THE DEVELOPMENT OF ICT AND ITS POLITICAL IMPACT IN MALAYSIA

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to identify the ways in which the Malaysian Government seeks to develop the country using Information Communication Technology (ICT) to be competitive in the golobalization era. It is also aims to evaluate the extent of development of ICT ability to empower Malaysian community by enhance their participation in politics. Through ICT products, the community not only follows the development of ICT revolution but they also create a knowledge society and helps to boost the quality of life of communities by participating in politics. As such it enable the transformation of Malaysian politics especially in elections.

Keywords: ICT, Malaysian community, political impact.

Introduction

The buzz word 'technology' is a double-edged sword in present days. It became a part of life and livelihood of any country. In the 20th century, rapid technological advances led to rising standards of living, literacy, health and life expectancy. The technology also made possible for destruction weapon warfare, global warming and so on. The ICTs likewise also present both opportunities and challenges. ICTs are tools. They are depending on how users used them and for what purposes. In the era of globalization information and extraordinary increase in spread of information have given birth to a new era of knowledge and information which affect directly economic, social, cultural and political activities of all region of the world, including Malaysia.

Many governments have recognized the role of ICTs could play in their local and economic development policies. ICTs are coG 'e-Korea Vision 2006' policy aimed at "an information society, focused on promoting national information process; advancing the information infrastructure; and strengthening international cooperation" (Bae, 2004). The Japanese ICT strategy was different, as the government played a minimal role in developing this sector. Instead, most ICT development in Japan was initiated by private firms. The government merely set the direction and the private firms executed it (Bae, 2004). Despite the differences in strategy, however, both countries made ICT development a top priority. The ICT revolution also spread to Southeast Asia. Singapore, in particular, is a highly advanced ICT country. It adapted its first ICT master plan in the early 1980's and implemented phases of the national ICT plan in line with changing technology. The Singapore plans include the National Computerisation Plan (1980 – 1985), National IT Plan (1986 – 1991), IT2000 (1992 – 1999), Infocomm 21 (2000 – 2003) and Connected Singapore (from 2003, and current at time of writing). The Philippine Government

launched its National Information Technology Plan 'IT21' in 1998. Two years earlier, Thailand had already launched an ICT vision in order to address social inequality and improve economic prosperity. Thailand's first national IT plan was called 'IT2000' (Thuvasethakul & Koanantakool, 2002). Arguably the most comprehensive ICT strategy of any ASEAN nation has been developed by Malaysia as well.

Since the 1990's the Malaysian Government has developed a range of ICT-related policies in order to be highly competitive in a globalised world. The former Prime Minister, Tun Mahathir announced the *Wawasan 2020* or 'Vision 2020' that set a goal for Malaysia to achieve the status of a fully developed country by the year 2020. The vision focused not only on economic aspects but also on social prosperity. One was the use of ICTs. The major development of ICT is the Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC). Established in 1996, the MSC is the NITC's biggest initiative. A high-profile ICT project, the MSC's aim is to build a world-leading technology environment that facilitates Malaysia's evolution into a knowledge-based society, by attracting and nurturing leading-edge and world-class companies. The state certainly hopes the MSC will be a catalyst that lifts Malaysia further up the economic value chain away from the limits of low-wage and low-value added manufacturing of IT hardware. But, the aspirations for the MSC go even further than these economic goals. In order to support for the technology, the government declared the Bill of Guarantee, whose Article No. 7 explicitly ensures that Internet content will not be censored. These offers attracted major foreign companies; Intel, AMD and DHL set up their regional headquarters there and helped local companies to reinforce their economic positions so that they could compete with international companies (Holst, 2007). This led to the creation of jobs for Malaysians. It was reported that the MSC project could offer 10,000 technology-related jobs (Ali, 2009). Government revenue increased almost nine-fold from US$1.2 billion to US$9.4 billion in 2005 (Ali, 2009).

