

THE SOCIAL MEDIA ELECTION IN MALAYSIA: THE 13TH GENERAL ELECTION IN 2013

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The 13th General Election (GE13) of 2013 was historic because the Barisan Nasional (BN) won with a slightly reduced majority compared to the last general election in 2008 and surprisingly lost the popular votes to the Pakatan Rakyat (PR) for the first time since 1969. There was a huge swing from the urban and suburban constituencies toward supporting the PR. One of the major contributors to the result was the social media which was once again dominated by the PR, similar to what happened in 2008. Social media is trendy, cheap and easy to access especially for youths who made up half of the voters totalling 13.3 million. Online channels such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, news portals and blogs are popular and became the avenues for political parties from both BN and PR alike for campaigning and tools for the leaders and candidates to meet the electorates in respective constituencies. The impact was enormous for PR parties which were able to utilise it to their advantages, letting the 2013 general election become competitive and strengthening the democratic process in Malaysia. Thus, this article studies the correlation between the phenomena of social media and democracy. It then explores the conditions and effects of social media in Malaysia. Finally, this article analyses thoroughly the impact of social media in the GE13. Based on overall observation, the social media is still dominated by the PR. The election results reflect the influence of social media in Malaysian politics.

Keywords: social media, the 13th General Election, Malaysia, Barisan Nasional, Pakatan Rakyat, democracy

INTRODUCTION

During the 12th General Election (GE12) of 8 March 2008, social media was definitely an important instrument in promoting democracy unnoticed by the ruling Barisan Nasional (BN) – a coalition of 13 parties headed by the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), government. It opened up the space for Malaysian citizens to deliberate political issues and gave opportunities for the opposition to influence the election results. The government under-estimated the

influence of social media on the Malaysian voters. With the policy of free cyberspace, the social media has huge potential to strengthen the democratisation process and democracy in Malaysia. Soon after GE12, on 25 March 2008, Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi astonishingly acknowledged that the BN government lost the online war in the general election. He said that:

We didn't think it was important. It was a serious misjudgement. We thought that the newspapers, the print media, the television were important but young people were looking at text messages and blogs. (The influence of alternative media) was painful. But it came at the right time, not too late (*New Straits Times*, 2008).

This statement definitely shows the significant influence of new media or the Internet on the society and during the general election until it almost toppled the BN government. Now, social media like the blogs, news portal, Facebook, Twitter and YouTube have become trendy, cheap and easy to access especially for the youths. Realising how essential the social media had been to young voters in the 13th General Election (GE13), Prime Minister Najib Razak said that GE13 was Malaysia's first social media election. After launching the Malaysia Social Media Week 2013 summit on 27 February 2013, Najib emphasised, "Of course, it (social media) will not be the biggest factor in the elections, but it is certainly increasing the tempo of political debate" (Lim, 2013). Therefore, this article will explore thoroughly the theoretical debate of social media vis-à-vis democracy. Analysis will be done on the phenomena of social media in Malaysia. Finally, an in-depth analysis will be done on the impact of social media to the outcome of GE13 on 5 May 2013. This will determine which of the two political groupings, either BN or the opposition Pakatan Rakyat (PR) – an alliance of three parties, namely the Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS), Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR) and Democratic Action Party (DAP), has better exploited social media to their benefits, which proved to be decisive on the results of the election.

SOCIAL MEDIA AND DEMOCRATIC PARTICIPATION: A THEORETICAL DEBATE

The term social media or "Web 2.0" refers to a new "wave" of Internet based applications which enable greater interaction between user and application through user generated content (Komito and Bates, 2009). Sites such as Bebo, MySpace and Facebook were developed to allow individuals to post a variety of different types of information on their own websites and link their websites to those of their friends, thus the description of them as "social networking" applications. Basically, social media can take many forms such as Internet forums, news portals, weblogs, social blogs, wikis, podcasts, pictures and video.

All these categories have functions that allow them to be democratically interactive in ways unlike radio, television, or the highly edited letters columns of newspapers and magazines. This content is varied, containing photographs, video, text comments, and thus forming a rich media mosaic. Social media supports democratisation of knowledge and information, transforming people from being content consumers into content producers. Social media is distinct from traditional media, such as newspapers, television and radio. While social media are relatively inexpensive and accessible tools that enable anyone (even ordinary individuals) to publish or access information, traditional media generally require certain skills and resources to publish information. One feature shared by both social media and traditional media is the capability to reach a small or large audience. Social media obviously has a huge potential for democratisation. Habermas (2006) argued that the Internet has a subversive effect on intellectual life in authoritarian regimes, and may threaten to bring down the regime itself.

Opportunities for a deeper and more interactive approach to media arise from the quickly evolving world of online, independent news media; a world that in some important, if limited, respects brings us closer to Habermas's ideal of the public sphere. Habermas (1989) has described the democratic ideal of a public sphere, as a space that permits citizens to interact, study, and debate on the public issues of the day without fear of immediate reprisal from the political and economic powers (Beers, 2006: 116). The purely technological potential of the Internet and other forms of social media to extend the public sphere or marketplace of ideas is undeniable. Internet usage is likely to accelerate as wireless computers become cheaper and portable. For instance, Google is already pushing free wireless access for the entire cities in the United States (US), and Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) researchers predict crank-powered laptop computers will soon cost so little they could be handed out for free in developing countries. Internet news media are able to be interactive, "viral" in distribution, immediately global in reach, and relatively inexpensive to produce. These traits make the Web seem a natural host for the public sphere that Habermas defines. Many critics of corporate media therefore celebrate the Internet/social media as a naturally fertile ground for independent media – as the basis, in fact, of a new media sphere that can compete with corporate media and undermine its influence and authority. Such optimism must be tempered by realisations of how corporations are already exploiting the Internet to their own ends, as well as the challenges independent sites face in gathering resources, establishing credibility, and finding audience.

