Ibrahim Suffian

Democratisation & new voter mobilisation in Southeast Asia: reflections of the 2008 Malaysian general election: role of the internet in political communications

Report

http://eprints.lse.ac.uk

Reflections of the 2008 Malaysian General Election: Role of the Internet in **Political Communications**

Mr. Ibrahim Suffian Merdeka Centre for Opinion Research, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

Introduction

The 2008 Malaysian General Elections produced a result that has since changed the political landscape of the country. The outcome of the elections were to a large part due to the confluence of issues and of personalities, one important factor that has emerged is the role played by the internet as a conduit for expressing public desire for political change.

The Malaysian mainstream media, particularly the vernacular Malay and English presses as well as the electronic medium, are controlled by either the government via the free-to-air televisions channels operated by the Ministry of Information, or the private channels operated by companies with strong links to the ruling coalition. Malaysian general elections since independence in 1957 have always been won by the ruling coalition of the National Front, a coalition of thirteen parties that represent various ethnic groups across the country dominated by the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO). In the eleven general elections held between 1957 and 2004, the National Front had always retained at least two-thirds of the seats in the Parliament, allowing it to amend the constitution at will. At the onset of the election campaign in 2008, most pundits and analysts observing the Malaysian political process agreed that this election would be no different, and the National Front would win handsomely, as it had in 2004 when it gained 92% of the seats in parliament with 64% of the popular vote.

However, unseen by the masses and largely dismissed by National Front strategists were the impact of concerns over the economy and rising public resentment over its handling of the interests of its polyglot citizenry. These issues began transforming into a discourse which found a thriving environment in the new media.

Overview of the Factors Influencing the 2008 Elections

The 2007 Malaysian survey of the Asian Barometer Survey project found that the key election issues were voters' perceptions of economic performance, leadership performance, management of inter-ethnic interests and the capability of the opposition.

Economic Performance

Following the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis the economy had shown signs of recovery and posted growth rates exceeding four percent between 2001 and 2005. By 2006 however, rising global oil prices and the ensuing increase in food prices forced the Malaysian government to rollback subsidies on essential items such and the successive increases in the price of fuel had a direct impact on the popularity of the government.

The chart below shows GDP growth and the Business Confidence Index from 2003 to end 2009. The 2008 elections took place prior to the end of the first quarter of 2008, before the precipitous drop caused by the recent financial crisis.
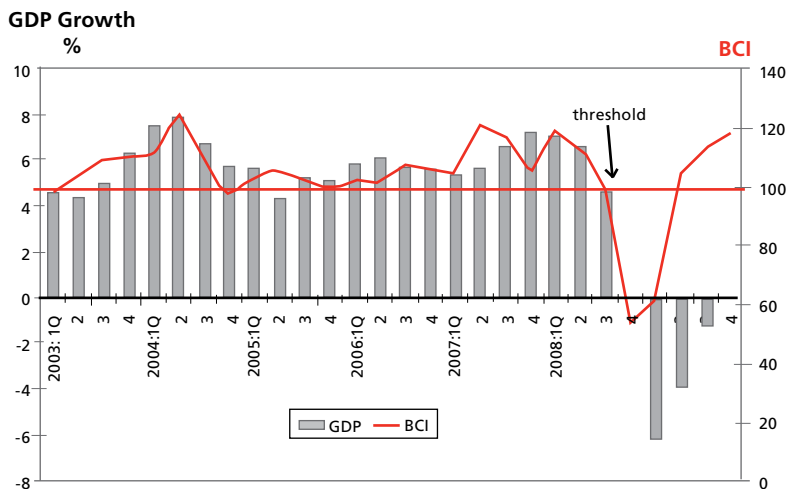
Source: Malaysian Institute for Economic Research

Leadership

In October 2003, Abdullah Ahmad Badawi became prime minister after twenty two years of Dr. Mahathir. Abdullah enjoyed unparalleled public support in the wake of his 2004 election victory, with approval ratings as high as of 91%. Abdullah's honeymoon lasted 18 months after which his popularity decreased as fuel and other consumer staple prices increased, and he came under verbal attack from Dr. Mahathir as well as increasing public criticism from among civil society.