However, the decision not to censor the Internet, in order to free up economic development has also had another remarkable effect that the government might not predicted which is the stimulation of political discourse from grassroots upwards. In fact, it would be argued that the whole political arena has been transformed through this one decision. The use of the Internet by opposition political groups have increased their political power and have become more effective in reaching individual Malaysians as well as groups at the grassroots level and there are signs of more lively and open political debate. As noted by Claudia Derich (2004: 107), the discourse on political reform and change has become remarkably lively since 1998 in Malaysia. Therefore, this study will provide insights into the dynamics of Internet-politics relations in Malaysia by looking on the impact of ICTs especially the Internet on the Malaysian politics.

Current State of ICTs Development in Malaysia

Assisted by government initiatives, Malaysia has now advanced technologically in ICT sector performance. The Malaysian society has seen a tremendous leap in the uptake and use of ICT. The Internet has become almost everywhere in the life of Malaysian society.

The Internet network started to be developed in Malaysia in 1983 by Mohamad Awang-Lah, an academic at University of Malaya. He tried to connect the country to the world while working at the university's laboratory (Rahmah & Becker, 2001). Following this, private companies such as TELEKOM took up various initiatives to establish a well-developed Internet connection in Malaysia. *RangKom* (Rangkaian Komputer Malaysia) was the first computer network in the country. It has the capability of linking up to four connections – Australia, United States, the Netherlands and Korea. *Rangkom* was also linked with five local universities – Universiti Malaya, Universiti Putra Malaysia, Universiti Sains

Malaysia, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia and Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia. Under the *RangKom* project, people were able to use email and access the USENET newsgroup.

In 1987, Telekom Malaysia Berhad (the privatised telecommunications company) launched TELITA, a video text service that enabled early 'netizens' to access a simple, interactive, computer-based information and business system for in-house communication and public dissemination (Rahmah & Becker, 2001). However, TELITA lasted only about two years. The main reason was that the connection was so slow that most people decided not to use the Internet (Rahmah & Becker, 2001). In 1990, the joint advanced integrated networking (JARING) was launched, the first Malaysian Internet service provider (ISP). JARING also absorbed RangKom into its system. In 1992, with the installation of a satellite link between Malaysia and the US, JARING was fully connected to the Internet and Malaysian users thereby gained easy access to Internet resources in more than 140 countries. Yet, less than 30 users were subscribers to JARING in 1992 (Rahmah & Becker, 2001).

In addition to the above initiatives, the government also established MSC and announced a program known as the National Broadband Initiative. The program is a strategy to bring broadband to the whole country. In March 2010 the government officially announced a high-speed broadband (HSBB) project. The HSBB project aims to roll out high-speed broadband services across the country by 2015 to boost national competitiveness (Ali, 2009). The project will cost RM11.3 billion and is a joint venture between Telekom Malaysia Bhd™ and the government, in which the latter provides a RM2.4 billion subsidy while RM8.9 billion comes from Telekom Malaysia. One initiative is to provide services to 615,000 household in 246 locations. Apart from this, 138 Information ministry offices will be allocated around the country, providing coverage for up to 400,000 users. E-kiosks will also be provided at community centres and sub-district offices in 1,105 sub-districts. For cellular coverage, 873 new telecommunication towers will be built (Salman & Hashim, 2011). With that, the Internet then started to pick up speed, reflecting the serious government efforts. With these developments, Internet penetration has grown dramatically, from 3.7 million users in 2000 to 18 million in 2013 (see Table 1).

Table 1 Internet users in Malaysia

Year	Internet Users	Population %
2000	3,700,000	15.0
2005	10,040,000	37.9
2006	11,016,000	38.9
2007	13,528,200	47.8
2008	15,868,000	62.8
2009	16,902,600	65.7
2010	16,902,600	64.6
2011	17,600, 000	62.2
2012	17,723,000	60.7
2013	18,000,000	62.0

Source: Compilation from ITU, World Statistics and MCMC

As such, with tremendous efforts by the government for technology penetration rate, the Internet has brought a huge change in a way we do things and on many aspects of our society. One is in politics.