According to Kellner (1999), the rise of the Internet expands the realm for democratic participation and debate and creates new public spaces for political intervention. He argues that first broadcast media like radio and television, and now computers, have produced new public spheres and spaces for information, debate, and participation that contain both the potential to invigorate democracy and to increase the dissemination of critical and progressive ideas – as well as new

possibilities for manipulation, social control, the promotion of conservative positions, and intensification of differences between the haves and the have-nots. But participation in these new public spheres, computer bulletin boards and discussion groups, talk radio and television, and the emerging sphere of what Kellner calls "cyberspace democracy" requires critical intellectuals to gain new technical skills and to master new technologies (Kellner, 1995; 1997). Certainly, the Internet is a contested terrain, used by all factions in the political spectrum to promote their own agendas and interests. The political battles of the past may well be fought in the streets, factories, parliaments, and other sites of past conflict, but politics today is already mediated by the media, computer, and information technologies and will increasingly be so in the future. Those interested in the politics and culture of the future should therefore be clear on the important role of the new public spheres and intervene accordingly. Now more than ever, public debate over the use of new technologies is of utmost importance to the future of democracy. Who will control the media and technologies of the future, and debates over the public's access to media, media accountability and responsibility, media funding and regulation? What kinds of culture are best for cultivating individual freedom, democracy, and human happiness and well-being that will become increasingly important in the future? The disinformation and misinformation that circulates on the Internet undermines democratic information and discussion, pointing to sharp contradictions within the current media system. Biased reporting, combined with factors like manipulative publicity and mass advertising have been described as "the colonisation of the public sphere by systems of authority" (Soules, 2001: 1). However, Gunter (2009) has questioned the credibility of social media as news sources. While news blogs for instance have set themselves up as alternative news suppliers, the legitimacy of any such claim has been challenged by journalists working for mainstream news organisations. Questions have been raised about whether news blogs do truly represent "news". With major news organisations, the public trust they command derives from reputations built up over many years. Moreover, the major news organisations are expected to abide by statutory or voluntary codes of practice that are designed to ensure the quality of their journalism. There is a need to trace whether news blogs observe the quality controls of major news suppliers and whether they command public trust. At the same time, to what extent would the objectivity constraints placed on journalists working for the mainstream news media create a (healthy or unhealthy) tension with the need to be distinctive – which is where blogs add to the overall diversity of news provision (Gunter, 2009).

In the end, power is expressed through participation in the political sphere, as citizens bring pressure on leaders to make policies that attend to the interests of citizens. There are many forms of participation which show the political power of citizens, among them political protest, which exists outside of formal institutions, and voting, which occurs within the institutions of a democratic political system. Social media has facilitated both extra-institutional

and intra-institutional expressions of political power. It can be both a means of organising citizen action outside institutions (online political movements) and facilitating institutionalised participation (e-voting and elections). The vast body of characteristics of democracy can be described as institutions that protect the citizen's ability to participate in the political process; elections, protection of minority rights, rule of law, a constrained executive, and political equality. In that sense the Internet is a tool in democratic processes (for instance, e-voting) as well as rule-making and political organising pathways (political organising includes a deliberative phase which precedes participation). The Internet has supported the grassroots democracy movements in many countries. The Internet has opened up many possibilities by allowing people to connect to various causes and mobilise public opinion. Nonetheless, the so-called liberation it had come to represent through blogs and online networking sites has brought into light the controversy revolving around freedom of speech and expression. The growing reach of the Internet has flourished as a platform for those whose voices had been suppressed for whatever reasons, whether by authoritarian regimes or by their own introverted nature. Since the early 2000s, net users have a chance to let the whole Internet-savvy crowd be privy to their views and feelings with web logs or "blogs" as popularly referred to.

Today, there are hundreds of social networking sites operating. Some of them are popular in certain countries while others have global reach. Some of these sites are targeted at very specific interest groups while others are general in nature. One of the best examples of a special interest social network is LinkedIn, a very popular social network for business executives. The popular general social networks are sites such as Facebook, Twitter, Friendster, MySpace, Blogger and many more. No one predicted the extent and impact of social networking at such a phenomenal scale. According to Megat Ishak (2010: 51), at one point during the year 2005–2006, MySpace, a social network that promotes independent music and the socialite scene across the globe, actually ranked higher than Google in terms of pages viewed. The winning angle for this network was the ability of users to listen to new music and promote creativity through the creation of unique profiles, plus sharing of favourite videos. MySpace claims that it has over 100 million music playlists with over 5.5 billion songs listened, 7 billion photos and at least 600 world famous celebrities blogging (Megat Ishak, 2010: 51).

Friendster was launched in the year 2002. People who are using this site tend to focus on sending messages, invites, and blogging to stay in touch. Friendster used a degree of separation concept called "Circle of Friends", wherein the pathways connecting two people are displayed, and promoted the idea that a rich online community can exist only between people who truly have common bonds. It ensured that there were plenty of ways to discover those bonds. The current most popular social networking site in the world is Facebook. Its network has grown into more than 300 million active users with an average of 50% of them logging on to Facebook per-day. It is similar to Friendster and started with

an emphasis on the college community (Megat Ishak, 2010: 51). Facebook just grows in popularity and now the number of adults reached on Facebook dwarfs that of college students. It has become the *de facto* social network for the English speaking world where at least 8 billion minutes are spent on Facebook each day. Facebook is so addictive because it is a convenient way to track the status of friends. However, even before the explosion of Facebook and its likes, there were weblogs, or blogs for short; making them the first real social networks (Megat Ishak, 2010: 51).

Megat Ishak (2010) argues that the power of blogs is in its usability. It enables ordinary people to use and voice out opinions on practically anything to an audience from practically anywhere. Although blogs started as people's personal diaries, they have grown bigger today, touching on a variety of topics such as fashion, automotive interests, technology, food, entertainment, personal opinion, politics and many more. While it takes hours or days to build a traditional website, creating a blog is simple and it only takes a minute to set up a blog on sites such as Blogger.com, a blogging platform owned by Google. In June 2008, blog search engine Technorati indexed over 112.8 million blogs and over 250 million pieces of tagged social media, according to its page on Wikipedia. The growth of blogs has been slow over the past two years but the impact it has created is impressive. The latest social networking phenomenon is Twitter, which is best described as a micro-blogging tool. Twitter allows users to send or "tweet" about their latest updates within 160 characters. Twitter is now accessible via a number of third party applications and mobile sites, making it very popular among users (Megat Ishak, 2010: 51). Hence, the impact of social media is huge. It gives important contributions to the popular participation and engagement in politics all over the world.

THE PHENOMENA OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN MALAYSIA

In Malaysia, monopoly of the print media is arguably inevitable. For instance, all main broadcasting stations, viz. RTM 1, RTM 2, TV3, NTV7, 8TV and TV9 are under BN party ownership and government control whether directly or indirectly. Radio and Television of Malaysia (RTM) is a public channel under the direct control of the Ministry of Communications and Multimedia. RTM has been used by the ruling BN to spread the coalition's messages and propagandas. In October 2006, a business deal between the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA, a BN component party) and media tycoon Tiong Hiew King solidified the monopolisation of the Chinese press, with all top four Chinese dailies now concentrated in the hands of a firm politico-business alliance. In 2007, Media Prima Berhad, which enjoys close links with UMNO, acquired all the private television stations including TV3, NTV7, 8TV and TV9. It also has a 43% equity interest in The New Straits Times Press (Malaysia) Berhad (NSTP), one of

Malaysia's largest publishing groups that publish leading newspaper titles such as the *New Straits Times*, *Berita Harian* and *Harian Metro*. The Group also owns two radio networks, Fly FM and Hot FM (Media Prima, 2007; Azizuddin, 2010). Both the print and broadcast media's news coverage and editorials generally support the government line (Freedom House, 2007).

