest, too, the police's heavy-handed response made people more aware of the limits to democracy and the abuse of power in Malaysia.[59]

Bersih 2.0 does seem to have achieved some results. For instance, the following month, noting that "some people have expressed doubts about elements of that system," Najib announced that he was forming a bipartisan Parliamentary

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54   Indra Darmawan, "We Depend Much on Twitter and Facebook," *VIVAnews*, 18 July 2011, http://us.en.vivanews.com/news/read/233930--we-depend-much-on-twitter-and-facebook-.

55   Joseph Sipalan, "Police Chief: No Orders to Box in Protesters," *Star*, 12 January 2012, http://thestar.com.my/news/story.asp?file=/2012/1/12/nation/10248784&sec=nation.

56   Clara Chooi, "On Facebook, More than 100,000 Want Najib to Quit," *Malaysian Insider,* 11 July 2011, http://www.themalaysianinsider.com/malaysia/article/on-facebook-more-than-100000-want-najib-to-quit. The page is named, modestly, "100,000 People Request Najib Tun Razak Resignation"; total "likes" stood at 212,951 as of 12 August 2011.

57   Johan Saravanamuttu, "The Political Impact of Bersih 2.0," *Aliran*, 20 July 2011, http://aliran.com/6077.html; Marina Mahathir, "My Bersih 2.0 Experience," *Rantings by MM*, 10 July 2011, http://rantingsbymm.blogspot.com/2011/07/my-bersih-20-experience.html, accessed 18 Aug. 2011.

58   Gooch, "A Reluctant Symbol."

59   "Q&A: Malaysia's Ambiga Sreenivasan."

Select Committee for Electoral Reform (PSC) to review the election system and ensure transparency (although critics deemed the effort more "a P.R. exercise" than likely to be effective). [60] Also in line with Bersih and Bersih 2.0's demands, the Electoral Commission announced plans to introduce indelible ink and possibly a biometric system to prevent fraud in voting.[61] Ordinary Malaysians overseas may be allowed to vote for the first time, too, and the PSC recommended an independent audit of the electoral roll—both steps among Bersih 2.0's forty-one specific recommendations.[62] Still, in the aftermath of the rally and its manifestation of popular discontent, the government further straitened public space for protest with a new Peaceful Assembly Act that placed new curbs on marches and rallies, particularly in urban areas.[63] Even as it did so, however, the BN reinforced its own online presence, preparing for looming elections.

Case Study III: Mobilizing for Elections (2008 GE)

Indeed, it is when new media pervade elections that politicians and pundits alike really take note, even if information-dissemination and identity-building are at least as important to political change in the long-term. New media seeped into the electoral arena starting in the mid-1990s. The DAP took the lead in launching a website in 1996, followed by the MCA in 1997, then PAS the next year, the MIC in 2000, and UMNO in 2001, all supplemented by party leaders' more interactive blogs (Rosyidah 2010). The example of the 2008 general elections suggests the real impacts of new media for on-the-ground mobilization, particularly in terms of circulating platforms and updates, generating new leaders, and getting out the vote.

Overall, the two weeks after the dissolution of parliament in February 2008 saw an "unprecedented" 30 percent increase in the number of unique readers online, greatly increasing the reach of online exhortations and information.[64] Facebook pages for candidates supplemented autonomous blogs. As blogger

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60 Liz Gooch, "Malaysia Opens Door to Changes in Electoral System," New York Times, 16 August 2011.

61 Jahabar Sadiq, "Cabinet dithers on EC's biometric system for voters," *Malaysian Insider*, 9 September 2011, http://www.themalaysianinsider.com/malaysia/article/cabinet-dithers-on-ecs-biometric-system-for-voters/.

62 For details on Bersih 2.0's demands and progress toward these, see http://bersih.org/.

63 Amanda Whiting, "Malaysia—Assembling the Peaceful Assembly Act," *New Mandala*, 6 December 2011, http://asiapacific.anu.edu.au/newmandala/2011/12/06/malaysia-assembling-the-peaceful-assembly-act/.