Even all the initiatives by the government were particularly for economic purpose, there are a number of scholars who studied the unattended consequences of Internet embraced in Malaysia especially in politics. Therefore, the following section will discuss systematically how the Internet impacts the Malaysian politics especially on the previous five elections.

ICTs and Politics in Malaysia

With the rapid expansion of the Internet, have grown expectations that it will be a new tool for a better democracy (Uimonen, 2003; Chin, 2003; George, 2006; Pang, 2006; Tan & Zawawi, 2008; Steele, 2009). Tan and Zawawi (2008: 76) argue that in Malaysia, the Internet, particularly blogs have become powerful weapons for democracy. They further claim that blogging promotes democratisation by enhancing civil liberties and helping to frame the discourse and agenda for public policies. Blogging is still a marginal activity for enhancing democracy in Malaysia but it is clearly an "unstoppable means to empower individual and civil society". Similarly, Lim M.K (2009) focuses on blogs that contribute to the promotion of democracy. For Lim M.K, blogs in Malaysia could function as a watchdog or fifth estate, becoming a tool for checking on the government. Blogs also act as networks that link people to each other. Indeed, blogs have been used to mobilise people in mass protest on various occasions in Malaysia. They are also a tool for expressing opinion; blogs make it easier for people to communicate with one another free from gate-keeping institutions.

George (2005) analyses the use of the Internet as a tool for democratisation in Malaysia and Singapore. In his analysis of websites, he refers to 'contentious journalism', which is journalism that challenges "the consensus that powerful interests try to shape and sustain through mainstream media" (p. 3). He also supports the view that online contentious journalism enables democratisation as it expresses the voices of individual and community sectors that are marginalised and underrepresented in the mainstream media. He argues that although Singapore offers cutting-edge technology, the political and democratic activities there are less of an impact than in Malaysia.

Similarly, Steele (2009), Pang (2006), Chin (2004) and Weiss (2012) claim that the Internet has helped to develop the public sphere, with the emergence of online newspaper *MalaysiaKini*, enabling citizens to exchange and share opinions. Steele (2009) says that *MalaysiaKini* promotes democracy in Malaysia thanks to its good journalism practices and because it provides space for people to participate through vehicles such as the letters page, the comments section and the Your Say section. Pang (2006: 71) argues that *MalaysiaKini* is able to maintain its editorial independence from political and economic forces despite the many challenges they face such as "lack of press accreditation, legal constraints, and inter-media rivalry that collectively act as a surrogate ideology." As such, this newly-created sphere provides a remedy for political participation and facilitates access to information not available in the mass media (Chin, 2004).

Other scholars are not optimistic about the potential of the Internet to change the political landscape in Malaysia. Abbott (2001) notes that the Internet links numerous vibrant civil society organisations across ethnic boundaries but still fails to promote regime change and democratisation in Malaysia. In a recent study, he remains cautious about the Internet as a tool for democratisation. As he notes (2012: 352), while "the Internet may be 'a raucous and highly democratic world', it clearly does have gatekeepers, often reflects existing socioeconomic and political divisions, and is ever more commercialised." Brown (2004) also casts doubt on the potential of the Internet for democratization as it

is still underutilised as a counter-hegemonic field. Most information is unrealistic, and full of gossip and slander. Similarly, Tan and Zawawi (2008: 79) are not optimistic about the democratisation effect of the Internet, warning that "the possibility of blogging to act as a vehicle for political change and democratization should be viewed with caution."

Impact of Cyber Politics on Elections

Given these contrasting views, it is important to look at the impact of ICTs especially the Internet on Malaysian politics a little more systematically. The following is discusses how the Internet has affected electoral politics during the four most recent elections in 1999, 2004, 2008 and 2013. Highlighting the ever-growing potential of the Internet as a democratic tool, this discussion sets the scene for the argument of this article.