Managing Ethnic Interests

One enduring feature of Malaysian politics is the complex management of the interests of the many ethnic groups that make up its population. For five decades, the National Front coalition had achieve a modicum of success in occupying the middle space in the Malaysian political spectrum, balancing the specific interests of the ethnic based political

parties. Over time however, the perception has increased that too much power had been accrued in the office of the prime minister under the guise of fast-tracking development and decision-making, eventually eroding the effectiveness of institutions tasked with maintaining checks and balances.

At the same time, efforts by UMNO to regain lost ground from the 1999 elections among Malays led to the perceptible rise of pro-Malay rhetoric and discourse over Ketuanan Melayu (loosely defined as Malay Supremacy). In the period leading to the 2008 elections, several incidents took place which raised public temperament including the discovery of a video showing a prominent lawyer fixing the appointments of judges, 'body-snatching' by Muslim administrative authorities, deaths in police custody and the demolition of temples on public land by state authorities. In late November 2007, a demonstration by the Hindu Rights Action Force was met with force and some of the organisers were detained under the Internal Security Act, resulting in an abrupt loss of ethnic Indian support for the National Front.

The opposition

In the 2008, the Malaysian opposition came together in a fashion that was unlike in previous elections. All three parties came to joint understanding based on their reading of the public mood and developed a tacit understanding of their roles that influenced their strategy in meeting the oncoming elections. In addition, many opposition campaigners had established working arrangements on common campaigns prior to the election, including the protests on free and fair elections, fuel subsidies, and judicial independence. Also salient was the centrifugal role of Anwar Ibrahim in moderating the stances of senior leadership in DAP and PAS that created a framework for practical cooperation among the three parties, including a basic campaign platform that downplayed ideological issues. The result was that the campaign communications of the opposition were generally uniform, and targeted the key issues of the government's handling of the economy and inflation, its treatment of minorities, and the erosion of public confidence in the judiciary, the police and the prime minister himself.

Web Based Strategies

The political campaigns' presence on the web was dominated by the opposition parties of PKR, PAS and DAP. The ruling coalition's footprint on the web was miniscule, despite investing in improved websites and recruiting 'cybertroopers' to counter pro-opposition messages. Using their web pages, but particularly the blogs of individual contesting candidates, opposition parties focused their communications on such target issues as high inflation, criminality, and corruption, as well as the prime minister's lack credibility.

The opposition also promoted a message of change anchored in a more equitable and practical redistribution of national wealth, the dismantling of monopolies, and a more responsible government. In the personality-driven political environment of Malaysia, Anwar Ibrahim was portrayed as a genuine alternative leader and a person who, after serving six years in prison on trumped-up charges, was duly cleansed of his prior role in government.

Anwar's party, PKR, centred its campaign message almost solely around his persona. Inspired by the Turkish AK Party's successful experience of promoting former Istanbul mayor Raccip Tayep Erdogan to win recent elections, PKR presented Anwar as a symbol and bearer of change. In cyberspace, Anwar's blog featured prominently as a source of information about the party, his campaign speeches and commentaries on developing events. By taking the style of a 'presidential campaign', PKR was able to deflect criticisms about the party and its lack of experience or pool of established leadership.

Application of Information Technology in the Elections

The evidence clearly indicates that the opposition was clearly more prepared and deliberate in their approach in using the internet and other technology in their communication strategy than the ruling parties. Some of these include:

Text Messages – short message services (SMS) was utilised to the maximum by campaigners in the opposition. Some elements within the opposition had developed a capacity to send targeted messages to individuals living in particular locations, and had the ability to inundate voters in a particular location with SMS blasts carrying various messages. These messages were utilised to inform voters about nearby events and to send teaser messages to get them to visit websites. On the eve of the election day, several tens of thousands of voters in targeted constituencies received a pre-recorded audio message by Anwar Ibrahim asking them to vote for change.