64 Ahirudin Attan, "Who's Winning the Cyber War in Malaysia's Blogosphere?" *AsiaOne*, 29 February 2008, http://www.asiaone.com/Business/Innovation/Story/A1Story20080229-52039.html.

and PKR candidate Nik Nazmi Nik Ahmad describes, while mainstream media published little on his campaign, he built support through a "blog for Nik Nazmi day" and a "Friends of Nik Nazmi" Facebook page. His party, too, sent out constituency-specific SMS messages to "millions of voters."[65] Indeed, SMS messages, email, and even low-tech printouts and CDs share credit with blogs for breaking the government's media blockade in the elections (and after). Although their greater resources give BN parties an edge in developing online communications, website design, and IT-based content delivery, opposition parties sustained a strong effort (Rosyidah 2010).

Supplementing more straight-laced blogs were comedy sites and clips, which circulated widely—for instance, web-hosted comedic film shorts spoofing local politicians and politics. These forms complement more established brick-and-mortar channels, such as the long-running, acerbic Instant Café Theatre (ICT).[66] However, not being reliant on licensing or theater attendance, these cyber variants can both be more freewheeling and have a wider reach.

For the first time, too, a handful of candidates even set up portals for online campaign donations. The DAP's Tony Pua, for instance, managed to collect a total of over MYR30,000 (around USD10,000; parliamentary candidates can spend up to MYR200,000) through online solicitations, although he noted that conventional methods, such as fundraising at *ceramah* (public addresses), remained more effective (Gong 2009, 11-12).

The rise of new media in Malaysia has also birthed a spate of new leaders, not only themselves prepared to take their political activism "offline" by contesting, but seemingly able to mobilize their supporters to campaign and vote for them. The 2008 elections introduced several bloggers as candidates; they contributed significantly to the opposition parties' best-ever showing. Two in particular, the DAP's Jeff Ooi and PKR's Nik Nazmi, ran successfully as bloggers (Weiss 2009, 754-5), highlighting the possibility of building a political reputation and organizing a campaign substantially online. Calculating the relationship between online presence and electoral success in Malaysia, Gong finds a significant independent benefit to opposition candidates from having

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65 Nik Nazmi Nik Ahmad, "How New Media Trumped Old Politics and the Road Ahead" (text of a keynote speech, reprinted on his eponymous blog), http://www.niknazmi.com/wordpress/?page_id=1069 (accessed 17 August 2011). He notes that a mainstream paper did run a post-election profile, and recommends that fellow new media practitioners seek alliances with mainstream media in order to help loosen controls on the latter.

66 ICT lost its license to perform in Kuala Lumpur briefly in 2003; although after public outcry, the ban was soon lifted, the city introduced new guidelines for censorship of scripts (Gong 2009, 10).

a blog. In fact, controlling for party, competition, and incumbency, bloggers were seven times more likely than non-bloggers to be elected in 2008, an effect about equal to that of incumbent advantage. However, the effect was significant only for opposition candidates; BN candidates presumably benefit from the media constraints that otherwise hobble their opponents (Gong 2009, 11-12). Tellingly, only 15 of 125 incumbents were from opposition parties, whereas 77 percent of the 57 candidate blogs at the time (from among 480 candidates in all) belonged to opposition candidates (Gong 2009, 10-11).

Even the Malaysian government conceded after the 2008 elections that blogs had influenced many voters. Then-prime minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi admitted that by not taking seriously the fact that "the young people were looking at SMS and blogs" rather than print media and television, the BN "lost the Internet war, the cyber-war."[67] His successor Najib, as well as other leading BN figures, echoed these sentiments (Mohd Azizuddin 2009, 114). Still, despite BN leaders' persistent criticism of bloggers (which left BN candidates hamstrung in trying to make use of blogs themselves), pro-UMNO site *mykmu* experienced a surge from 20,000 to 80,000 unique visitors per day during the 2008 campaign. [68] One common reading is that opposition parties in the Pakatan Rakyat remained largely "complacent" about new media in 2008, having little coherent media strategy; what helped in mobilizing support was merely that several of its "political newbie" candidates were bloggers and that online media space was then "largely critical of the government."[69] Since then, both sides have worked to develop their online strategies. For instance, Najib, then Anwar, recently launched Chinese-language Facebook fan pages, specifically to court the ethnic-Chinese vote[70] (though in the process, reaffirming the salience of communal divisions online).