Table 2 shows that there have been significant swings in BN's share of the popular vote from the high of 65.2 per cent in 1995, when the Internet was still very much an 'unknown' in mass communication in the country. After 1995, Table 4 shows the fluctuation in the percentage of votes for BN dropping in 1999 to 56.5 per cent, rising to 63.9 per cent in 2004 and plunging again to 51.4 per cent in 2008. Then in 2013, percentage of votes for BN still falls. The rise and fall in percentages in the election year of 1999 and 2004 do not correlate to the use of new media by opposition parties. Similarly, Table 3 shows that the number of BN seats at federal level changed in tandem with the popular vote. The ruling coalition held on to its politically and psychologically critical two-thirds majority until the 'political tsunami' of 2008. The opposition parties, united under the Pakatan Rakyat (People's Alliance [PR]) banner, captured 82 seats - a big jump from the 20 they won in 2004 and again they captured biggest seats in the 2013 with 89 seats.

Table 2 Percentage of popular votes for Barisan Nasional

General Elections	Percentage of Votes
1995	65.2
1999	56.5
2004	63.9
2008	51.4
2013	47.4

Source: Compiled from Election Commission of Malaysia (www.spr.gov.my)

Table 3 Number of seats in Parliament

General elections	Barisan Nasional	Opposition
1995	162	30
1999	148	45
2004	199	20
2008	140	82
2013	133	89

Source: Compiled from Election Commission of Malaysia (www.spr.gov.my)

In its early days, the Internet in Malaysia was used mostly by people who had telephone lines and personal computers. User numbers were still small and most people relied mainly on government-controlled newspapers, television and radio stations for their political information. Given this situation, the Internet served as an important alternative media for those who were pro-opposition. One of the first noteworthy sites was the *Sang Kancil* mailing list created by Malaysia's first online journalist, the late MGG Pillai (George, 2005). Websites and discussion forums critical of the government proliferated, including many that were not simply limited to the intellectual elite.

Prior to the emergence of the Internet, Tun Mahathir could control virtually every crisis or political event through traditional news and information sources. The BN used the mainstream media to convey its messages to the public. Scholars who have written on elections and politics in Malaysia often note the obstructive role of the local media. Most claim that the performance of the mainstream media during elections demonstrated that they consistently portrayed the ruling BN in a positive light and provided limited coverage of the political opposition (see for example, Zaharom, 2000; Wang, 2003; Mustafa, 2003). The mainstream media praised in particular the role of UMNO in preserving Malay dominance and defending the community from ethnic violence (Wong, 2000). It was not until 1998 that the Internet began to emerge as a political threat to the government, after the sacking and arrest of Anwar Ibrahim (Bahfen, 2009; Abbott, 2000). As mentioned, in the wake of the Asian financial crisis, increasing differences emerged between Mahathir and his deputy, Anwar (Wong, 2004). Anwar's sacking led to large public protests, and the BN swiftly thwarted the reform movement by imprisoning Anwar along with other prominent civil society activists. In opposing the government, Anwar brought together the opposition parties for the first time into one coalition, known as the Alternative Front. The media began to portray the Alternative Front negatively, especially by emphasising its internal disputes (Kim W.L, 2001).

The Internet provides a means for information to be disseminated publicly without government interference. The Anwar crisis, along with his reform agenda, mobilised grassroots support for him. Many websites previously critical of Anwar during his position in the government turned into mouthpieces for his struggle for justice, reporting his statements, showing photos and providing up-to-date news. While slow Internet connections limited the dissemination of news, it was still possible to download, print and distribute news among friends and relatives. Then, with the new combination of traditional media and alternative media, the *reformasi* groups managed to rally their supporters and organise mass gatherings in Kuala Lumpur on a few occasions. Dozens of websites sprang up immediately after Anwar's arrest, posting the latest news and rumours, as well as links to foreign news sources. The estimated number of websites rose to up to 50 (George, 2006; Zaharom, 2002), a significant number considering that the Internet in Malaysia was still new then. Popular sites such as MalaysiaKini.com, Laman Reformasi, Freeanwar.com, harakahdaily.com and FreeMalaysia.com offered alternative news and information about the crisis, and received a significant number of hits per day (Anil Netto, 2002). Some of these websites were owned by popular webmasters, for example Sabri Zain (Reformasi Diary) and Raja Petra Kamaruddin (MalaysiaToday). The first online news portal to emerge before the 1999 general election was *MalaysiaKini*, founded by Steven Gan and Premesh Chandran, who were joined by journalists concerned about the credibility of the news (Tong, 2004). *MalaysiaKini* quickly became the most popular news portal in Malaysia and its readership reached half a million hits during its first month of operation (Anil Netto, 2000). The readership continued to achieve high figures after the election, averaging 100,000 hits per day – more than the circulation of the top daily newspapers, *The Sun* and *The Star* (Zaharom, 2000).