However, the policy to control the media has become difficult with the emergence of the Internet in 1990s. Malaysia has at least 900,000 Internet subscribers by 2000, with an estimated 4 million users (MASSA, 2000). When Anwar Ibrahim, former Deputy Prime Minister, was sacked from the government in 1998, the government had difficulties controlling the criticism from Internet sources sent by pro *Reformasi* (reform) movement websites such as Laman Reformasi (<http://members.tripod.com/~mahazalimtwo>), Anwar dot com (<http://www.anwar.com>), freeMalaysia (<http://www.freemalaysia.com>), and Reformasi Dot Com (<http://www.reformasi.com>). Opposition parties have also established their own websites to disseminate information to the public about their daily activities. Independent media or news portal on the Internet like the Malaysiakini (<http://www.malaysiakini.com>) and Malaysia Today (<http://www.malaysia-today.net>) portals function as alternative media for the public. However, these alternative media also face pressures from the government and threats under the Sedition Act (SA) for their reporting. For instance in July 2005, the editor of Malaysia Today, Raja Petra Kamarudin, was under police probe over alleged seditious reports carried by the website, had his two computers confiscated. The action was taken following a police report lodged by the Negeri Sembilan royal family claiming the website reported corruption and misconduct of the royal family (Suara Rakyat Malaysia [SUARAM], 2006: 76).

The Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (MCMC) is the regulator for the converging communications and multimedia industry, including the Internet. At the time it was created its key role was the regulation of the communications and multimedia industry based on the powers provided for in the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission Act (1998) and the Communications and Multimedia Act (1998). Pursuant to the Acts, the role of the MCMC is to implement and promote the government's national policy objectives for the communications and multimedia sector and is also charged with overseeing the new regulatory framework for the converging industries of telecommunications, broadcasting and on-line activities. Its social regulation roles include the area of content development as well as content regulation. The latter includes the prohibition of offensive content as well as public education on content-related issues (Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission, 2004). The Section 211 of the Communications and Multimedia Act 1998 in Malaysia provides: "No content applications service provider, or other person using a content applications service, shall provide content which is indecent, obscene, false, menacing, or offensive in character with intent to annoy, abuse,

threaten or harass any person" (Communications and Multimedia Act, 1998). Consensus is necessary both at the rule-generating stage and at the enforcement stage (Biegel, 2001: 53). However most people believe that one of the reasons the Internet worked so well and vigorous is that it has been free of government regulation (Biegel, 2001: 355). While it is believed that rules and regulations will reduce the passion for using the Internet, ironically, use of websites has flourished since 1998. In 1996, when former Prime Minister, Mahathir Mohamad launched the ambitious Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC) project to attract the world's leading Information Technology (IT) companies, the government came up with the MSC Bill of Guarantees, which included a commitment that the Malaysian government would never censor the Internet. This policy continues until today. The opposition and civil society movements have obviously benefited from this policy by creating a new public sphere of the Internet after mainstream broadcasting and printed media became hostile to them (George, 2006: 60–70).

During Abdullah Ahmad Badawi's premiership, there were waves of blogs which were critical of the government entering the public sphere on the Internet such as Jeff Ooi Blog and Anwar Ibrahim Blog. The government was unable to control the blogs but threatened to take action against them, webmasters and authors for purportedly spreading "false news" and "defamatory material" or for bringing up "sensitive issues" and racial hatred on the Internet. For example, blogger Jeff Ooi was summoned to give a statement to the police on an alleged blasphemous remark posted by a reader on his weblog "Screenshots" (SUARAM, 2006: 76). Freedom of the press and open public sphere are almost non-existent in Malaysia, where the government has full control over the media and restricts the alternative or opposition media. Clearly, the policy to control the media in Malaysia is a way to deter dissent and criticism of the government, and thus can be considered as undemocratic. Although the issue of racial harmony is a determining factor of the policy, the government manages to manipulate this issue, by controlling the media, to strengthen its power (Azizuddin, 2004: 12–22). Currently, nine of the Top 20 websites in Malaysia according to the web information company Alexa are social networking sites. The top 6 sites are Yahoo!, Facebook, Google.com.my, YouTube, Google.com, and Blogger. Malaysians consume digital media heavily according to the Nielsen Global Online Consumer Survey on entertainment media usage. The sampling is based on 26,000 online users (including 500 Malaysians) from 52 countries. The survey defined digital media as video (movie, TV show, music video, short video), audio and video games. Malaysians ranked very high in this survey. They were No. 5 in the list of digital media consuming nations and the third ranked nationality in spending over 20 hours a week watching streamed or downloaded content from the Internet (Megat Ishak, 2010: 52). An article published in *The Star* newspaper by David Gibson, managing director of Inter.Asia Communications, says that social media is very big in Malaysia and will grow bigger over time. According

to Gibson, there were 17 million Internet users in Malaysia in 2010. These users belong to a variety of social networks. They actively consume and adapt information, and have a sense of global culture (Megat Ishak, 2010: 52).

In Malaysia, Facebook boasts over 9.5 million users. Although different online measurement companies may disagree on the precise rankings of the nation's top 10 most visited websites, the top spot, for a single site, is always occupied by Facebook. Rankings by Alexa and Effective Measure both named Facebook as the most visited website by Malaysians in October 2010 while ComScore ranked Facebook after Google's group of sites. Although Facebook's popularity may be common knowledge by now, what is truly surprising is the rapid pace at which the social media network has grown in Malaysia. According to social technology website GreyReviews.com whose author Lim Yung-Hui sources his figures from data Facebook provides its advertisers, Facebook had about 5.1 million Malaysian accounts in March 2010. By 1 January 2011, that number had almost doubled to 9.5 million accounts (Tan, 2011). Vaishali Rastogi, the Boston Consulting Group (BCG) Singapore partner and managing director, said that "The growth of social networking in Asia, spearheaded by Facebook, has been an amazing phenomenon to watch. This is especially true for some segments, like the youth... Of the nearly 10 million users in Malaysia, 70 percent are between 18 and 34. For the young, Facebook is fast becoming a means of communication. The community has become incredibly connected and this impacts lives in multi-dimensional ways' (Tan, 2011: 1–2). Facebook's popularity in Malaysia is reflected throughout Asia. At the start of 2011, there were 111.9 million Facebook users in Asia, 20 million of who were added in the last quarter of year 2010.¹ David Lian, social media lead at public relations firm Text 100 Asia Pacific, argues that "People just want to connect. Social networking isn't a fad because it meets one of humanity's basic needs. In Facebook's case, the growth in Asia will be driven by mobile and Facebook Zero, a product launched last year that allows you to access Facebook from any phone, even basic ones, for free" (Tan, 2011: 1).