The power of new media to spread messages, generate leaders, and rally votes should not be overstated. The vast majority of Malaysians seem still to have relied on traditional media in 2008, notwithstanding the disjuncture between those sources' reporting and the election outcome (Liow and Afif 2010, 46). Besides, however much their blogs helped certain bloggers garner renown, those candidates could not have won without their political party organizations, the ceramah (public addresses, advertised in part on blogs) at which the opposition's core issues were articulated and reinforced, as well as

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67   David Dizon, "New Media Challenges."
68   Ahirudin Attan, "Who's Winning."
69   Oon Yeoh, "The Cyberwar of 2012," *The SunDaily*, 29 July 2010, http://www.thesundaily.my/news/oon-time/cyberwar-2012.
70   Shibani Mahtani, "Najib's Twitter Following."

other media exposure (Tan and Zawawi 2008, 85). Importantly also, blogs may well be anonymous and/or present fallacious information, as Tan and Zawawi's survey of bloggers (detailed above) confirmed. Not surprisingly, while bloggers themselves report higher trust in blogs than in mainstream media, they rate foreign media the most credible source of news (Tan and Zawawi 2008, 55-57).

Furthermore, a "digital divide" separating urban areas from the rural "heartland" helped shape the election outcome. The opposition "tsunami," in which opposition parties won about one-third of parliamentary seats, was confined largely to urban and northern Malaysia; the poorer east and the south showed little change (Weiss 2009, 744). The internet now penetrates even farther in Malaysia, with potential implications for the elections due by 2013. As of 2010, Malaysia had 16.9 registered internet users (of a total population of around 27 million), compared with just 11.8 million registered voters[71] —the discrepancy perhaps pointing to a preponderance of internet users under 21 and thus too young to vote according to Malaysian law (or among the estimated four million eligible citizens not registered to vote). While internet users are still predominantly urban, the spread not just of broadband networks, but also of ever more affordable devices such as smartphones, has put internet access—and real-time information updates—within reach of an ever-greater proportion of households (Liow and Afif 2010, 45). Taken together, developments in new media do suggest a trajectory toward greater political engagement and openness, but without an altogether clear vector.

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71   Ho Aoi Ling, "No Escape from New Media Effect," *Malaysian Insider*, 14 July 2011, http://malaysia-today.net/mtcolumns/letterssurat/42035-no-escape-from-new-media-effect.

Conclusions

Contextualizing Media, Old and New

The internet has no inherent ability to subvert authoritarianism, but gains power in the presence of an organized political force able to make use of the advantages it offers (Rodan 2005, 17). New media gain real political efficacy when they push people offline and into the real-world public sphere. They do so by making people aware of key issues and perspectives, offering ways to mobilize without being so aware of racial or other distinctions, and boosting the reach and efficiency of campaigning, increasing the pressure to (change one's) vote. Given the caveats detailed above—from the digital divide to the BN's own increasingly-savvy online strategies—new media may or may not help to spur a change of leadership in Malaysia. Regardless, they are indubitably catalyzing at least a superficial (and possibly deeper) shift in the character of the regime and of citizens' relationship to their government, in the direction of greater transparency, interaction, and accountability.

Most important for assessing the political impacts of new media in Malaysia specifically: while these tools and platforms can facilitate cross-cutting issue-oriented mobilization, as was the case in Bersih 2.0, they may do little overall to transform the communal structure of Malaysian politics, as the abundance of monolingual blogs, *Malaysiakini*'s four separate language streams (English, Malay, Mandarin, Tamil), and separate English and Chinese Facebook pages attest. The online media that help to spur engagement still mirror linguistic silos to at least some extent.[72] As such, new media could simply provide "yet another arena in which political contestations unfold, and where longstanding themes are not only debated, but also perpetuated and reinforced" (Liow and Afif 2010, 49). Cyberspace maps onto a landscape of "social and power relations" (Hurwitz 1999, 660); in Malaysia, that landscape is marked by deep economic and demographic fragmentation, which online communities may amplify as well as disrupt. The virulently Malay nationalist group Perkasa, for instance, is equally active online and off, and some of the most heated recent