Not only were civil society agencies active online, but opposition parties also used the net for public outreach, especially during the 1999 general election. For instance, PAS set up its first website in

1999. PAS launched the first Net TV (Harakah web TV) in May 1999 (Woodier, 2008) and also turned its weekly newspaper *Harakah* into an online journal when the government restricted its sale from twice a week to once a fortnight (Woodier, 2008). The new *KeADILan* party was refused permission to publish any printed material to promote its platform, so it, too, turned to the Internet to reach wider audiences. It should be noted that publishing news online was helpful for opposition parties because it meant that they no longer had to comply with the Printing and Publication Act. However, at this time, the Internet was not as sophisticated as it is today. At the beginning, most of the online platforms disseminated news one-way only. For political parties, the Internet was a way to present information about office holders and candidates, to disseminate press releases and to make public announcements. There was no way for readers to provide feedback or to add any information to what was available. Nonetheless, the combination of the online presence of civil society and opposition parties, the growth of websites, chat rooms, listservs and emails was significant in the lead-up to the election.

As a result, though the BN maintained its two-thirds majority, it was a tough victory. It is evidence that the Internet had become a new space for political activists and opposition voices to disseminate political information and news. Taylor (2004) analysed the 1999 election result and noted that the result was still significant in term of seats won by the opposition parties even though the number of seats won was small. Many of the seats won by the BN were won only narrowly. Moreover, in the Federal Territory of Kuala Lumpur and Selangor, where the Internet had the largest impact, the opposition coalition gained the largest margin.

By the 2004 general election, blogs and independent websites were definitely on the rise and had become important tools for political communication. Many NGOs began to set up their own websites. Examples include the country's pioneer civil rights group's Aliran Online (Aliran.com); *Suaram* (Suara Rakyat Malaysia, Voice of the Malaysian People), with its Suaram.net to support victims of state oppression; women's advocates *Tenaganita* (www.tenaganita.net); Islamic youth activists ABIM (www.abim.org.my); Muslim women advocates, Sisters in Islam (www.sistersinislam.org.my); and the Malaysian Bar (www.malaysianbar.org.my). The first political bloggers to appear were Jeff Ooi in 2003 and Raja Petra Kamaruddin, the founder of the Malaysia-Today website (Gomez & Chang, 2010). Yet, the online presence of so many NGOs and individuals bloggers had no significant impact on the election. Instead, the 2004 election represented an opportunity for the newly-appointed Prime Minister Badawi to obtain a fresh mandate for the BN after 22 years under Mahathir. During this period, the mainstream media played its role in 'welcoming' the new prime minister with his nickname, Pak Lah. As noted by Mustafa, the newspapers, specifically The *New Straits Times*, *The Star*, *Berita Harian* and *Utusan Malaysia*, emphasised 'the Pak Lah' factor. Pak Lah was portrayed by the daily newspapers as "clean, non-confrontational, humble, gentle and affable as well as a people friendly leader" (Mustafa, 2005: 36). In addition, his slogan "work with me, not for me" was advertised widely in the newspapers; through it, Badawi promoted an image of care and concern for the people, especially those who had felt alienated during Mahathir's rule.

Unlike in 1999, the 2004 general election featured no sensational issue that could be covered by the opposition parties. Instead, most of their energy was spent on countering the image campaign of Pak Lah. The opposition used the Internet to spread news about Badawi but it was not particularly effective, as there was no controversial issue to be covered. Most news concentrated on Badawi's new transformation plan, which included fighting corruption and ensuring more accountability and transparency in the administration (Marzuki, 2004). Such promises gave people hope in a new Badawi administration. Opposition figures like Anwar Ibrahim and Lim Kit Siang used their personal blogs to

convey their messages to the public, but these had no major impact during the 2004 general election. As Smeltzer and Lepawsky (2010) shows, the alternative media played a minimum role in the 2004 election.

