

THE TWO WAVES OF CYBERPOLITICS IN MALAYSIA: WHAT DOES THE BY-ELECTIONS BAROMETER TELL US?

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Abstract

This paper explores the political spectrum of Malaysia leading to the reformasi period in view of tracing the causes of the rise of the Internet as a source of disseminating and consuming alternative media. It attempts to answer why there was a sudden decline in alternative media during the 2004 general elections followed by the Internet revolution in the 2008 general elections. The 11 by-elections held in Malaysia since 2008 is tabulated and analyzed, to ascertain whether the ball is still in the opposition's court. Through analysis of the available data gathered from the Elections Commission, it could be concluded that the Barisan Nasional would still be the current valid government.

Keywords: *Malaysian Politics, Democratization, Deliberation, Participation and Polarization*

1. Introduction⁴⁶

A spectacular 450 million users or 31 percent of the world's social media population originates from Asia.⁴⁷ The ever popular Facebook has over 350 million active users in 180 countries, with over 70 percent of these users outside the United States (U.S.).⁴⁸ Twitter's popularity spread like a forest fire, with an increase of 3,700 percent in 2009 alone.⁴⁹ It was cited in a Nielsen Company

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47 OgilvyInsight, "Can Brands Have a Social Life?", 2008, [database on-line]; available at http://www.the-open-room.com/wp-content/uploads/2009/01/ogilvyone_brands-sociallife_2008.pdf last accessed in 3 March 2010

48 Facebook.com, [database on-line] Available at <http://www.facebook.com/press/info.php?statistics> last accessed in December 9, 2009

49 Rick Cole, "Social Media: What Does it Mean for Public Managers?," *Public Management*, vol. 91 no. 9 (2009): 8-12.

report that the 2010 Haiti earthquake changed the landscape of aid and relief organizations as they used Twitter as a pivotal channel for information dispersion and gathering of information, whilst the latter being the source of information in general.⁵⁰ DiMaggio et. al urged sociologists to broaden and intensify their efforts to understand this new technology. Politicians and political parties worldwide have used the Internet as a medium in recent times for campaigning and information dissemination activities, primarily to engage the grassroots.⁵¹

Bell⁵² appears to have been the first sociologist to write about the social impact of social communications, contending that the social impact would derive from the intervention of miniature electronic and optical circuits capable of sending information through networks, and the impending integration of computer processing and telecommunications. In recent times, populist political figures calling for change have gotten voter support all over the world, as seen in the United States and Malaysia. Barack Obama's call for change enabled him to win the popular vote and was decisive during the primaries. The tech-savvy Democratic candidate was quick and foresighted in cultivating the Internet and its possibilities.⁵³ Similar use of the Internet is seen throughout the globe. In recent times, a single email by William Hague from the Conservative Party was enough to raise £100,000 while the party's web campaign brought in more than £500,000.⁵⁴

As in the case of Malaysia, Anwar Ibrahim and his supporters were contentiously forced by the controlled media landscape in

50 Ti Leberecht, "Twitter grows up in aftermath of Haiti earthquake," *CNET News*, 2010, [database on-line]; Available at http://news.cnet.com/8301-13641_3-10436435-44.html. Last accessed in January 24, 2010.

51 Paul DiMaggio, Eszter Hargittai, W. Russell Neuman, and John. P. Robinson, "Social implications of the Internet", *Annual Review of Sociology*, vol. 27, no. 1 (2001): 307-336.

52 Daniel Bell, "Teletext and technology: new networks of knowledge and information in postindustrial society" in *The Winding Passage: Essays and Sociological Journeys, 1960-1980*, ed. Bell Daniel, New York: Basic 34-65. (1977) [1980].

53 Davey Winder, "Obama wins the Internet vote for tech President," *ITWire*, (27 June 2008) [database on-line]; Available at <http://www.itwire.com/business-it-news/networking/19066-obama-wins-the-internet-vote-for-tech-president>. Last viewed in 1 June 2010.

54 Matt Warman, "The online election strayed off-message: There had been much talk that this would be the first 'digital' General Election, but traditional media still had the biggest role to play," *Consumer Technology*, (13 may, 2010), [database on-line]; Available at <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/newstopping/politics/7718409/The-online-election-strayed-off-message.html> last accessed in 1 June 2010.

Malaysia to resort to alternative media, particularly the Internet as a mechanism to disseminate information.⁵⁵ Nikolaus contends that 'alternative media, such as subculture magazines, oppositional radio stations, and newspapers for ethnic minorities, are the product of an editorial production process that is part of the media system' and that 'they are positioned at one end of a continuum with mainstream media on the other end'.⁵⁶ In her analysis of Malaysiakini.com, Steele claims that alternative media is a by-product of the media system.⁵⁷ Therefore, it was the alternative media that garnered him as the figure of democracy in Malaysia. Hence, this paper scrutinizes available data on the rise of the cyber-politics in Malaysia after the sacking and incarceration of Anwar Ibrahim in 1998 and his role in the cyberpolitical war. The first part of this article is concerned with the necessity to ascertain the root causes of cyber-politics in Malaysia and the continuous struggle to win the hearts of citizens.

To the best of the author's knowledge, several published articles have documented that the internet made an impact on the general elections.⁵⁸ However, there has not been an empirical study done thus far on the actual impact of the Internet on the general elections, especially the by-elections. This article attempts to stipulate events and issues that spurred cyberpolitics in Malaysia. It then attempts to use the information that was plotted based on the majority votes of the by-elections to argue whether it can accept the hypothesis that the opposition is still gaining momentum for the upcoming general elections expected in 2013. Data presented in this paper is based on findings from previous literature such as books, articles, newspapers, and

55 Abdul Rashid Moten, "2004 and 2008 General Elections in Malaysia: Towards a Multicultural, Bi-party Political System?" *Asian Journal of Political Science*, vol. 17, no. 2 (2009): 173-194; Graham Brown, "Democratization and Communication in Asia," *Pacific Affairs*, University of British Columbia, vol. 78, no. 1 (2005): 39-56.

56 Nikolaus Georg and Edmund Jakob, "No Alternatives? The Relationship between Perceived Media Dependency, Use of Alternative Information Sources, and General Trust in Mass Media", *International Journal of Communication*, vol. 4, no. 1 (2010): 589-606.

57 Janet Steele, "Professionalism Online: How Malaysiakini Challenges Authoritarianism", *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, vol. 14, no.1 (2009): 91-111.

58 James Chin, "Malaysia's Electoral Upheaval," *Journal of Democracy*, vol.20 no3 (2009):71-85. Abdul, "2004 and 2008 General Elections in Malaysia...; Jason P. Abbott, "Vanquishing Banquo's ghost: the Anwar Ibrahim affair and its impact on Malaysian politics" *Asian Studies Review*, vol. 25, no. 3 (2001): 285-308; Graham Brown, "Democratization and Communication in Asia

political blogs to gauge whether the opposition is “still winning the cyber-political war”. After proving that it is an ongoing struggle to win the cyber-political war, the main aim is to shed light on the by-elections that were held and the lack of analysis done on their outcomes based on majority vote. This is to prove the assumption that the ruling government is still the valid government for Malaysia in the next general election.