In October 2010, the international research company, TNS, released the findings from what it claims was the largest ever study of Internet usage. It surveyed 50,000 people, in 46 countries. Out of all these countries, Malaysia registered the highest usage of social networking sites. On average, those surveyed spent nine hours a week on sites like Facebook and Friendster. According to their findings, Malaysians had more Facebook friends than anywhere else—233 compared to just 29 in Japan. Overall, TNS's Chief Development Officer, Matthew Froggatt, noted a greater engagement among developing countries like Malaysia, than in mature economies: "In rapid growth markets that have seen recent, sustained investment in infrastructure, users are embracing these new channels in much more active ways. Online consumers in these markets are leaving those in the developed world behind in terms of being active online and engaging in new forms of communications" (Fama and Tam,

2010: 82). However, it must be realised that Internet access in Malaysia is still limited to less than 70% of the population. Radio, by contrast, reaches nine out of ten people. In most rural areas, information is still received via the traditional media, which is firmly pro-government. People in these areas are generally poorer, more socially conservative and less educated. They are still largely cut off from the Internet. These people are the natural constituency of UMNO and its conservative Muslim allies. Apart from the heavily Malay north eastern state of Kelantan, where PAS has governed for most of the last four decades, BN does disproportionately well in poorer, rural areas. The big question is, whether UMNO and its allies can take this support for granted in future elections (Fama and Tam, 2010: 82).

Fama and Tam (2010) are of the view that Malaysia bumps along the bottom of international rankings for press freedom, but the explosion of social media sites such as Twitter and Facebook is revolutionising how journalists work. Dissenting views, which for decades were screened out of the government-linked mainstream media, are now everywhere, including the blogosphere and text messages, making repression extremely difficult. Fama and Tam further argue that one of the truisms of the Internet age, is that nothing stands still for long. BN may have ignored social media almost completely in 2008, but it no longer does so now. The Prime Minister, Najib Razak, is an active blogger, while UMNO has several Facebook groups, as do many of its members of parliament. The "1 Malaysia" campaign, which seeks to promote racial harmony, or justify Malay dominance, depending on people's point of view, has a large online presence (Fama and Tam, 2010: 81). Najib (2010: 99) argues, as the first Malaysian Prime Minister to have a Facebook account, that:

One of the advantages of Facebook is that it allows me to interact directly, and so I can receive immediate feedback regarding comments, reviews and actions implemented by the government. Therefore, it is a highly effective medium of communication that helps me to gain a genuine picture of the people's opinions and requests pertaining to certain issues.

Najib became proactive in engaging the people via Twitter and Facebook on 11 January 2011 by saying that "I will be considering questions on Facebook and Twitter between 4.30 p.m. and 5.30 p.m. Please use #tanyanajib hashtag in tweeted qs (questions)" (The Malaysian Insider, 2011). According to the Prime Minister's Department, Najib used the Youtube to answer as many questions as possible expressed by the people (Ho, 2011). Najib has signalled quite clearly that he will not allow the opposition a free run in the next election's battle of the Internet. But not all government members, or supporters for that matter, are "singing from the same song sheet" (Fama and Tam, 2010: 81). As in January 2010, the Information, Communication and Culture Minister, Rais Yatim, warned

of the dangers of being immersed in the foreign Internet culture. Quoted by the national news agency, *Bernama*, he said, "We must be strong in our beliefs and culture because the identity and image of our country depends on us. They are just selling Facebook, Twitter, as a product but we do not do such business. We accept all this in a state of cultural shock" (Fama and Tam, 2010: 82). Although his comments were greeted by ridicule on Twitter, Facebook and other social media sites, he is far from being alone among Malaysians, in viewing the Internet as a threat to traditional social and religious values. Whatever conservatives like Rais may hope it would be, Malaysians have fallen in love with social media, and there seems to be no sign of this love affair ending any time soon. It is now clearly that Facebook is the country's most popular site, with a large lead over second-placed Friendster. Twitter is credited with about half a million unique users, with an estimated three times that number accessing tweets through other social media sites. Even Wong Sai Wan, the executive editor of *The Star*, Malaysia's best-selling English language newspaper, acknowledged how important social media is now: "In 2008, it was blog sites and e-mails that were effective. If the next general election is held...Facebook and Twitter will be more effective, as these two media have proven to have massive viral capability" (Fama and Tam, 2010: 81–82).

Today, Facebook fan pages highlighting political rallies and civil society forums, as well as Twitter exchanges with lawmakers, have reshaped the reporting landscape. Premesh Chandran, *Malaysiakini* Chief Executive Officer, argues that "All our reporters have BlackBerrys (smart phone) and use that to follow these tweets. The social media has changed the way journalists work in fundamental ways" (Bose, 2011: 1). He said that the new immediacy hampers government attempts to "spin" or control a story as journalists get real-time reaction from the opposition and experts and use it to seek an immediate response from officials. With the advent of Twitter, politicians from both sides of the aisle freely disseminate their views, so much so that legislators have been known to take debates out of the chamber and continue them on Twitter. Social media also have a knack of eliciting more candid commentary than politicians would usually choose to put in a regular news release. That phenomenon was on display in August 2010 when Khairy Jamaluddin, influential leader of the ruling party's youth wing, gave a quick response to a government decision not to drop a ban on students joining political parties. In a much-discussed tweet, Khairy said that "Cabinet decision not allowing university students to be involved in political parties is gutless and indicates outdated thinking" (Bose, 2011: 1–2). Opposition politician Nik Nazmi Nik Ahmad tweets daily on his constituency work. He lists all his public events on Facebook and even carries out interviews and dialogues online. He said that:

Social media definitely gives the opposition and alternative voices a space to express our views without censorship... The

limitation is that we are restricted to 140 characters on Twitter, so we can't really flesh out many of the arguments and positions, but it at least allows people and the media to read and understand our perspective (Bose, 2011: 1–2).