Not long after the BN's overwhelming victory in the 2004 general election, many people lost faith in Abdullah Badawi's leadership. Seen as incompetent, he and his administration soon became the target of widespread criticism. Significantly, his critics included a number of government insiders. Among the popular bloggers who sharply criticised the administration was a former secretary of UMNO, 'Sang Kelembai' (Zaharin Mohd Yassin). Datuk Ruhanie Ahmad had been secretary of politics for former Deputy Prime Minister Musa Hitam; and an UMNO MP of Parit Sulong in Johor, wrote his blog under the pseudonym 'Kuda Kepang' in order to criticise Badawi's government. Other popular bloggers, including Aisehman and Cuit Sikit, also had previously been on the government's side. They all tended to oppose government policy even though they were in government themselves. Another who lent his voice to the chorus of criticism was former prime minister, Mahathir Mohamed, who wrote his own blog on the website chedet.co.cc. He started blogging on 9th May 2008. After retiring as prime minister, his relationship with his successor was not very good. He found his opinions blocked by traditional mass media. Mahathir gained more freedom to have his opinions read by going online and he used his blog to target Badawi, the BN government and the party. According to Kee and Ahmad et al. (2010), Mahathir's use of his blog to target personality of Badawi constituted 58.8 per cent of his postings and received a high level of response from readers.

It was not only people close to the government who attacked the new prime minister. Ordinary citizens also used blogs to show their dissatisfaction, including Rocky Bru (Ahiruddin Atan), formerly a Malay newspaper journalist, and UMNO media advisor and editor of *Berita Harian*, Abdul Kadir Jasin – known as the Scribe. Both were critical of the government. Marina Mahathir, daughter of Mahathir, also turned to online writing on the blog, Rating MM. Another important blogger, Raja Petra Kamaruddin (RPK), with his website, MalaysiaToday, became famous for his exposure of corruption, abuse of power and the incompetence of the BN party. His blog gained in popularity and eventually attracted the authorities' attention. He criticised not only the government but also the opposition parties (Khoo Boo Teik, 2010). Most of these people were not necessarily supporters of the opposition parties but were simply frustrated with the BN government and particularly the Badawi administration. It was difficult for Badawi to deal with these bloggers or even to respond to them, as they were people who normally supported the BN. However, as the next election approached, several active bloggers were given a chance by opposition parties to become candidates in the 2008 poll. Among them were Tony Pua, Jeff Ooi, Badrul Hisham Shahrin, Teresa Kok, Nik Nazmi and Hannah Yeoh (Smeltzer, 2008; Ooi Kee Beng, 2009). This period also witnessed the arrival of more independent online news. In addition to *MalaysiaKini*, other independent news sources such as Nut Graph, The Malaysian Insider, Malaysia Mirror, Free Malaysia Today arose. As a result, during the 2008 general election campaign, Malaysians had easy access to a large amount of free, alternative information produced by professional journalists as well as citizens and amateur journalists (Gomez & Chang, 2010).

The political web campaign during the 2008 general election period was dominated by opposition groups and those who were dissatisfied with the Badawi administration. Though the BN also had a web campaign, it was "miniscule, despite investing in improved websites" (Suffian, 2008: 20). The opposition groups focused their web campaigns on highlighting the weaknesses of the BN such as corruption, criminal activities and the prime minister's credibility (Rashid, 2009). They took the opportunities made available by the Internet to discuss, debate and disseminate information to ordinary people without any filtering. As many observers have noted, these activities in cyberspace affected the result of the 2008

general election (Ufen, 2008 and 2009; Weiss, 2008; Abbott, 2009; Mohd Azizuddin, 2009; Abdul Rashid, 2009).