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72   See, for instance, a speculative discussion on a mapping of Malaysian blogs that reveals two distinct clusters: BG, "Malaysia's Blogosphere: Can you map the social effect of Malaysia's Chinese schools?" *Economist,* 29 May 2010, http://www.economist.com/blogs/babbage/2010/03/malaysias_blogosphere/.

debates online (for instance, dueling Facebook groups for and against a court decision on whether non-Muslims may use the term *Allah* as a Malay term for God) have served not just to replicate, but to aggravate, the usual communal cleavages (Liow and Afif 2010, 49, 57, 59-60).

That finding fits theoretical predictions and empirical findings regarding group polarization: when people place themselves or are placed in communities of like-minded others, those groups tend to become more extreme and more internally homogenous in their views—a result of skewed information, members' desire to fit in with the rest of the group, and the extent to which corroboration bolsters confidence in one's positions (Sunstein 2008, 91-3). The blogosphere allows individuals to avoid or escape such cocoons, but studies of links, cross-postings, and the like have found that individuals of a given political persuasion read blogs that match those leanings; only a minority of cross-citations to blogs with conflicting views open up real discussion (as opposed to deriding those views) (Sunstein 2008, 93-4). Plus, as local experience demonstrates, it is not just "progressive" or change-oriented forces that can and do make use of new media, even if opposition-linked forces took the lead earlier on.

Still, media specifically do have a central role to play: One of the hurdles Malaysian activists have always faced involves differences not just in preferred vernaculars, but in discourse broadly—from what is meant by a Malaysian nation (for instance, Tan 1988), to the terms of reference preferred by secular and Islamist human rights organizations (Saliha 2006, 268-9), to definitions of democracy. At least some new media have greater potential than hidebound old media to shift the discourse from traditional notions of racialized, uncritical political loyalty and toward issues of governance and rights. A common interpretation of 2008's opposition surge is that Malaysia is finally moving beyond a communal framework—although the same sentiments circulated around the 1999 elections, and in both cases, voting patterns still were largely communal or premised on careful, perhaps reframed, inter-ethnic bargaining (Liow and Afif 2010, 43-44; Liow 2010, 15). New media may have raised awareness and sparked participation, but that is not to say that these media really stirred transformation in communal identities.

Still, the popularity and policy impacts of Bersih 2.0 seem to confirm that the rise of online media has furthered a surge in both politicization of younger voters in particular, and of critical, informed discourse generally. Indeed, new media stand to shift the demographics of political participation significantly.

As of 2006, fully 74 percent of Malaysian bloggers were under twenty-five years of age (more than the regional average of 56 percent); 64 percent were female (again exceeding the regional average, 55 percent). Malaysians, too, were more prone than most other Asians to visit politicians' blogs; 20 percent did so, compared with 14 percent for the region.[73] "Alternative" media—those not just online, but that aim to add something new to the media landscape—"democratize access" to information and critique, and "directly and explicitly challenge the authority of elites in setting the national agenda and in forging consensus" (George 2006, 4).

All told, these effects echo what analysts predicted over a decade ago, despite changes in the communication technologies available since then. "New media" have helped immensely to make information (perhaps unmanageably much information) available, at least to internet-enabled "netizens." While less adept in influencing policymakers, web-based technologies can effectively alert citizens to crises and spur them to join in collective action (Hurwitz 1999, 656). Moreover, online media can ensure that citizens are more informed about key issues before they engage in or assess more traditional political activities, from attending ceramah to voting, and that they can track the consequences, at least at a macro level. *Malaysiakini*'s dedicated election coverage site, for instance, drew over half a million unique visitors on the night of the 2008 elections.[74] *Malaysia Today*, too, was swamped as the results came in, more than trebling its usual traffic with 15 million hits that day—625,000 per hour.[75] Even so, only 13 percent of Malaysians ranked the internet among their top three sources of election news that year.[76] The practical and psychological effects of breaking the information blockade are significant, but should not be presumed to alter patterns of political behavior beyond rallying people to join events on cue, especially when comparatively few even avail themselves of the substantive, nonpartisan perspectives on offer.