Candidate Websites – numerous campaign websites sprouted in support of candidates, the majority of which were developed by opposition candidates. These websites carried information about the candidates and reported on events, and some also solicited donations. Some notable successes were online donation drives by blogger-turned candidate Jeff Ooi who raised tens of thousands of dollars online to win handsomely; and Badrul Hisham, running against the prime minister's son-in-law, raised more than RM30,000 within a week.

Party Media Portals – party sites such as Harakahdaily and Suara Keadilan became portals that made material available for subsequent duplication and transmission amongst the public. PAS developed a daily newsletter which carried the statements and reportage of campaign issues and events, which was widely distributed during the campaign by party activists.

Supporter websites – in addition to party websites, a number of homepages operated by party activists and supporters also carried additional information and generated materials and leaflets that could be downloaded and distributed.

Youtube and other video sites – the opposition was denied access to mainstream television networks and so relied upon video sharing sites like Youtube to showcase its events and speeches. A large quantity of user generated material found their way on Youtube, with one of the more popular video clips showing the Malaysian prime minister asleep at various public events.

Distribution of Video Discs – an adaptation of the leaflet, the general election saw further widespread use of the video compact discs (VCDs) as a form of digital leafleting by campaigners from both sides. These VCDs were used to carry various forms of messages, from the typical introduction of a local candidate to the transmission of insidious material denigrating a particular candidate or party. During the campaign, activists likely linked to the National Front re-issued an old video purporting Anwar Ibrahim's sexual scandal, but the impact was negligible as the material was nearly a decade old and had been discredited by the legal process which acquitted Anwar in 2004. On the other hand, a VCD by the interest group HINDRAF depicting the destruction of Hindu temples and homes of Malaysians of Indian descent by Malaysian local authorities proved pivotal in inflaming voter passions.

Impact of Information Technology

The National Front ran its campaign defensively yet retained a hubristic outlook that assumed members of the public would simply accept what was handed to them. It underestimated the level of resentment and disillusionment latent within the Malaysian electorate. The National Front also failed to comprehend the reach and transmission network of opposition and dissident citizen communications. A post election survey conducted by the Merdeka Center, a polling organization, found that while more than 90% of Malaysians learned about the elections via the mainstream media, two-thirds also had access to secondary and alternative sources of information such the internet, leaflets, and activist

meetings. Although these alternative forms of communications were difficult to maintain over time and were largely aided by the huge mobilisation of volunteer resources, they nonetheless achieved a decisive impact in the outcome of the elections. Campaigners from the ruling party failed to comprehend the corrosive nature of the content of the material being transmitted on the internet and by secondary information networks on their legitimacy and standing in the eyes of the electorate.

The use of information technology will be a permanent feature of election campaigns. Its potency will be fueled by the type and nature of issues at hand as well as the strategy adopted by the mainstream media. At the time of writing, the Malaysian mainstream media continues to resist further liberalisation, and television and radio networks remain wedded to the wishes of the National Front ruling coalition. The electorate has clearly become increasingly cynical of the mainstream media and its masters, as a Merdeka Center poll conducted in July 2008 found that only 25% of Malaysian voters felt that they had some trust in the political news coverage of the local mainstream media, with less than 10% expressing "strong trust" in the medium.

Malaysia continues to invest in its broadband networks and as internet access continues to widen beyond the urban areas of the country political actors are now more empowered and better able to utilise these tools. The disparate opposition has coalesced into the People's Alliance who now control five provincial governments. At the same time, the evolution of Malaysian politics is likely to continue apace as information becomes more freely available to the public. Along with an increasing young electorate – many of whom are likely to have Internet access – the promise is that this is merely the beginning of a wider role for ICT in Malaysian political and social discourse. ■

Ibrahim Suffian

(MBA, Michigan State University) is Programs Director at the Merdeka Centre for Opinion Research in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. His work at the Centre involves socio-economic research in support of public policies relating to matters such as the removal of subsidies, integrity, gender equality, and rural development, among others. He is also involved in opinion research work for socio-political tracking and political communications initiatives. The Office of the Prime Minister of Malaysia, Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development and the Ministry of Defence are among his many clients.