Malaysians have flocked to the Internet for news and views, a phenomenon credited with the opposition's stunning performance in the 2008 polls when the government lost its two-thirds parliamentary majority for the first time since 1969. Reporters Without Borders' regional correspondent Patrice Victor said that the Malaysian experience could be replicated in other countries as they develop a potent combination of repressive governments and reasonable Internet access (Bose, 2011: 2). The rapid growth of social networking in Malaysia, which is the most popular online activity, will result in an increased awareness for the need to build "walls" within existing networks. According to the Yahoo!-Synovate Net Index 2011 study, the walls would be built to control information exchanges and ensure conversations remain rich and engaging (one-to-few) (*New Straits Times*, 2011). The 2011 second consecutive study on "Internet Trends, Digital Development and Online Behaviour in Malaysia" was conducted between January and March. The Yahoo! Net Index study is also the first Internet media study of urban Internet users in selected countries across South East Asia. The enormous appetite of Malaysians for social networking could accelerate the emergence of "selective socialisation", such as limiting their personal information, keeping strict privacy settings and being specific as to those they choose to connect with. The study showcased Malaysia as leading in social networking across Southeast Asia, accounting for 90%, a 29% increase since 2010. However, email (87%) and instant messenger (58%) usage are also on the increase, with a solid growth since 2010. Other key interests of Malaysians are online searches (89%) and use of online portals (80%), which also rank among the highest (*New Straits Times*, 2011). Yahoo! Malaysia Country Ambassador, Jon-Tjin Kee said that the study also showed that online deal aggregation and group buying holds significant potential for rapid growth. He explains that "User education and the comfort of paying online will dictate the rate of growth... Thus, this provides a fertile environment for e-commerce to grow rapidly in Malaysia, going forward" (*New Straits Times*, 2011: 1). Social networking is the most prominent virtual platform dominating a staggering 71% of online activities across the nation, while instant messaging comes in second at 35%. However, the number of non-subscribers in all the age groups was also high, encompassing more than 50% of the total surveyed (Marketing Interactive, 2011).

Freedom of speech on the Internet is one of the essential issues that requires close attention. Although Malaysian governments realise the importance of free cyberspace and they do not want to hamper the phenomena for market reasons, they have attempted to regulate and dictate its proper use politically.

Based on the Freedom House's report entitled Freedom of the Net 2011 and 2012, Malaysia is in the status of "Partly Free" (see Table 1).

Table 1: Freedom on the Net 2011 and 2012: Malaysia

	2011	2012	
INTERNET FREEDOM STATUS	Partly Free	Partly Free	POPULATION: 29 million
Obstacles to Access (0-25)	9	10	INTERNET PENETRATION 2011: 61 percent
Limits on Content (0-35)	11	14	WEB 2.0 APPLICATIONS BLOCKED: No
Violations of User Rights (0-40)	21	19	NOTABLE POLITICAL CENSORSHIP: No
Total (0-100)*	41	43	BLOGGERS/ICT USERS ARRESTED: Yes
			PRESS FREEDOM STATUS: Not Free

* 0=most free, 100=least free

Notes: Each country is ranked on a scale of 0 to 100, with 0 being the best and 100 being the worst. A combined score of 0–30 = Free, 31–60 = Partly free, 61–100 = Not free. Under each question, a lower number of points are allotted for a more free situation, while a higher number of points is allotted for a less free environment. Unless otherwise indicated, the sub-questions listed are meant to provide guidance as to what issues should be addressed under each methodology question, though not all will apply to every country.

Source: Freedom House (2012).

Malaysia maintains its free cyberspace policy through the Communications and Multimedia Act 1998 (Act 588). The lack of clear legal provisions authorising the filtering of online content in Malaysia may not be equated with total freedom of online speech. This is because the state may rely on other laws such as the Sedition Act (SA), the Official Secrets Act (OSA) and the Penal Code or adopt different methods of silencing opinions expressed online. In July 2008, the MCMC blocked the access to many websites and blogs including the controversial Malaysia Today website (Farrah, 2008: 6). However, it will not stop the social media to be developed and progress as the channel for Malaysian citizens to express themselves politically either for or against the government.

SOCIAL MEDIA DURING THE 13TH GENERAL ELECTION IN 2013

The campaign period for GE13 started on the nomination day of 20 April 2013, when the electorate began to know the candidates. It was fought fiercely by political parties in trying to win the votes of 13.3 million eligible voters. The ruling BN promised to reduce the cost of living for the benefit of middle income and lower income groups. In the spirit of "1Malaysia", Prime Minister Najib created at least 30 "1Malaysia" products, among them:

1. Kedai Rakyat 1Malaysia (KR1M), affordable convenient shops opened over 80 branches nationwide.
2. Perbadanan Program Perumahan 1Malaysia (PR1MA). PR1MA was set up to construct and maintain affordable housing for middle-income households in key urban centres. It is the first public housing provider which targets this segment with homes ranging from RM100,000 to RM400,000. In Putrajaya, under the programme, 560 affordable homes, priced between RM120,000 and RM150,000 in Presint 11, were allocated for those with a household income of below RM6,000.
3. Bantuan Rakyat 1Malaysia (BR1M) scheme. It is a RM500 monetary assistance for households earning less than RM3,000.
4. Amanah Saham 1Malaysia (AS1M) unit trust.

Although many incentives are given by the BN government, its image was marred by the issue of graft and abuse of power such as in the Port Klang Free Zone (PKFZ) scandal, National Feedlot Corporation (NFC) cow-and-condominium fiasco, and the Scorpene submarine saga. In fact, the unbearable rise in the cost of living and price of goods still continues to this day. Instead of a promise made to reduce the fiscal deficit, the BN government has been overspending for the past 15 years through the budget deficit (Anas, 2013). These issues were exploited by the PR through the social media to gain votes, later contributing to the significant outcome of the election. The most important fact is that there are at least 2.6 million first-time voters, mostly between their mid-twenties and mid-thirties, expected to cast their ballots. According to the statistics from the Suruhanjaya Pilihan Raya (SPR), young voters consist of up to 40% or 5.6 million voters. The young voting population mostly intellectual urbanites which form a majority of the 3.7 million new registered voters (Anas, 2013). Voters between the ages of 21 and 45 years old were made up of more than 8 million voters. EC explains that there are over 85% of the country's 13.3 million eligible voters who went to the polls on 5 May 2013. GE13 saw the BN winning 133 parliamentary seats and maintaining the federal power with 7 seats fewer than the last election, totalling 140 seats. The PR garnered a total of 89 seats, increasing 7 seats from its 2008 election tally of 82 seats. BN won 275 state seats, while PR won a total of 229. PR lost Kedah to BN, but managed to secure majority two-thirds of state seats in Kelantan, Pulau Pinang and Selangor. With regard to popular votes, PR received more votes than the BN. PR managed to get 5,623,984 votes or 50.87% of the total votes, while BN got 5,237,699 votes or 47.38%, and others received a total of 192,892 or 1.74% of the votes (Suruhanjaya Pilihan Raya, 2013; Augustin, 2013). BN managed to retain power, but one of the major factors contributing to the ability of PR to reduce the majority of BN and win the popular votes was social media coverage during the election.