2. Literature Review

Choucri⁵⁹ provides an appropriate definition of the term *cyberpolitics*.⁶⁰ The relationship between blogs, regularly updated web pages consisting of posts in reverse chronological order, and political behavior have been of interest to political scientists across the globe. The relationship between behavioral aspects and blogs has also spurred the interest of politicians alike. Deliberative theorists believe that it is conducive for individuals to refine opinions, develop greater tolerance for different opinions and idealistically identify common objectives. Deliberative theorists often lament that the polarization of American politics has strengthened and thickened opinions, leading to the decrement of tolerance and the inability to reach consensus⁶¹, whilst others believe that partisan organizations can achieve beneficial deliberative outcomes.⁶² Consequently, the increase of socio-political blogs has intrigued sociologists, political scientists, and communications and media experts worldwide. Macedo and Alex-Assensoh argue that increment in participation and civic engagement leads to a more legitimate, responsive polity, increasing the quality of lives of the citizenry.⁶³ Prior contends

59 Nazli Choucri “Introduction: CyberPolitics in International Relations,” *International Political Science Review, Sage Publications*, vol. 21, no. 3 (2000): 243, [database on-line]; Available at <http://ips.sagepub.com/cgi/reprint/21/3/243.pdf>. Last accessed in 5 June

60 Choucri contends that cyberpolitics is “in practice this refers also to the use of advanced electronic technologies for purposes of shaping ideas, exchanging information, exploring options, and broadening access to knowledge, evidence, and alternative modes of reasoning and reflection..... in the sense of reducing barriers to entry and increasing the empowerment of people through enhanced ability to express views, contentions, or simple reflections”, 244.

61 B.A.Ackerman and J.A.Fishkin, *Deliberation Day* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004).

62 Joshua Cohen, “Deliberative Democracy and Democratic Legitimacy” in *The Good Polity*, eds. Hamlin Alan and Pettit. Philip (Oxford: Blackwell 1989): 17-34.

63 Stephen Macedo and Alex-Assensoh, Yvette. M. eds, *Democracy at risk*, (Washington D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2005).

that media choice affects both political polarization and participation⁶⁴ Rational individuals that are interested in politics would be more likely to patronize political blogs for news and information. Those who are not so interested in politics will be less likely to read political blogs whilst interchangeably causing further increase in polarization and decrease in political participation. This increase in polarization and lack of political participation would affect deliberations and consequential fruitful outcomes.

Romsdahl contests that the Internet poses challenges for fair and equal involvement⁶⁵ for all participants, such as the digital divide⁶⁶. Romsdahl further argues that quality and inappropriate information posted in blogs is an area of concern. Another issue of concern triggered is that users of social blogs may have an uphill task of contemplating between facts and opinion⁶⁷. In his study, he found that 96 percent of Internet users only follow blogs that they believe in, hence, the plausibility of not being able to analyze the credibility of the facts presented on the blogs.⁶⁸

Underestimation of the ferocity of the blogosphere in the Malaysian context prior to the Malaysian general election in 2008 was a sheer miscalculation by many politicians of the ruling government⁶⁹. Chadwick⁷⁰ contends that the Internet is not only swiftly changing the landscape of existing political institutions but also introducing new norms, rules and procedures. He contends that ideological reinforcements occur and network structures are hardened and extended through the Internet, contending that it

64 Markus Prior, *Post-Broadcast Democracy: How Media Choice Increases Inequality in Political Involvement and Polarizes Elections*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

65 Rebecca, J. Romsdahl, "Political Deliberation and E-Participation in Policy-Making," *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture*, Purdue University Press vol. 7, no. 2 (2005): 1-11..

66 Romsdahl contends that the digital divide is the dichotomy between citizens who have access to computers and the Internet compared to those with limited access.

67 Rick Cole, "Social Media: What Does it Mean for Public Managers?."

68 Rebecca, J. Romsdahl, "Political Deliberation and E-Participation in Policy-Making ..."

69 A Malaysian government official described bloggers as "karaoke singers who take pleasure in their own singing but have no influence although they claimed to have received millions of hits" and "although there were numerous bloggers, the mainstream newspapers would ultimately hold sway over the majority of the people (Bernama, 2007)."

70 Andrew Chadwick, *Internet Politics: States, Citizens, and New Communication Technologies*, (NY: Oxford University Press, 2006).

is not only a meager medium.⁷¹ Chin argues that this new phenomenon of rallies and bloggers was the tipping point in challenging the status quo in Malaysia during the March 8, 2008 general elections.⁷²

The rise of authoritarian⁷³ rule is fundamentally due to multi-ethnicity in Malaysia and the desire of the majority party to consolidate its position and protect its supremacy. Crouch derives two distinct hypotheses in his argument; the juxtaposition that it is difficult for an authoritarian government to rule effectively in a pervasively divisive multiethnic society as the ruling majority community would be cautious of upheavals, and that the prevalence of multi-ethnicity in Malaysia contributes to the balance of power through bargaining and negotiations.⁷⁴ Secondly, the class struggle between the bourgeois and the government instigates democratization. However, in the case of Malaysia, the domestic capitalist remains predominantly held fortress amongst the Chinese and the Malays (who are beneficiaries of the new economic policy vis-a-vis patronage of the politically entrenched). However, the rise of the bourgeois class, albeit the capitalist Chinese and Malays, did not play a democratization role in Malaysia prior to the 2008 elections, arguably due to their lack of independence from the government. Scholars have also argued that the "Asian Way" of authoritarianism defended and coined by Mahathir and Lee Kuan Yew were the reasoning for authoritarian rule in Malaysia and most East Asian countries⁷⁵. This is concomitant to the resilience of the economies of both countries. The 1997 Asian Financial Crisis had made an impact on the region and its robust economy. It also spurred developments that led to dissidents engaging the

71 He further argues that the Internet "allows previously marginalized or even new parties to emerge and compete with established players" (p.148) and that "psychologically disempowered spectators will feel their political efficacy increase, not only by physically turning out for rallies and meetings but by contributing to and learning from a much richer online public debate" (p. 149).

72 James Chin, "Malaysia's Electoral Upheaval ...

73 Crouch (1996, 149) argues that Malaysia "retained a democratic constitutional framework" whilst, "the system gradually acquired a widening range of authoritarian characteristics" Crouch (1996) also says that the "democracy was more than a mere facade" (p. 149). The democratic opportunities were available for non-governmental organizations and pressure groups to transmit their arguments and subjugating the government of Malaysia to respond accordingly

74 Harold Crouch, *Government and Society in Malaysia*, Cornell University Press. United States, 1996.

75 Khoo Boo Teik, "The value(s) of a miracle: Malaysian and Singaporean elite constructions of Asia", *Asian Studies Review*, vol. 23, no. 2 (1999): 181-192.

Internet as a trajectory to disseminate information and garner support from other Malaysians, including the diaspora. This, we argue, was the first wave of cyberpolitics in Malaysia.

3. The first wave of cyberpolitics

3.1 Issues

For further analysis of the role of blogs in Malaysia, a review of a popular personality, Anwar Ibrahim is necessary. After taking power from Hussein Onn in 1981, Mahathir Mohammad was confronted with the problem of power consolidation as his allies were also his contenders for power, Musa Hitam and Razaleigh Hamzah. Razaleigh Hamzah was an aristocrat and unlike Musa Hitam was not deemed a rank and file politician like Mahathir. An important development before the day of the 1982 general elections was the call for Anwar Ibrahim, who resigned as President of ABIM (Anggota Belia Islam Malaysia) and joined UMNO on the eve of the nomination day in order to contest for a parliamentary seat during the 1982 elections. Musa Hitam, who was once Mahathir's ally, was seen as a perfect combination during their administration as prime minister and deputy prime minister, popularly referred to as to as the 2Ms (Mahathir later claimed that it stood for Mahathir Mohamad). Their falling out was arguably contributed to by Musa's handling of the Memali incident that took place during Mahathir's absence from the country⁷⁶. After Musa resigned as deputy prime minister in 1986, he alluded that he was 'open' to joining an anti-Mahathir coalition. This arguably led to the foundation for the formation of Team A (Mahathir – Ghafar Baba) and Team B (Razaleigh-Musa) within UMNO. An offspring of this fallout was the formation of UMNO Baru and Semangat 46' (the year UMNO was founded by the Team B faction). Anwar Ibrahim played an integral role during the UMNO fallout in 1987 in support of Mahathir's faction.