Understanding these dynamics helps to explain not just the series of record-setting crowds at protests over the last several years, but also why routines so

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73 Jeff Ooi, "Study: Blogging for Social Connections and Self-expression," *CNET Asia*, 1 December 2006, http://asia.cnet.com/study-blogging-for-social-connections-and-self-expression-61971059.htm; "Blogging Phenomenon Sweeps Asia," Xinhua-PRNewswire, 28 November 2008, http://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/blogging-phenomenon-sweeps-asia-56531722.html.
74 "500,000 Visited Malaysiakini on Poll Night," *Malaysiakini*, 10 March 2008, http://www.malaysiakini.com/news/79584.
75 Jeremy Au Yong, "Battle Lost in Cyberspace," *Straits Times*, 12 March 2008.
76 Merdeka Center, "Peninsular Malaysia Voter Opinion Poll," 14-21 March 2008, available at http://www.merdeka.org/pages/02_research.html, accessed 18 August 2011, slides 20-21.

quickly returned to normal. If they function at just a relatively shallow level, new media stand to make Malaysian politics more participatory, but in the framework of what Roger Hurwitz terms a "monitorial" (as opposed to partisan or deliberative) model of democracy (Hurwitz 1999, 657, 660). This model promotes a pattern of clearly unsustainable, ad hoc mass mobilization at sporadic points of crisis, without necessarily long-term engagement or sense of being part of a distinct, interest-defined community. Hurwitz deems this sort of political action able to be automated by means of an online "clipping service," whereby citizens would be alerted to events satisfying certain conditions, then directed toward taking a stance without need for extensive information or conviction—still basically passive consumers of information, fixed in a pattern of perpetual election campaign (Hurwitz 1999, 659-60). In contrast, Mohd Azizuddin Mohd Sani proposes that Malaysia is shifting toward a model of deliberative democracy, in which the government presumes a well-informed populace and plans for public participation and discussion, much of it online, however imperfect the medium (Mohd Azizuddin 2009, 120-2). And yet this model, too, represents top-down, contained mobilization rather than organically-defined popular engagement.

The place of blogs is especially revealing, since it is bloggers who are so often hailed, especially since the 2008 elections, as harbingers of a new, more bottom-up politics. In fact, blogs in particular are ideally suited for individuals to self-select communities of like-minded posters, ignoring those individuals or sites with views antithetical to their own (Mohd Azizuddin 2009, 123). Politically-savvy bloggers themselves tend to be highly politically aware and to receive more political information than most other citizens, but they are also more prone to "reject, or rationalize away, messages that are discordant, or that violate their beliefs" (Munger 2008, 130).

Regardless, recent developments—particularly the consistent popularity of *Malaysiakini* (and independent news portals more broadly) and the success of Bersih 2.0—suggest that the latest wave of media tools may offer real leverage against the recalcitrance of identity- rather than issue-oriented politics in Malaysia. However much Malaysian media consumers self-select what they read, watch, or believe, they are (or readily can become) better-informed on critical issues now than previously. It seems no coincidence that the Bersih 2.0 campaign has been more truly cross-cutting than any other political campaign in recent Malaysian history. Led not just by a woman, but a Malaysian Indian one at that, the rally drew participants from across ethnic, religious, and class lines. The protest was still a predominantly urban phenomenon, in part

given the main rally's venue (Kuala Lumpur), and in part since the Malaysian netizenry is still predominantly urban. And of course, what made Bersih 2.0 so meaningful was not the online discussion and Facebook-friending, but the fact that members of a virtual community took collective action in the real world—but they did so as a collective, not segmented, force. (Had political parties been allowed a greater role in Bersih 2.0, the usual cleavages may well have loomed larger, simply due to the way partisan interests are channeled.) New media alone, in other words, however innovative, engaged, and engaging, still need to be considered in light of their concrete effects: do they lead citizens to participate more or differently, and do they encourage or discourage those citizens to do so on the same terms as before?