The Internet usage monitoring website, Internet World Stats estimated that, up to June 2012, the total number of Internet users in Malaysia to be 17,723,000, representing 60.7% of the country's population. According to the Asian Correspondent website, the level of Internet penetration in Malaysia has increased by 300% since GE12 in 2008. Meanwhile, the total number of active Facebook users in Malaysia is 13,354,900, which is the 20th highest in the world. There are 1,128,000 Twitter users in Malaysia (Ali Imran, 2013). As proven in GE12, the Internet provided the advantage for parties and the candidates to win over the voters. Current trends indicate that almost all parties and candidates have been building up websites, blogs, and social media accounts like Facebook, Twitter or YouTube unlike in 2008, when the ruling BN almost totally disregarded the online public sphere. Besides Najib, among the BN leaders who embrace the social media in order to reach out to the electorate are the former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad, Home Minister Hishamuddin Hussein and UMNO Youth Chief Khairy Jamaluddin. On the PR side, opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim, PAS's spiritual head Nik Abdul Aziz Nik Mat and his deputy Haron Din, and DAP's Publicity Secretary Tony Pua have become the attractions. Internet monitoring site Socialbakers recorded that Najib's Twitter hashtag (@NajibRazak) has the most number of followers in Malaysia with 1,510,127. Najib's Twitter followers are the 11th highest in the world under the category of politicians. After Najib, in the same category, come Hishamuddin (@HishammuddinH2O) with 477,893 followers, Anwar (@anwaribrahim) with 278,535 followers, Khairy (@Khairykj) with 264,734 followers, and Tony Pua (@tonypua) with 59,090 followers (Ali Imran, 2013). Looking onto political parties on Twitter, the PR fares better where PKR has 27,000 followers; DAP has 27,000 followers, and PAS has 1,200 followers. BN, meanwhile, has on the whole only 24,000 followers (Gomez, 2013).

On Facebook's Fan page, Najib is in the second highest position for the most "liked" politician with 1,633,812 "Likes", after Mahathir with 2,085,034 "Likes". Nik Abdul Aziz is in third place with 917,785 "Likes". Meanwhile, Haron Din is in the 4th and Anwar in the 5th position with both recording 672,546 and 582,839 "Likes" respectively (Ali Imran, 2013). However on the polling day of 5 May 2013, although there has been an increase of "Likes" in Najib's official Facebook page to 1,720,255, the engagement level was very low at 12%. Opposition leader Anwar's official Facebook page had an increase as well at nearly half of Najib's at 826,586 "Likes", but had an extremely high engagement rate of 75%. Engagement is the number of people talking about the page, divided by the number of people who like the page (Asohan, 2013a). It is clear that Anwar used extensively the social media to his advantages during the campaigning period to engage the electorate compared to Najib.

Ahmed Kamal as the founder of Politweet, a non-partisan research company specialising in the analysis of interactions of Malaysians using social media, argued that "The social media usage has definitely increased. We have

one to two million Twitter users in Malaysia and over 13 million Facebook users, with over nine million of those above 21 years old...In 2008, people mainly turned to blogs for political information. Today the conversation seems to have moved to Facebook and Twitter" (Asohan, 2013b). Ahmed Kamal believed that social media plays a major role in GE13, especially in urban areas as well as in semi-urban and rural areas. He explains that "Urban areas have the most users, and candidates in these areas will benefit the most from using social media...But many people work in townships and have families staying in small towns and *kampungs* (villages). They will bring home whatever political message they acquired from the city. It's not easy to measure that sort of real-world impact...Having said that, it's worth pointing out that social media enables us to be more connected with like-minded people. It hardens the mind-set of people who are leaning towards either BN or PR (the Opposition), making it harder to convert people from the other side...When it comes to socializing with each other, we tend to live in our own bubble online" (Asohan, 2013b).

The impact of social media was evident in the campaigning period. PAS's Titiwangsa candidate Ahmad Zamri Asa'ad Khuzaimi admitted that he had been relying heavily on social media as part of his campaign strategy as opposition candidates like him did not have access to the mainstream media (Alyaa, 2013). His opponent, BN Titiwangsa candidate, Johari Abdul Ghani, agreed that social media plays an important role in the election since a lot of young voters do not read the printed material. The youngsters get information on their mobile phones or laptops, so it is handier for them to access information online about the candidates (Alyaa, 2013). For BN to dominate the online public sphere, legions of cybertroopers were formed and recruited to attack the opposition online. Khairy Jamaluddin, as leader of BN's youth wing, said that BN has 6,000 volunteers working to get the BN messages out online. BN managed to have a political talk and speak to maybe 1,000 or 2,000 people in public gathering or *ceramah*, but if it was able to post it on Facebook, within an hour 20,000 people would have seen it (Zappei, 2013). PR was more advanced in televising live telecasts of their public gatherings. PKR televised live their public gathering of *Jelajah Merdeka Rakyat* through various channels such as "new.livestream.com/jmr" and "Selangorku.com". DAP televised live their activities through "Ubah.tv". *Malaysiakini* also televised live during campaigning period via "Kinitv.com/live".

Social media especially YouTube has been the medium to respond to anger and dissatisfaction among people toward the authority or BN government. In 2013, Malaysians were shown with several high profile gaffes tarnishing the image of the BN. For instance in January 2013, a video clip emerged of a student forum in which the head of the government-aligned Suara Wanita 1Malaysia (SW1M), Sharifah Zohra Jabeen, interrupted and then admonished a student campaigner. Sharifah Zohra's repeated demands to "Listen, listen, listen" was quickly picked up and the video was shared and ridiculed by netizens and

bloggers. The original clip on YouTube very quickly amassed 1.3 million views (O'Brien, 2013a). Another incident was when Prime Minister Najib Razak got booed by a crowd in Pulau Pinang at a Chinese New Year concert featuring the K-Pop star Psy – an incident which quickly became the biggest talking point for social media discussion (O'Brien, 2013a). These two incidents were used by the opposition PR to claim that the Internet-savvy youths and Malaysians in general had rejected BN in GE13. In fact, by searching the video clips via the names of political leaders and political parties, irrespective of whether they are positive or negative clips for those leaders or parties, we can definitely find out that Anwar Ibrahim and Pakatan Rakyat have the highest number of video clips in YouTube (see Figure 1 and 2).