Table 1. Summary of apex events that led to the 2004 general elections

1978	The Star moved to Kuala Lumpur to become a national newspaper and concomitant rival to The News Straits Times
1981	Upon Hussein's resignation, Mahathir becomes prime minister and president of UMNO. Mahathir announces his "Look East" policy
1982	Anwar Ibrahim, standing as a UMNO candidate, wins a seat at the general election
1984	The Star first to reports that the Agung requested Musa Hitam (deputy minister) to apologize to him in the mosque, followed by other news carriers.
1986	Musa Hitam resigns as deputy prime minister; replaced by Ghafar Baba
1987	Government loses the prohibition of Aliran Monthly, albeit a social action periodical.
1987	Razaleigh founds a breakaway party, but Mahathir's UMNO defeats it at the general elections of 1990 and 1995
1987	The Star is suspended for 6 months and the first Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman and Dr Tan Chee koon are suspended from contributing in the columns section
1993	Anwar replaces Ghafar Baba as deputy president of UMNO and deputy prime minister
1994	Launch of second private network: Mega TV
1996	Razaleigh dissolves his party and rejoins UMNO
1996	Astro launch—the major launch of satellite television with 20 channels & 8 radio Channels
1996	Launch of MSC (Malaysian Super Corridor) Project
1997	An economic crisis severely affects Southeast Asia, including Malaysia
1998	Mahathir dismisses Anwar as Minister of Finance and as Deputy Prime Minister; Anwar expelled from UMNO, arrested and his trial begins.
1998	Mushrooming of <i>reformasi</i> websites such as Mahazalim (the Great Oppressor), Minda Rakyat (the People's Mind).
1999	Founding of Malaysiakini.com, the first independent commercial Internet website.
2001	15 top <i>reformasi</i> activists detained, including Raja Petra Kamaruddin of Free Anwar Campaign, which he runs and maintains the freeanwar.com website.
2001	Huaren Holdings (MCA Investment arm that also owns The Star) buys over Nanyang Press Sdn. Bhd. and the China Press

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- 2003 Mahathir steps down as prime minister and passes the baton to Abdullah Badawi.
 - 2003 The office of Malaysiakini.com raided by police.
 - 2003 American invasion of Iraq
 - 2004 Landslide victory by the ruling government, Barisan Nasional held on March 21, 2004.
 - 2004 Anwar freed from jail on 2nd September, but is not be allowed to return to politics because his appeal on the supposed completion of jail term for the corruption charges was completed. He can only return to political activities in April 2008. Important to note that the 2008 elections were held on March 8.
 - 2004 Raja Petra Kamaruddin affectionately known as RPK formed Malaysiatoday.com which gains notoriety for his columns and criticism on his blog
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After the formation of Semangat 46' and its inability to garner momentum in Malaysian politics during the early 1990's, Musa vanished from politics, automatically putting Mahathir at the prime of his premiership. However, the deputy minister position was still a "hot" seat, between an aspiring young gentleman and a dainty experienced gentleman. As the Minister of Finance, Anwar Ibrahim, concomitantly a leading figure during the 1987 fallout, was vying to campaign against Ghafar Baba for the deputy minister position. His strategic campaign made him an inevitable candidate under the new ruling administration. During the 1993 triennial UMNO elections, the Wawasan Team or Vision Team that accorded Anwar Ibrahim as Deputy Minister of UMNO and the three Vice Presidents of the party, Najip Tun Razak, Muhyiddin Yassin and Muhammad Muhammad Taib was a political strategy amongst the top shots vying for the top UMNO party positions. The other fraction, Ghafar Baba, Abdullah Badawi and Sanusi Junid did not band together as cohesively as the other team. A few years later rumours were lingering whether Anwar was going to challenge Mahathir for the "hot seat" in 1996. These rumors were quickly discarded by Mahathir and Anwar as overtly expressed. After the 1996 triennial UMNO General Assembly, Ahmad Zahid Hamidi was the incumbent UMNO Youth Leader and Rafidah Aziz outweighed by Siti Zaharah for the UMNO Women

Presidency⁷⁷. Muhiyyidin Yasin, Najib Tun Razak of the Wawasan Team and Abdullah Badawi won the vice presidency positions. It is still not confirmed whether Ahmad Zahid Hamidi was acting on his own accord or on the advice of Anwar Ibrahim when he uttered dissentient messages against Mahathir's administration criticizing the existence of "cronyism" and "nepotism", similar to the case of Suharto in June 1998.⁷⁸

On September 2, 1998 Anwar was fired as deputy prime minister of the country and subsequently two days later as deputy minister in UMNO. The fallout between Mahathir and Anwar (who was also the Finance Minister of Malaysia) was rumored among others to be attributed by the latter's willingness to endorse the International Monetary Fund's (IMF) neoliberal fiscal-austerity prescriptions rather than Mahathir's unorthodox approach centered on currency control. Scholars contend that the decision for Anwar's dismissal was actually due to the hostility between him and Mahathir.⁷⁹

This led to the brewing of a non-governmental organization (NGO) led reform movement eventually transcending into an opposition party. Wan Azzizah, wife to Anwar Ibrahim, would eventually form a coalition with the DAP and PAS, alongside other parties, albeit under the Barisan Alternatif (BA) or Alternative Front, adopting a common platform campaigning against "corruption, collusion and nepotism"⁸⁰. However, Keadilan operating on electoral margins did fairly well, winning only five parliamentary seats in the 1999 elections and withered in 2004 winning 1 parliamentary seat during the general elections.⁸¹

Nevertheless, the Pakatan Rakyat was not the first attempt of a coalition party in Malaysia. There were five of such attempts prior

77 Khoo Boo Teik, "Democracy and Transition in Malaysia: An Analysis of the Problems of Political Succession," *Macalester International*, [database online] vol. 12, no. 11 (2002).

78 Ibid.

79 William Case, Politics beyond Anwar: what's new?, *Asian Journal of Political Science*, vol.27, no.1 (1999): 1-19; Jason, P. Abbott, "Vanquishing Banquo's ghost: the Anwar Ibrahim affair.