Instrumentalist theories that predict that mere access to information will spur greater political engagement, based on a rationalist assumption that information costs are deciding, are problematic for "glossing over the problem of how information becomes actionable knowledge" (Bimber 2001, 57-8). The freer flow of information subverts authoritarianism, but only by informing, not transforming, the regime's subjects. It may well be that the efforts of nongovernmental organizations and noncommunal parties to build common understandings, interests, and coalitions for action (Weiss 2006), largely through face-to-face engagement, remain more key to real transformation certainly than news sites or blogs, but even than Facebook and Twitter.

Trends to Watch

The most important trends to watch develop related to new media in Malaysia are the extent to which the internet is more depoliticizing than mobilizing, how consumption of new media meshes with other patterns of media access (particularly across generations of media consumers), and the mechanisms by which new media might trigger offline political mobilization or transform political culture.

First, a possibility worth noting is that of the internet as depoliticizing, much as television is said to have been. Its use primarily for shopping, entertainment, and occupational purposes, or for "depersonalizing relationships," could be to the detriment of social capital (Jennings and Zeitner 2003, 312-13). Data from the US suggest that internet use has not diminished civic engagement or trust in political institutions and leaders; those already inclined to be actively engaged tend to be even more so online (Jennings and Zeitner 2003, 330-1). Even those new media with little direct effect on politics, such as blogs, have

indirect impact by influencing traditional media, mobilizing public opinion, and offering political elites a lens on and entry into public debates (Woodly 2008, 118). So far, similar effects seem to hold in Malaysia, particularly since the simple fact of liberalizing information access, crucial for an informed, engaged citizenry, makes new media inherently more politically salient than in more liberal-democratic contexts. Still, as Tan and Zawawi's study makes clear, most internet use is not political in Malaysia—and that is unlikely to change.

A second, perhaps even more key dimension yet to be studied systematically in Malaysia (indeed, in most contexts, since patterns are still developing) is how new media mesh with other patterns of media consumption and political participation, and the likely generational disparity in such patterns: whether new media and internet activism supplement existing practices, as for those who "came of age" pre-internet, or if these are part of an individual's repertoire from the outset (Jennings and Zeitner 2003, 313). Most Malaysians still get most of their news from "old" print and broadcast media, even if an increasing, if select, cohort rely more on online sources. Even as the internet penetrates more pervasively, its coverage remains uneven, with younger, better-educated, more urban, and wealthier citizens more likely to be online than others. Over time, those trends could foster bifurcated patterns of political engagement or empowerment, belying the supposed boundless openness of these new platforms. Moreover, if online media are just as biased as fettered offline counterparts, but in other directions (and with established authorities quick to stake their own claim to online space), the result could, again, be the further degradation and segmentation of public discourse.

While there seems little evidence thus far that increasingly accessible and wide-ranging new media have fundamentally changed patterns of polarization in Malaysia, they *have* gone some way to "level the playing field" for challengers to existing authorities and spurred increased politicization broadly, and especially among the young—who form a formidable portion of the voting public. The easiest way to dismiss the political potential of new media is to note the boundaries of netizenship: it is disproportionately the young and urban who are online. In Malaysia, however, it was that demographic that really tipped the scales toward the opposition in 2008. Nearly three-fourths of Malaysians today are under 40 years old, and the BN's own data show that over 60 percent of those under 35 are undecided as voters. Both sides are likely to target these "digital natives," relying heavily on an online toolbox (Linnarz 2010, 6-7). If those young (or future) voters have a partisan preference, chances are better now than previously that they will exercise that preference, not just

at the ballot box, but also in finding and engaging with information on issues of importance to them.

Finally, the "broader offline strategy" (George 2006, 17) remains critical: the internet is a medium and a sort of shorthand for a cluster of tools; it is a stage for, rather than sufficient for, mobilization. What makes new media activism particularly effective is when the virtual and real worlds mesh: when citizens mobilized on Facebook, for instance, are moved to take concrete political action, whether demonstrating, voting in a certain way, or lobbying for a policy change. Online engagement that is too thoughtless or shallow to translate into behavior change is ineffective as a form of sociopolitical activism, apart from perhaps incremental shifts in general consciousness-raising. Importantly, too, even online engagement does entail a level of risk in Malaysia—yet concrete critical engagement sustains the same (greater) dangers and uncertain benefits as before. If online discussion seems to present a safe alternative, rather than spurring on-the-ground mobilization or engagement with citizens not similarly politically-inclined, new media could merely augment existing patterns of polarization and substantive depoliticization in the long run.