The changes of online politic have not gone without unnoticed by the BN. In facing the 2013 general election, the BN jumped onto the Internet as well as a sign of willingness to change and also to regain support. Many political leaders from BN have also joined the cyberspace community by launching their own blogs, Facebook and Twitter accounts. BN leaders no longer disregard opinions from the online community as most of them did prior to the 2008 election. Most of them now value the power of the Internet. Most Malaysian political frontrunners have joined Facebook, including Najib Razak, the Prime Minister. By April 2013, Najib followers in his Twitter were 1,460,000 the highest followers compared to the opposition PR political frontrunner – Anwar Ibrahim had 267,000, Nik Aziz 94,000 dan Lim Kit Siang 89,000. Similarly to Facebook 'Like' in which Najib Razak still ahead in 'Like' in his facebook – 1,58,000 while the PR leader – Anwar Ibrahim only 80,000. In fact, Najib also announced few months before the 2013 general election that the country would experience its first 'social media election' (Gomez, 2014). The party also allocate huge budget for election advertising especially for online advertising especially in projected a singular branding with the single image of Najib as the icon leader (Gomez, 2014). The government also employs a number of 'cyber troopers' or Internet users paid to generate content, rebut criticism and also attack the opposition. On the other side, the opposition PR also double their effort in combating the BN in using the Internet particularly the social media. DAP as one of the three major parties in PR had created a position in the party to oversee social media publicity for various campaigns. For example, the party manage to collect fund amount RM130,00 in only one campaign (Singh, 2013). In fact according to Yeo Bee Yin, – one of DAP's campaign strategies that the social media really benefited for them due its features of two ways communication and they have very strong online fans and these people were those who spread the party's message (Singh, 2013). Like in the previous election, NGOs also playing its role in supporting the PR. The PR and grassroots organizations once again using the social media, organized Bersih 2.0 in 2011 follow up the 2007 Bersih rally. In reporting the event, the social media became essential tool for protestors to share the event through YouTube, Facebook and Twitter in response to the news report about the event in traditional media. Moreover, the opposition PR launched a campaign by asking citizens to share video or picture through social media during the polls if any sign of fraudulent activity. Since then many photos and videos including 'suspicious ballot boxes dropped by an helicopter on a football pitch and evidence of all other kinds of frauds have flooded in the Internet' (Navarria, 2014:3) and these stimulate for debates.

Ever since the Internet was available in Malaysia, the one question that has interested observers over the supply of online political content is the impact it might have on politics, especially during elections. With the rise of blogs in the elections and the emerging significance of social media in the country, the follow up question is whether opposition parties use of new media have been able to affect electoral outcomes in the last five general elections. Malaysia has strong opposition parties, an active civil society and a growing amount of online political content, and the results over the last two general elections, 2008 and 2013 hold the evidence that voters are more or less influenced by the new media.

The Potential of the Internet for Democratization

The Internet is transforming Malaysian society into a discursive society and it is a platform not only for deliberation among citizens but also between citizens and political leaders. According to Mohd Azizuddin (2010: 121), the Internet "can definitely provide a forum for deliberation in the larger flow of communication in the public sphere." Uimonen (2003: 309) argues that the Internet has provided "a discursive space in which users can communicate and interact on issues of common concern." Similarly,

Tang (2006: 5) also states that the Internet in Malaysia provides "digital conversation that can properly be characterised as a growing culture of democratization." Tan and Zawawi (2008: 76) also emphasise that the practice of blogging is going to "help in framing the discourse and setting the agenda for public policy-making."

The effects of this gradual transformation became obvious after the unprecedented gains made by the opposition political parties since the 2008 general election. Since then, there has been an emphasis on greater political participation and deliberation in the political process. The BN does not want to repeat the mistake of ignoring the Internet and losing votes among the young, the majority of whom are among the internet users. There are also signs that the government has changed its strategy and begun to engage with people through online spaces. Since the 2008 general election, a number of by-elections have been held and the BN took the opportunities they presented to use cyberspace to approach the community. For example, in the by-election in Merlimau, Malacca, the candidate from BN, Roslan, used Facebook to answer questions from readers and explain his position on current issues (*Berita Harian*, 3rd March 2011). Similarly, in the by-elections in Bukit Selambau and Bukit Gantang, the ruling BN launched blogs that provided forums for discussion with the community (Gomez & Chang, 2010).