80 Jason, P. Abbott, "Vanquishing Banquo's ghost: the Anwar Ibrahim affair.

81 Abdul Rashid Moten, "2004 and 2008 General Elections in Malaysia .

to the before the GE 12.⁸² The fourth of which was between the DAP and Semangat 46' under the Gagasan Rakyat (Malaysia's People Front) and the PAS in the Angkatan Perpaduan Ummah (APU) or the Muslim Community Unity Movement.⁸³ The inability of Semangat 46' to make inroads in Malaysian politics, coupled with the Gagasan being disbanded in 1995 and APU in 1996, and most intrinsically Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah jumping ships to join UMNO alongside his counterparts, led to an inevitable displacement of the third attempt of an opposition coalition.⁸⁴

The fifth attempt for a coalition was the BA. However, the BA and the DAP were not able to make inroads during the 2010 general election in Malaysia, forging a greater push by PAS for greater Islamization policies by the party, forcing the exit of the DAP from the BA in 2001⁸⁵. The formation of such a coalition was deferred from its erstwhile attempts as the distribution of parliamentary seats among the opposition parties was in favor of the Malay-led, multiracial and moderate party, PKR, acting as the balance of power between the ethnic based DAP and PAS.⁸⁶

82 Ong (2010) argues that this was the third attempt by the opposition. In fact there were five such attempts before the GE 12. The first of such an attempt was by Partai Rakyat (later the Partai Sosialis Rakyat Malaysia) and the Labor Party that was handicapped by being suspected of being a front for communist representation and to garner the support of the Chinese and Malay because the former was rural based and had the support of the Malays while the later was urban based and had the support of the Chinese (Milne and Mauzy, 1999). The second attempt was after the inclusion of Singapore and the results of the general elections after Malaysia was formed (two more elections were held in 1955 and 1959 under Malaya, before the inclusion of Sabah, Sarawak and Singapore in September 1963). After the unimpressive results of the elections, the PAP decided to hold unofficial talks for the promulgation of 'Malaysian Malaysia', henceforth forming the Malaysian Solidarity National Conference, together with the People's Progressive Party of Malaya, the United Labour Party (ULP) and pivotal parties in Sabah and Sarawak to form a cohesive and comprehensive opposition front (Vasil, 1965). The DAP, PPP and Gerakan formed an electoral pact prior to the 1969 general elections, spurring the surprise win for the opposition.

83 Kim Hong Khong, *Malaysia's General Election 1990: Continuity, Change, and Ethnic Politics*, (Institute of Southeast Asian Studies: Singapore, 1991).

84 In Won Hwang, *Personalized Politics: The Malaysian State under Mahathir*, (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2003).

85 Patricia Martinez, "Malaysia in 2001: an interlude of consolidation", *Asian Survey*, vol. 42, no. 1 (2002): 133-140.

86 Donald L. Horowitz, *Ethnic Groups in Conflict*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 411.

3.2 BN Curtailment Mechanisms of the Printing Press and Broadcast Channels

The rise of the Internet as a means was due to the curtailment laws that restrict alternative viewpoints. Raja Aziz Addruse⁸⁷, the former chairman of the Malaysian Bar Council argues that the Official Secrets Act (OSA) is a hindrance for freedom of speech and citizens' right to discourse on government misconduct and incompetence⁸⁸. Under the vague OSA provisions, any documents labeled an 'official secret' cannot be revealed to the public, thus, providing the government muscle to prevent anything deemed 'secret' being released to the public. The Internal Security Act (ISA) introduced by the British during the colonization periods, is still used as a mechanism to incarcerate political dissidents for extensive periods. An example of the the use of this draconian law was during the Operasi Lalang (Operation Lalang) in 1987 when political dissidents, members of advocacy groups and religious bodies were incarcerated without proper court proceedings.

The Printing Presses and Publications Act of 1984 provides enormous powers to the minister for home affairs fiat to grant or to withdraw printing licenses. Asian Wall Street Journal was suspended for three months in 1986 for unveiling the Bank Bumiputra Finance which was intriguingly linked to the ruling government. Dailies such as The Star and Sin Chew Jit Poh, and the Watan (Malay bi-weekly) had their licenses revoked for six months in 1987. Malaysia as a developing country embraced the potentials of Information Technology by launching the National Technology Agenda (NITA) and Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC).⁸⁹ Other curtailment laws include the Sedition Act, Defamation Act, Communications and Multimedia Act. Renong Group (before Renong the newspapers were owned by Fleet

87 Raja Aziz Addruse, "The Erosion of Press Freedom", in *Media Watch: The Use and Abuse of the Malaysian Press*, ed. Kua Kia Soong, (The Resource and Research Centre. Kuala Lumpur, 1990).

88 Addruse further contends that "in a democracy no government can claim to be a credible government if it seeks to operate in secrecy. A government in a democracy must be prepared to account for its actions and to subject its acts and policies to public scrutiny and discussion", 24.

89 M. Rozhan Idrus and Hanafi Atan, "Closing the Digital Divide in Malaysia - Catching Them Young," *Malaysian Online Journal of Instructional Technology (MOJIT)*, vol. 1, no. 1, (2004): 33-40.

Group), a UMNO controlled group, owns the Utusan Melayu and The News Straits Times.⁹⁰ Whilst Huareem Holdings (investment arm of MCA) owns The Star and MIC owns the Indian medium national circulations. The Broadcasting Act, which licenses and controls broadcast activity, providing the relevant minister powers to dictate licensees in broadcast matters.⁹¹ RTM (Radio Televisyen Malaysia), runs two terrestrial television channels in Malaysia and has denied opposition party interviews.⁹² The introduction of *Sistem Televisyen Malaysia* in 1985 did little to shed a more liberal media vehicle in Malaysia as it was controlled by Fleet Group, which happened to be an investment arm of UMNO. The mid-90's marked speculations of an "open sky" policy by the ruling coalition when cable and satellite was introduced to Malaysia, but the government legislated to restrict the size of the satellite dish to prevent reception from outside the country. Only license for domestic satellite television was permitted to a government linked conglomerate, while similarly cable television was permitted to a politically linked businessman as in the case of licenses of two more terrestrial channels.⁹³

3.3 *The tidings of a miscalculated policy*

The "Father of Modernity", Mahathir Mohammad was the driving force behind embracing the promising technology and possibilities of the Internet to attract foreign direct investment (FDI) to achieve his developmentalist Wawasan 2020 (Vision 2020). Nevertheless, it was never imagined that the Internet would pose a potential political threat in years to come. The MSC "Bill of Guarantees" included a pledge for non-censorship of the Internet. During the periods of street protests in October to December 1998 a plethora of vociferous *reformasi* websites surged in the Internet domain. Most interesting was Malaysiakini.com, Malaysia's first news portal that was set up in 1999 with funding

90 Edmund Terence Gomez and Jomo Kwame Sundram, *Malaysia's Political Economy: Politics, patronage and profits*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

91 Graham Brown, "Democratization and Communication in Asia".

92 Justifying it as "the official channel of the government of the day [which] conveys official information to the people" (Dewan Rakyat Report, 1999, 4).

93 Naim Zaharom, "The structure of the media industry: implications for democracy" in *Democracy in Malaysia: Discourses and Practices*, eds Loh Kok Wah and Khoo Boo Teik (Richmond, UK: Curzon, 2002).

from overseas foundations in support for more democratization and transparency and liberalization of the media. Another Internet site was the freeanwar.com blog managed by Raja Petra Kamaruddin. After a crackdown on Malaysiakini.com in December 2002, freeanwar.com moved to Australia and malaysiakini.com was given a firm warning.⁹⁴ The dissidents of Anwar Ibrahim's camp were the impetus in cyberpolitics. The trajectory of the Internet was a means to an end, the end being getting their voices heard. However, a benign gentleman was chosen by Mahathir to replace him as the Malaysian premier on October 2003. The war on terror and the United States invasion of Iraq arguably played a role in the Malaysian political spectrum where the majority of voters are Malay Muslims. Hence, issues that were portrayed on the cyberpolitical spectrum in Malaysia shifted from domesticated affairs to international affairs.

Therefore, the sentiments that circulated the Malaysian blogosphere were centered on Islam and other religiously inclined issues. As a result, most Malay dominant constituencies were won over by the Barisan Nasional⁹⁵. Most importantly this election was held in the absence of Anwar Ibrahim, who as exhibited prior to this, was the cause of the Internet dissent mechanism. This simmered the proliferation of a domesticized cyberpolitical war for a short period. It can be argued that the events that transpired between the 2004 and 2008 general elections spurred the second wave of cyberpolitics, as scrutinized below.