Moreover, news portals still significantly influence people's views on political parties and candidates. According to the Malaysian Digital Association's (MDA) February 2012 report, websites of the mainstream media, such as "thestar.com.my", "utusan.com.my" and "bharian.com.my", attracted 2,221,763, 1,171,578 and 769,772 unique browsers respectively. Alternative news websites such as "malaysiakini.com" and "themalaysianinsider.com" attracted 1,858,649 and 1,117,124 unique browsers respectively in the same period, demonstrating strongly their comparative strength (Gomez, 2013). *Malaysiakini* expected "over 15–20 million unique devices, about 80% of adult internet users, to access *Malaysiakini* during the election period, up from 2.8 million on normal days" (Asohan, 2013c). On the polling day, 5 May 2013, over 4.3 million users visited *Malaysiakini*. Three million of them accessed *Malaysiakini*'s live report page on its website and another 1.3 million accessed it through *Malaysiakini*'s mobile version. A further 1.3 million users visited *Malaysiakini*'s undi.info, which provides information on seats and candidates. According to Google Analytics, at the height of the vote count, *Malaysiakini*'s readership hit 500,000 users per minute. Since letting the website go free on 17 April 2013, *Malaysiakini*'s daily readership has doubled to 500,000 (*Malaysiakini*, 2013a).

With the extensive use of social media, the tendency is high for the abuse of social media. Therefore, the MCMC announced that it was going to monitor all users of social media during the election for possible abuse. The MCMC is looking into suitable ways in which it can monitor and control abuse over social media (Gomez, 2013). Despite monitoring, there are several cases during the campaigning period which led to the authority taking action against users of social media. For instance, the police detained a pro-PR blogger Yusuf Al Siddique (aka Milo Suam) under the OSA. The police told the court on 3 May 2013 that they were investigating him over a blog post "*Maklumat sulit: Pendatang asing bakaletus huru hara di Sabah*" (Confidential information: Foreigners to cause chaos in Sabah) posted on 23 April 2013. In the post, Milo Suam included an image of a confidential police document warning that 1,400 foreigners were set to cause chaos in Kota Kinabalu and Tawau (Anand, 2013). Besides, pro-UMNO blogger Papagomo and pro-PR blogger King Jason (both

pseudo-names) were arrested by the police. Papagomo was detained due to posting racial remarks on his blog, whilst King Jason was accusing BN of buying votes (*Malaysiakini*, 2013b). Furthermore, the Centre for Independent Journalism (CIJ) has expressed concern over the online radio jamming targeting *Radio Free Sarawak* and *Radio Free Malaysia* and distributed denial of service (DDOS) attacks on their websites (Koh, 2013).

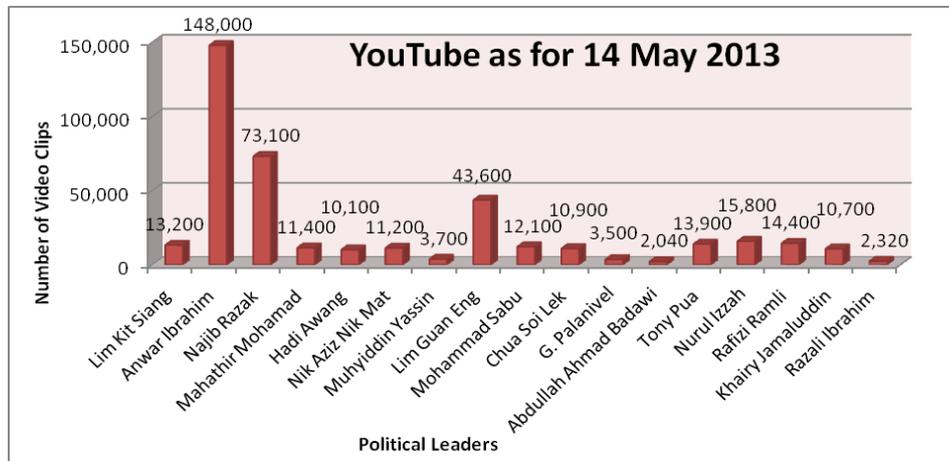


Figure 1: Numbers of video clips of political leaders on YouTube

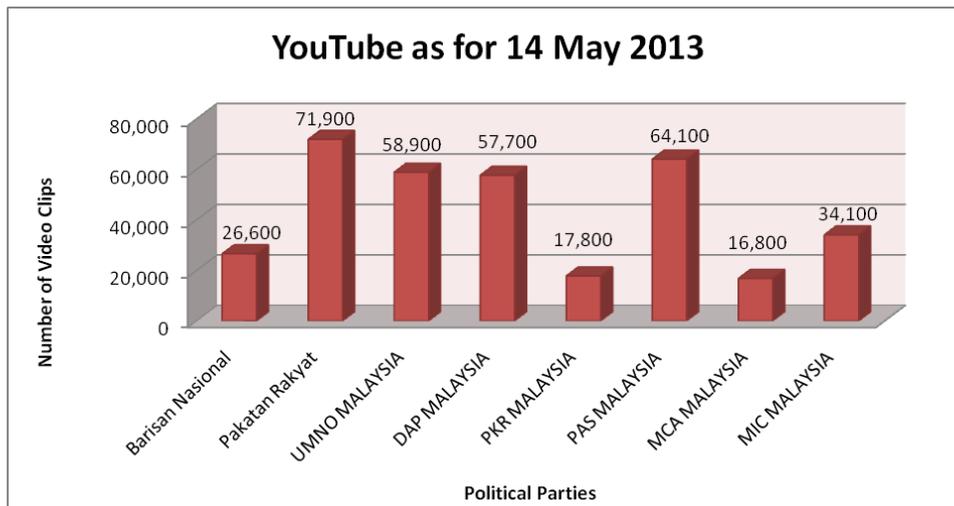


Figure 2: Numbers of video clips of political parties on YouTube

Another popular visual campaign tool is Instagram. In GE13, there have been thousands of images shared under the various hashtags such as #ge13, #pru13, #najib, and #anwar causing excitement to voters. In a search for GE13 on the afternoon of 5 May 2013, 31,495 images were listed. There were many smart art and slogans as well captured during the campaigning period. The "inked" fingers were the most posted on polling day through the social media platform (O'Brien, 2013b). The use of indelible ink was controversially introduced for the first time in GE13 to prevent duplicate voting. Some postal voters who had cast their ballots had complained that the ink was easily washed off. On polling day, many voters posted before-and-after pictures of their fingers on Facebook and Twitter to prove that the ink, at least in some cases, could be removed. According to online intelligence solutions provider Meltwater, who monitored Twitter during GE13, the words "ink", "indelible" and "indelible ink" were mentioned 1,438 times, 1,001 times and 918 times respectively (Asohan, 2013a).