But perhaps the most subtle and yet most pervasive effects of media activism are in the domain of political culture. Social movements may aim not just at policy change, but at shifts in the culture undergirding politics. Breaking the information blockade in Malaysia, for instance, has obliged the government to recalibrate its approaches, and citizens, their assessments, with likely secular impacts on the culture of formal politics. Meanwhile, the proliferation of novel channels for at least symbolic activism will likely have similar effects on the culture of informal politics and approaches to political engagement.

The 2012(?) Elections

As of this writing, the 13th general elections are on the horizon, due by March 2013 but widely expected (based largely on a populist, election year-like budget unveiled in October 2011) to be called by mid-2012. Both BN and Pakatan parties clearly deem cyberspace a critical battleground in those polls, not least as a point of entrée to the hotly-contested youth vote. Some analyses suggest that the BN still lags in "new media" competency as Malaysia approaches its next general election;[77] others suggest that the more active political bloggers now are on the BN side, with so many pro-Pakatan bloggers preoccupied with their duties in state or federal parliament.[78]

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77   Ho Aoi Ling, "No Escape."
78   Oon Yeoh, "The Cyberwar."

As described above, even before the challenge of Bersih 2.0, BN politicians had taken steps to augment their web strategy, especially targeting younger voters, and to translate their strong presence on Facebook and Twitter into face-to-face interaction. Pakatan parties, too, are gearing up. The usually-staid PAS, for instance, recognizing the draw of hip, multimedia appeals, uploaded three videos to YouTube in February 2012 in preparation for the elections in Kelantan, long a party stronghold. The party's target audiences are clear: one clip is a pop song, "PAS Pilihanku" ("PAS is My Choice"), "featuring a background of young and trendy people" (each unsubtly either texting that choice on their smartphone or wearing a t-shirt emblazoned with a Facebook thumbs-up "like" icon); another depicts PAS supporters from various races and religions, attesting to PAS's tolerance in the state—a key theme for the party as it works to broaden its base.[79]

Particularly if elections are called as early as many pundits predict, the regulatory framework in effect will be the same as it has been. That said, Malaysia's National Union of Journalists submitted a set of proposals to the PSC on Electoral Reform in January 2012, calling for the Elections Commission to take steps to ensure voters access to fair, reliable information, including such measures as mandating fairly-distributed coverage of BN and opposition candidates in print and broadcast media, promoting balanced reporting, and especially, establishing a media-monitoring committee tasked with issuing guidelines for print, broadcast, and online media.[80] While substantial compliance with these requests seems unlikely, it is unclear whether liberalizing mainstream print and broadcast media would stem voters' (and hence, parties') migration toward online platforms. For net-dependent younger voters, such a shift seems unlikely, particularly since traditional media are so much more static and non-interactive, but opposition parties in particular might recalibrate their efforts significantly, given the proportion of voters who preferred traditional news sources in 2008.

In conclusion, regardless of electoral implications, recent developments underscore the qualitative shift with the latest generation of new media: these tools allow and encourage the merging of online and offline communities and may (though need not) foster cleavage-crossing coalitions as well as both

79   Hafiz Yatim, "PAS enters YouTube to attract votes," *Malaysiakini*, 7 February 2012, http://www.malaysiakini.com/news/188481; the music video is available at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tklHAIR9QoE&context=C34b9745ADOEgsToPDskIbjWK1qrNAudYN7VA7AAf1.

80   Patrick Lee, "NUJ to govt: Don't muzzle the press," *FMT News*, 26 January 2012, http://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/2012/01/26/nuj-to-govt-unleash-the-press/.

electoral and non-electoral mobilization. Dramatic political change remains unlikely in Malaysia via any vector, but new media are arguably steering the polity toward a more informed, participatory polity: toward democracy, even without regime change.

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