4. The Brewing of the next Cyberpolitical Storm

The choice of the fifth prime minister of Malaysia proved to be pivotal during the balloting. His milder and more moderate tone and personality⁹⁶ was well accepted by the Malaysian populous.

94 Graham Brown, "Democratization and Communication in Asia".

95 Mohamad Marzuki, "Malaysia's 2004 General Elections: Spectacular Victory, Continuing Tensions," *Kasarinlan: Philippine Journal of Third World Studies*, vol. 19 no. 2 (2004): 25-53.

96 Sivamurugan (2010) provides a deeper analysis of Badawi's leadership style, with a retrospective analysis of the latter's upbringing and its influence on the fifth prime minister.

Sivamurugan⁹⁷ argues that consensus, accommodation and participation are the characteristics of Badawi's leadership style and this was a hindrance for him to remain in control. Nevertheless, the choice of Badawi was arguably a wise choice as the results of the general election reveal. Keadilan won only one seat during the 2004 general election, a parliamentary seat that the wife of Anwar Ibrahim won in his former constituency. This general election proved to be the biggest victory of all for the ruling government⁹⁸.

Badawi faced several impediments during his tenure as prime minister. The Independent Police Complaints and Misconduct Commission were not established as he persevered with resistance from senior police officials. His Oxford-educated son-in-law was in the limelight a lot. After causing a stir with Mahathir, by cancelling some of latter's pet projects, Badawi's predecessor embarked on a string of attacks against the fifth prime minister by insinuating that the "Fourth Floor Boys" – referring to Khairy Jamaluddin and his circle – were actually "running" the country.⁹⁹ Mahathir continued to correct Badawi on his blog Chedet.com. Mahathir was not Badawi's only problem in the blogosphere. Several ethno-sectarian issues, as in the case of conversion to Islam for marriage purposes, and renouncing the religion were considered not properly addressed. Scandals such as the Port Klang Free Trade Zone (PKFZ) and a member of the Selangor State Assembly building a mansion for himself without the requisite municipal approval were prevalent during Badawi's administration¹⁰⁰. Several politicians and a minister were implicated in the murder of a Mongolian model, making headlines in the blogs. On November 10, 2007 a rally was held when 26 NGO's and five opposition political parties formed a coalition for Clean and Fair Election (known as BERSIH) demanding immediate reform on at least three issues: the use of inedible ink, the

97 Pandian Sivamurugan, Omar Rusdi and Mohd Azizuddin Mohd Sani, "Work with Me, Not for Me: Malaysia under Abdullah Ahmad Badawi (2003-2009)", *Asian Culture and History*, Canadian Center of Science and Education, vol. 2, no. 1, (2010): 97-107.

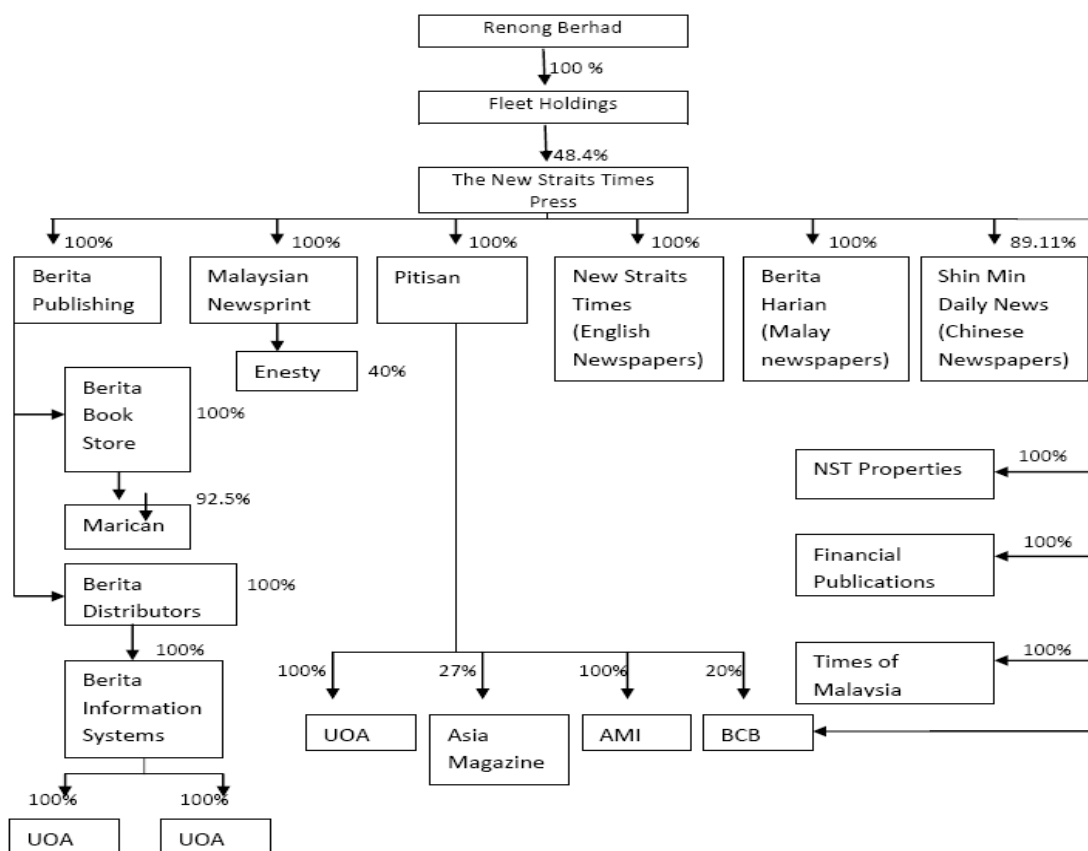
98 The BN "won 62.37 percent of the popular votes, 4,430,908 ballots out of 7.10 million who cast their votes, and 90.4 percent of the seats in Malaysia" (Ong, 2010).

99 James Chin, "Malaysia's Electoral Upheaval".

100 Abdul Rashid Moten, "2004 and 2008 General Elections in Malaysia".

abolition of postal voting and the cleansing of the electoral role¹⁰¹. November 25, 2007 marked another event in Malaysian politics when the Indian community, under the Hindu Rights Action Force (HINDRAF), held a rally to demand their rights. The police managed to calm the situation and five of the leaders were charged under ISA. Another issue perplexing the Malaysian public was the rise of fuel prices by 20 cents in 2005 and by 90 cents in 2006. The Malaysian populous was further disheartened by the developments that were pervasively transpiring and the blogs were quick to respond to make allegations and contentious remarks. Furthermore, to the despair of the Malaysian populous, it was well established that the ruling government owns the media, displayed in the tables below.