It is clear that although there were great battles between BN and PR on the social media in order to win the hearts and minds of the electorate, the results showed that PR won mostly in urban and suburban constituencies where the facilities and accesses to Internet through broadband and Wi-Fi are better compared to those in the rural areas. This gives a clear indication that social media as a source of information played a significant role in constructing the perception of the voters in urban and suburban areas. BN had actually won the polls on the back of voters from a largely conservative rural Malaysia particularly in Sabah and Sarawak, as well as UMNO voters with an interest in the continuation of affirmative action policies. In comparison with its performance in the 2008 election, UMNO performed magnificently and managed to increase the seats it won in GE13 from 79 to 88 parliamentary seats and from 239 to 244 state seats. However, the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA), Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC) and Parti Gerakan Rakyat Malaysia (GERAKAN) – all BN component parties, suffered tremendously due to Chinese and urban votes swinging to the PR. According to Meredith Weiss, the Malay shift swung toward the PR especially from a growing middle class and a disenchanting urban working class. She explains that "Intra-ethnic inequality is startlingly high. There has been a lot of disproportionate access (to economic privileges) by the few...The underlining trend seems to be that interests are defined now by socioeconomic class rather than ethnicity" (Lau, 2013). To prove this, in urban Selangor and Pulau Pinang, PR increased its mandate. While BN regained Perak, PR increased its majorities in Pulau Pinang and Selangor because the middle class and urban electorate from all races moved away from BN. UMNO and BN also suffered major blows in urban Johor with losses of largely urban and multiracial votes. PR also made inroads into Sabah, significantly in urban areas. PR won in places like Kuala Lumpur, Shah Alam, Ipoh, Alor Setar, Kuantan, Kota Melaka, Seremban, Kuching, Kota Kinabalu and Kuala Terengganu which have large numbers of

multiracial urbanites. Hence, GE13 results were determined not by the "Chinese tsunami",² but correctly it was due to the "Urban tsunami" from all races.

GE13 has proven yet again that the battle of social media was won by PR, as it had done in GE12. Newly appointed Home Minister, Ahmad Zahid Hamidi acknowledged that 85% of the new media in the country were managed by the social media of the opposition (*Bernama*, 2013). Finally, in the Prime Minister's Department gathering on 3 June 2013, Najib admitted that the failure of the BN government to handle the public negative perception on social media had cost them the election. He argued that "Perception can be formed in many ways. Maybe not through face-to-face meetings, but through Facebook...If there is any weakness in the government, it could be that we are not so good in dealing with the war on perception" (*The Malaysian Insider*, 2013). He struggled to fight off the criticisms against him and his party on social media and recorded three major failures despite the polls win: failure to recapture the country's richest and most industrialised state of Selangor, failure to recapture BN's customary two-thirds parliamentary majority, and failure to win the popular vote (*The Malaysian Insider*, 2013).

CONCLUSION

People have given a mandate yet again to the BN to rule Malaysia. Based on the analysis, BN managed only to win with a smaller majority. It is clear that the urban factors contributed a lot to the performance of PR as well as the BN. UMNO is still strong but not so for other BN component parties like the MCA, MIC and GERAKAN. PR through PKR, PAS and DAP had been able to penetrate into the BN fortress states like Johor, Sabah and Sarawak and won several seats there. It is interesting to see the emergence of the two coalition party system in Malaysia, where people now have a choice to choose either BN or PR to be the government. It is believed that this will bring about further democratisation in Malaysia. GE13 was definitely a social media election. Although the social media was not the determinant factor in the overall election results, it obviously played a significant role in giving a space, channel and avenue for people or the electorate to debate and engage with political leaders and candidates in the election. This helps in strengthening the democratic process in Malaysia for the better even though it contributed to the tremendous losses in seats and weakened the ruling BN government. Social media now is so powerful in Malaysia, comparable and parallel to the strength of the mainstream media and the traditional media. No wonder, Prime Minister Najib Razak called GE13 the social media election. There were a lot of debates between the ruled and ruling elites, making many Malaysians fascinated with information technology and how it changes our society for the better politically. Those who control information will control the political power. So Malaysia will never be the same again. GE13

has made people think how valuable democracy is to their lives. One vote can change the regime. The only thing that Malaysians can wish is that whatever happens after the elections, hopefully Malaysians become more mature in politics, fresh in exploring new ideas and thoughts, and willing to commit for the common good.

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NOTES

1. As of 1 January 2011, there were 32 million Indonesians on Facebook. Facebook launched a regional office in Singapore last September 2010. In February 2011, it ran advertisements for numerous positions to be based in Singapore including a director of online sales and operations for Asia-Pacific. The social network firm did not respond to press queries on their plans for the region. David Lian argues that "While this is mostly guesswork, I think Facebook's plans for the region will be quite localised. First, this is driven by location-based services like Facebook Places, and secondly, there is a possibility of local e-commerce in the form of Facebook Credits for micropayment" (Tan, 2011: 2). This statement agreed by BCG's Vaishali who also sees opportunities for marketers to leverage the success of the network. He says that "Facebook is a powerful tool which can be used by marketers who understand how to leverage word-of-mouth marketing or advocacy marketing. On a social or political level, Facebook can be used to garner support for different causes" (Tan, 2011: 2).
2. The first impression from Najib was that BN survived a hard-fought polls battle in face of a "Chinese tsunami" (Ahmad Fauzi, 2013). He argued shortly after receiving a simple majority victory for BN that "I think they (the Chinese) were taken in by some of the undertakings given by the opposition...and that's why there was that swing...and a lot of sentiments there, some of them racial in nature, that were being played up in this election, which is not very healthy for this country...I expected it but I did not expect it to this extent. None of us expected it to this extent. But despite the extent of the swing against us, BN did not fall" (Jahabar, 2013).

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