As noted, many political leaders from BN have also joined the cyberspace community by launching their own blogs, Facebook and Twitter accounts. BN leaders no longer disregard opinions from the online community as most of them did prior to the 2008 election. Most of them now value the power of the Internet. Most Malaysian political frontrunners have joined Facebook. They have been active in updating the news on their walls as well as gaining support from followers. They have also incorporated interactive social networking resources into their larger Internet strategies by featuring links on their official homepages. These links demonstrate an integrated approach and show an appreciation for the importance of communication with people. The official websites of Najib Razak (1Malaysia.com), Anwar Ibrahim (AnwarIbrahim.com) and Lim Kit Siang (LimKitSiang.com) all feature clear links to four major social networking sites (Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Flickr). Besides Facebook, Twitter has also recently taken root in Malaysia. Twittering has become a popular way for politicians to be more accessible to the public and to engage with their electorates. It helps to make conversation more personal and direct, and it mobilises supporters. In particular, younger politicians like MPs Tony Pua, Khairy Jamaluddin, Nurul Izzah and State Assembly Representatives Hannah Yeoh and Nik Nazmi, use this tool. According to Tony Pua, Twitter is "a platform to make quick kills in term of poking holes in arguments" (in Teoh, 2011). MP Khairy also stated that Twitter is a place to chat with people (in Shannon, 2011). Other Malaysian politicians, Najib Razak, Anwar Ibrahim, DAP Secretary General Lim Kit Siang and Mahathir Mohammed among them, also use Twitter.

Malaysian civil society is also actively engaged online voicing its views, mobilising and setting up its own virtual communities. Many Malaysians now use Facebook for discussing specific issues. They also use online spaces to protest against government policy. For example, in responding to the National Budget 2011, a Facebook account was set up with the name "1Malaysians Reject 100-storey Mega Tower" and attracted 294,684 fans (see Figure 1) protesting against the government's plan to build the skyscraper known as Warisan Merdeka. For these protestors, the project budget of RM5 billion would be better spent on education and health (*Malaysia Today,* 28th October 2010). In order to counter this criticism, a pro-government group set up a Facebook account called "100-storey Menara Warisan" in support of the 2011 budget. This page only attracted 249 fans.[1]

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[1] See http://www.facebook.com/NoMegaTower, accessed 8th May 2011.

Figure1 Snapshot from Facebook

This new phenomenon has been described by Mohd Azizuddin (2010) as the emergence of a 'new politics', a shift in the political landscape towards deliberative democracy. Loh (2003: 279) had already pointed out the existence of the 'new politics' since the 1999 general election when he described the transition as a period of "contestations between the discourse and practices of the politics of ethnicity and participatory democracy." He added that since the 1999 election, there have been shifts in the relative balance of power between the state and society, and incremental movements toward greater openness, a liberalisation of the BN rule and the emergence of an autonomous civil society.

Conclusion

This article has identified the ways in which the Malaysian Government seeks to develop the country using ICT to be competitive in the global economy. In its attempt to accelerate economic development by attracting foreign investors to the MSC, the government declared a policy of non-censorship of Internet content which inadvertently helped to create a new space for political dissent. As more and more Malaysians become regular internet users, the online sphere is increasingly appropriated by people who are critical of the government, who seek to use it to create a sense of autonomy, free from government ideology and policies.

Since the result of the 2008 general election, the BN Government realised that it was facing strong opposition in civil society. The government then began to shift its strategy from ignoring the Internet to embracing it, in order to compete directly with opposition groups to gain the attention of what has been dubbed the digital voter. Today, the Internet is a crucial site for political contestation and debate in Malaysia, used by both government and opposition groups and supporters. As patterns of political communication change, new opportunities for fostering democracy arise.

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