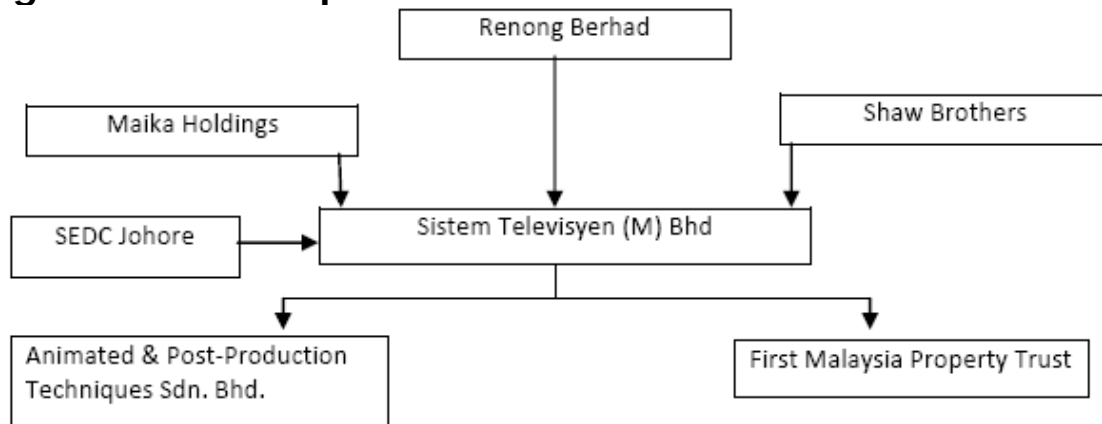
Figure 1. The NSTP corporate structure in 1990



Source: Edmund Terrence Gomez, *Politics in Business: UMNO's Corporate Investments* (Forum, Kuala Lumpur, 1992), 92.

101 Ibid.

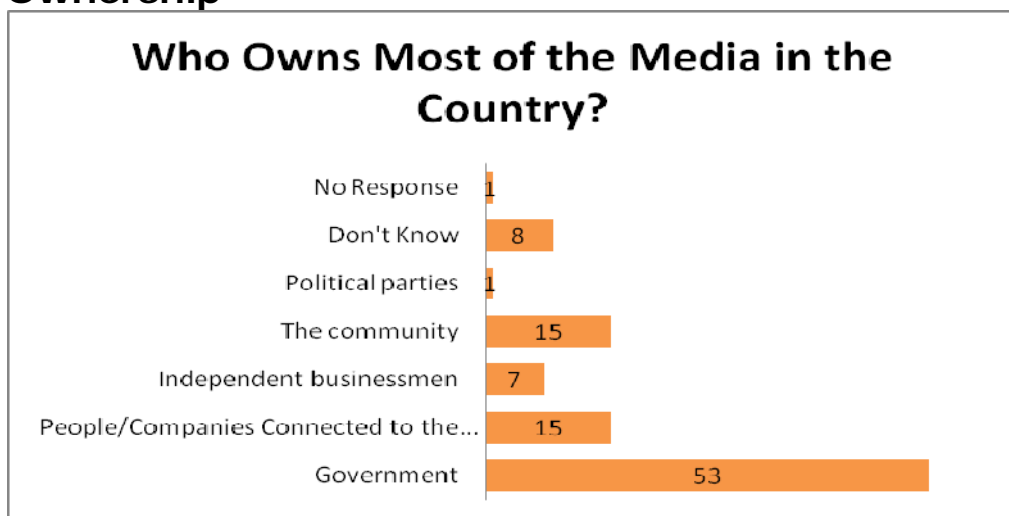
Figure 2. TV3 corporate structure



Source: Edmund Terrence Gomez, *Political Business: Corporate Involvement of Malaysian Political Parties* (James Cook University of North Queensland, Australia, 1994), 82

A survey conducted by the Merdeka Centre for Independent Opinion¹⁰² during the periods after the elections found that the Malaysian populous was perturbed by the lack of independence of the media in Malaysia, as indicated below.

Figure 3. The Distribution of Answers about Media Ownership

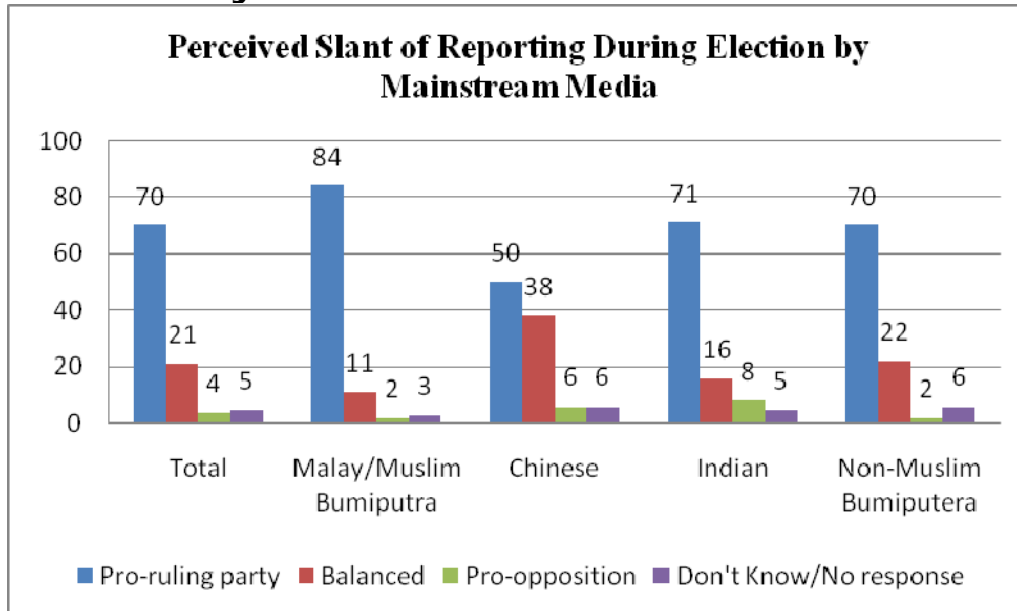


Source: Centre for Independent Journalism

102 The Merdeka Centre for Independent Opinion is an opinion research firm established to concentrate the capabilities of a team of dedicated social scientists and professionals in the field of economics, political science, communications, marketing management and civil society.

The survey also concluded that the mainstream media was biased towards the ruling government in Malaysia.

Figure 4. The Distribution of Reporting Perceptions during Election Day



Source: Centre for Independent Journalism

Hence, based on the indications provided above, we can make an assumption that Internet played a significant role in the outcome of the general election in 2008, in support of prior studies of the Malaysian political arena¹⁰³. This revolution did have significant outcomes on the 2008 general election, as discussed below.

5. The 2008 General Election Internet Revolution:

While scholars and observers alike may differ on the determinant role of knowledge, everyone agrees that we have already embarked on a transformation of such pervasive importance that it may be compared to the agricultural revolution (independently in different parts of the world around 8,000 B.C.) or of the Industrial Revolution of

103 Abdul Rashid Moten, "2004 and 2008 General Elections in Malaysia..."; Graham Brown, "Democratization and Communication in Asia ..."; Jason P. Abbott, "The Internet, reform and democratization in Malaysia", in *The State of Malaysia: Ethnicity, Equity and Reform* ed. Edmund Terence Gomez (London: Routledge Curzon, 2004); James Chin, "Malaysia's Electoral Upheaval".

eighteenth-century Europe. And, if “knowledge is power,” as is commonly believed, then the global economy at the end of the twentieth century is increasingly reliant on the use of cyberspace facilities for fueling the world economy and accelerating transformation of knowledge into power.¹⁰⁴

The March 2008 general election (GE) was a bruise on the face of the Malaysian political landscape, as it was the first time since independence that the ruling coalition, known as Barisan Nasional (BN) or National Front, lost its two-thirds parliamentary majority that endowed coalition leaders to change the constitution at will. Paramount to the 2008 GE was the opposition’s ability to win control of five of the thirteen state governments. Adding injury to the wounded tiger was the loss of parliamentary seats by three presidents of the BN component parties: the long serving President of the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC), Samy Vellu, President of Gerakan and Chief Minister of Pulau Pinang, Koh Tsu Koon, and the President of the Peoples Progressive Party (PPP) and Deputy Minister M. Kayveas.¹⁰⁵ The list of casualties includes ministers such as Shahrizat Jalil, Zainuddin Maidin and Aziz Shamsuddin and several former deputy ministers, including UMNO’s Zainal Abidin Zin, MCA’s Fu Ah Kiow, Gerakan’s Chia Kwang Chye and MIC’s K. Sothinathan. The Pakatan Rakyat (PR) or People's Pact was a coalition between the Parti Rakyat Malaysia (PKR) or Malaysian People's Party, the Democratic Action Party (DAP) and Parti Se-Islam Malaysia (PAS). The coalition building was necessitated to rule four out of five states (excluding Kelantan, as it has been won by PAS with an absolute majority to form a government since 1990) as none of the opposition parties won an absolute majority to form state governments in the four states. As highlighted by James Chin¹⁰⁶:

The opposition’s state-level victories may be its most impressive feats. Fully 43 percent of Malaysia’s registered voters live in the five states that elected opposition governments, and two of the five – Penang and Selangor –

104 Nazli Choucri, “Introduction: CyberPolitics in International Relations” .

105 Tunku Mohar Mohktar, “The Twelfth General Elections in Malaysia”, *Intellectual Discourse*, vol. 16, no. 1 (2008): 89-100.

106 James Chin, “Malaysia's Electoral Upheaval ” .

are the richest in the country. Opposition notched a near-sweep in the Federal Territory of Kuala Lumpur (which is located geographically within Selangor), and now fill all but one of the capital territory's eleven House seats.

Thus, this paper contends that the Internet was the impetus to the disheartening of the Malaysian populous. The Malaysian populous is concentrated, with most of its citizenry living in developed states such as Penang, Johor, Kuala Lumpur and Selangor. These states are generally more developed and access to the Internet is available through broadband and dial-up services, which are readily accessible through a magnitude of avenues. The most accessible to the general public are the cybercafés.

6. The by-elections: What does it spell out?

The first of the by-elections was held for the parliamentary seat in Permatang Pauh. Wan Azizah who held the seat in the 1999, 2004 and 2008 GE, emptied the seat for Anwar Ibrahim to be re-appointed in the constituency in August 2008¹⁰⁷. "Umno can claim a moral victory," according to a Monash University Malaysia political scientist Prof James Chin¹⁰⁸ with reference to the Manik Urai by-election. Nevertheless, it can be argued that after one former aide to the current prime minister made racial remarks on the two major races in Malaysia, it had an impact on the eleventh by-election held in Sarawak. The perplexities of the word God when translated into Malay lingered in the minds of the predominantly Chinese Christians in Sibul, Sarawak. Though there was a ban on the word "Allah" by the home minister in 2007, there was a sudden uproar when it was used again in the Herald (Catholic Newspaper), followed by the confiscation 15,000 copies in which the word "Allah" was used. In December 2009, after the Kuala Lumpur High Court overruled the earlier ban, there were

107 This seat was held by Anwar before he was sacked and incarcerated in 1998.

108 Zedeck Siew, "PAS's slim victory in Manik Urai," *The Nutgraph*, 15 July, 2009, [database on-line]; Available at <http://www.thenutgraph.com/pass-slim-victory-in-manik-urai> in 29 May 2010.

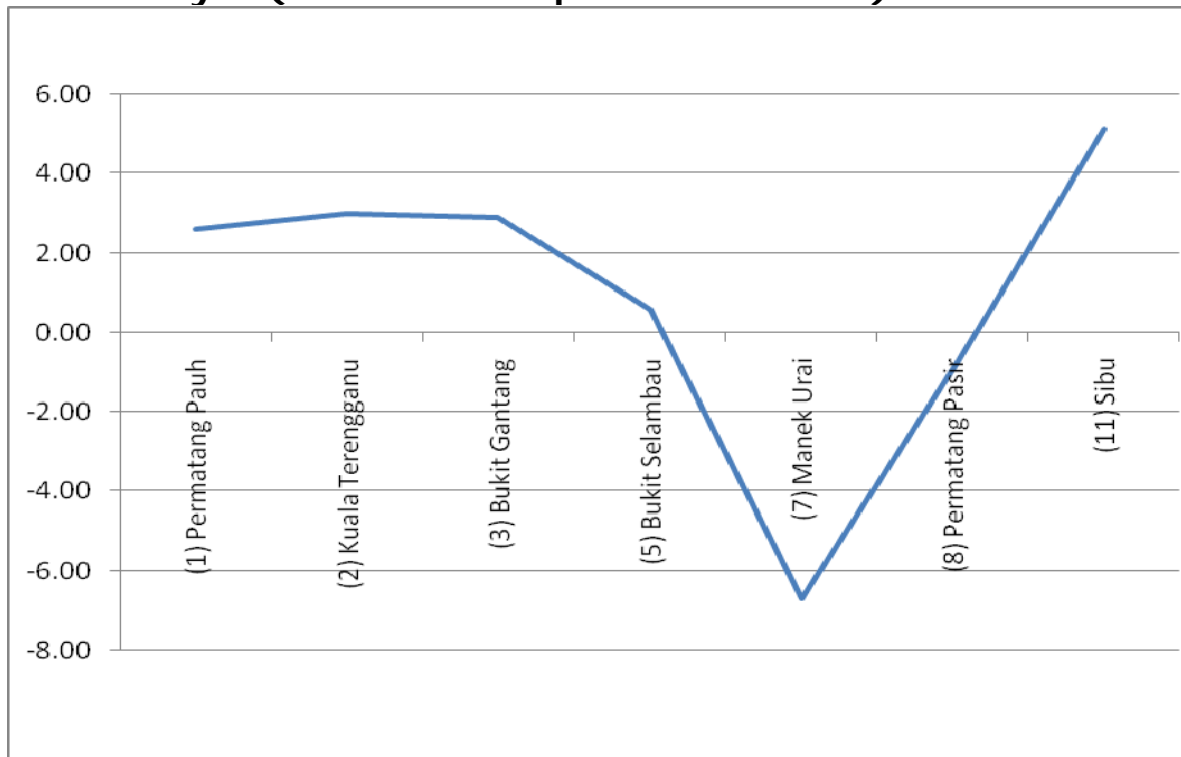
Table 2. Summary of the by-election results after the March 2008 General Election

No	Constituency Name	Ethnic Composition	Incumbent	Winner	Change in popular vote for winning part (%)
1	Permatang Pauh (P)	69% M, 25% C, 6% I	Pakatan-PKR	Pakatan-PKR	66.8% from 64.2%
2	Kuala Terengganu (P)	88% M, 11% C, 1% I	BN-UMNO	Pakatan-PAS	51.95% from 48.9%
3	Bukit Gantang (P)	64% M, 27% C, 9% I	Pakatan-PAS	Pakatan-PAS	53.8% from 50.9%
4	Batang Ai (S)	95% Iban, 4% C, 1% C	BN-PRS	BN-PRS	65.6% from 57.0%
5	Bukit Selambau (S)	50% M, 19% C, 1% I, 1% O	Pakatan-PKR	Pakatan-PKR	52.8% from 52.2%
6	Penanti (S)	73% M, 24% C, 3% I	Pakatan-PKR	Pakatan-PKR	86.5% from 58.9%
7	Manek Urai (S)	99% M, 1% O	Pakatan-PAS	Pakatan-PAS	50.3% from 57.0%
8	Permatang Pasir (S)	72% M, 26% C, 1% I, 1% O	Pakatan-PAS	Pakatan-PAS	65.5% from 66.4%
9	Bagan Pinang (S)	63% M, 11% C, 21% I, 5% O	BN-UMNO	BN-UMNO	75.7% from 61.1%
10	Hulu Selangor (P)	53% M, 26 I, 19% I	Pakatan-PKR	BN-MIC	51.7% from 49.8%
11	Sibu (P)	67% C, others 33%	BN-SUPP	PKR-DAP	50.5% from 45%

Source: Ong, K. M.(2010) 'Pakatan Rakyat: What is Different This Time?', The Round Table, Routledge, London 99:407, 141-152

demonstrations and arson attacks on more than 10 churches.¹⁰⁹ It can be contended that this made an impact on the majority of voters. Interestingly, most blogs were enthusiastically debating the issues that were religiously inclined. Rumors of dissatisfaction on the part of the ruling government's unfulfilled promises were also partially a factor. The opposition was no different in insinuating racial remarks, as in the case of Jeff Ooi, Member of Parliament, Jelutong¹¹⁰. He has since made a public apology for his aici lipseste ceva, poate este in versiunea precedenta. and Elections Commissions of Malaysia.

Figure 5. Tabulation of Change in Voting Patterns of the Parti Rakyat (with the exception of Penanti)



1 09 Anwar Ibrahim, "Muslims have no monopoly over 'Allah'", *Wall Street Journal*, 2010 [database on-line]; Available at http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748704375604575023813383421900.html?mod%4agooglenews_wsj last accessed in 25 May 2010; Baradan Kuppusamy, "Can Christians say 'Allah'? In Malaysia, Muslims say no", *Time*, 8 January 2010, [database on-line]; Available at <http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1952497> last accessed in 26 May 2010; Robert Piggott, "Malaysia withholds 'Allah Bibles'", *BBC News*, 4 November 2009, [database on-line]; Available at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/asia-pacific/8343626.stm>. Last accessed in 26 May 2010.

110 Kian Ming Ong, "Pakatan Rakyat: What is Different This Time?," *The Round Table*, Routledge, London vol. 99, no. 407 (2010): 141-152.

remarks. It is noteworthy that his comments were stipulated on blogs, especially the pro-BN websites. The table below shows the by-elections that were in held Malaysia with the exception of Hulu Selangor and Sibü.

Figure 5 and Table 2 suggest that there was a decline in majority vote for the opposition party with reference to the by-elections. A major decline is noticed during the by-election in Manek Urai, Kelantan. Most importantly, the by-elections saw the opposition winning eight out of eleven by elections. 73 percent winning ration translates to a big victory for the opposition parties in Malaysia. However, they were only able to win two parliamentary seats from the ruling government. Whereas the ruling government was able to take the Hulu Selangor parliamentary seat from the opposition party. Closer scrutiny of the by-elections after excluding the spoilt votes and votes of independent parties reveals that the Pakatan Rakyat has still an uphill task in gaining momentum for the next general elections. It also reveals that Anwar's promise of failed switchovers irked the Malaysian populous to form a shadow cabinet was never fulfilled. The figures reveal a downhill trend since Bukit Gantang. Will the momentum continue for the Pakatan Rakyat? It is argued that the East Malaysian political landscape is different from the Peninsula¹¹¹. East Malaysian voters are more concerned with issues that are relatively domesticated (peninsula Malaysia being perceived as the others), arguably due to economic circumstances and unfulfilled promises.¹¹² Hence, excluding the Sibü by-elections, it could be construed that the opposition is not doing as well as most people perceive, according to the anaalysis used in this study. Nu stiu de ce au inceput notele de la inceput.

Hence, it is contended that it was a cyberpolitical war as the ruling government and opposition were quick to debate on insolated issues, while character assassination was at its best during the by-elections. An example was the Hulu Selangor by-

111 James Chin and Arnold Puyok, "Going Against the Tide: Sabah and the 2008 Malaysian General Election", *Asian Politics & Policy*, Wiley Interscience, vol. 2, no. 2 (2010): 219-235.

112 "Local issues cost Barisan Sibü seat", *The Star*, (May 18, 2010), [database on-line]; Available at <http://thestar.com.my/news/story.asp?file=/2010/5/18/sibu/20100518150002&sec=sibu>. Last accessed in May 25, 2010.

election, when Zaid Ibrahim from the opposition was accused of alcohol drinking lost the by-election, arguably costing him the parliamentary seat.⁹ His supporters were also prompt in defending Zaid Ibrahim on their blogs, claiming that he indulged in immoral activities while he was still part of UMNO. This is exemplary of cyberpolitics and its active role in the Malaysian political sphere. Further empirical analysis would be necessary for sociologists and political scientists wanting to gauge the actual impact of cyberpolitics in Malaysia.

7. Conclusions

As discussed in the previous sections, the turn of events during the 80's led to the rise and fall of certain key political figures. Most importantly were the rise of Mahathir and Anwar Ibrahim and the fall of Semangat 46' led by Razaleigh Hamzah and Musa Hitam. The importance of the media control in Malaysia can be seen during the 1990 general elections when Razaleigh was shown using a peculiar hat on which resembled a cross. The cross was a Kadazan symbol and not Christian symbol, and was worn by members of Team A in Sabah, but due to obvious reasons it was never highlighted during the elections in the Utusan newspapers, similar to the kind of limelight that was shed on Razaleigh. Nevertheless, Mahathir's fondness of Anwar grew stronger and in due time, he quickly became a protégé of the former. As a result, Anwar became Deputy President of UMNO and Deputy Prime Minister of Malaysia in 1993.

The fallout between Mahathir and Anwar was due to several reasons, nevertheless it led to the former's incarceration and political career freeze. This was momentous for the birth of *reformasi* and cyberpolitics in Malaysia. Through arrests and subjugation of the press, the fire that was ignited was kept cold for a while. The international highlights that were garnering much attention in cyberpolitics during the 2004 general elections such as the 9/11 terrorist attacks and America's invasion of Iraq were contributory to the outcomes of the electoral outcomes. Domestically, Mahathir resigned as prime minister and passed the baton to Abdullah Badawi, who was portrayed by the media as a clean and determined figure to fight against corruption. This was

the reason for the decline of cyberpolitics in Malaysia during the 2004 general elections.

Cyberspace is increasingly becoming a vital source of socialization and information seeking. It has proved to spur the interest in two waves of political uproar in the Malaysian political scene. In ten years, it has made a once irrelevant Internet newspaper a leader in alternative news portal (malaysiakini.com). The impact it had in the Malaysian political sphere can be overtly seen during the *reformasi* movement, HINDRAF and BERSIH rallies. Added with that, five well-known bloggers were elected to parliament during the 2008 general elections, furthering the argument that it was a victory for the power of online media.

The results of the general election may be a revolt against "the increasing fragmentation of the ethnic communities" along side the emergence of "new politics" going beyond ethnic politics ignited through the Anwar led-*reformasi* movement in 1998. The two coalition or two-party system is found in many democracies, including the United States and Canada.

Nevertheless, an analysis on the by-elections suggests that the opposition may be losing the cyberpolitical war. A retrospect analysis done proved that the opposition through Anwar Ibrahim as a figure of democracy was able to use the Internet to gain vital votes during the 2008 GE. Ironically, winning 8 out of 11 by-elections was not enough proof that the opposition had won credibility in the Malaysian populous. With the exception of Sibu, the tabulation suggests that the Malaysian populous will just re-elect the BN.

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