

## Hintergrundpapier

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# The Successful Role of the Internet in the 2008 Malaysian General Elections

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### Executive Summary

It is generally acknowledged that the strength of Malaysia's democratic institutions have degraded over the years. There is a strong dominance of the executive over the parliament and there are significant restrictions of democratic freedoms of speech and expression. Newspapers need to renew their printing licenses on an annual basis and find themselves exposed to immense political pressure. Radio and TV are either owned by the government or they are government controlled. In this situation, elections in Malaysia are generally regarded as "free but not fair".

The 12<sup>th</sup> Malaysian General Elections took place on March 8<sup>th</sup> 2008 and produced a result that has since changed the political landscape of the country. The outcome of the elections were to a large part due to the confluence of issues and of personalities, a recurring feature in Malaysian politics but one important factor that has emerged is the role played by the Internet as a conduit for expressing public desire for political change.

Malaysia operates on a democracy based on the Westminster model, reflecting its British colonial past. Although critics contend that the strength of her democratic institutions have degraded over the years such as the increasing dominance of the executive over the other branches of government

as well as the retention and use of laws that restrict democratic freedoms of speech and expression, elections have been held regularly every four to five years, in a manner that is seen as "free but not fair".

Elections in Malaysia are typically peaceful events with the campaign period emanating a festival like atmosphere. Effectively however, the opposition competes with a severe disadvantage in the lack of access to the mainstream media. The Malaysian traditional media – hereafter referred to as the mainstream media, particularly the vernacular Malay and English presses as well as the electronic medium are controlled by either the government via the free-to-air televisions channels operated by the Ministry of Information or the private channels operated by companies with strong links to the ruling coalition.

Malaysian general elections since independence in 1957 have always been dominated and won by the ruling coalition of the National Front, and in particular its principal party, the United Malays National Organization (UMNO). The National Front is a coalition of fourteen parties that represent various ethnic interest groups across the country. The coalition however is dominated by the Malay-based UMNO, which runs the coalition with other national partners such as the Malaysian Chinese Association, the Malaysian Indian Congress and the Gerakan Party (a nominally multiethnic but largely represented by the ethnic Chinese party).

Indeed in the eleven general elections held between 1957 and 2004, the National Front always retained at least two-thirds of the seats in the Parliament, thus allowing it to amend the constitution at will. At the onset of the election campaign in 2008, most pundits and analysts observing the Malaysian political process generally agreed that the twelfth general elections would be no different – that the National Front would win handsomely and the disparate Malaysian opposition parties would again be consigned to defeat.

In the lead up to the general elections, the National Front appeared formidable as it continues to exert significant influence over the state and private-owned media networks and as federal government had launched a series of socio-economic initiatives known as the "development corridors" in various regions of the country. In part, this assessment would have been not incorrect as the National Front won its largest ever victory in the 2004 general elections – gaining 92% of the seats in parliament on 64% of the popular vote.



Prime minister Abdullah Badawi and other National Front component party leaders.  
photo credit: www.thestar.com.my

The opposition comprises the multiethnic People's Justice Party (PKR) led by Dr Wan Azizah, the Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS) and the Democratic Action Party (DAP) (a largely ethnic Chinese party). The de facto opposition leader is Anwar Ibrahim. It was general consensus that the opposition which consisted of parties with very disparate ideologies – PAS espoused a state based on the Muslim syaria code while DAP wants a secular Malaysia – would falter against the centrist position of the National Front. As late as the middle of 2007, critics also felt that leading dissident Anwar Ibrahim was a spent force having lost a by-election in what many felt was a bellweather for the upcoming general elections.



Anwar Ibrahim flanked by Lim Kit Siang (DAP) and Haji Hadi Awang of PAS

Photo credit: www.malaysiakini.com

However unseen by the masses and largely dismissed by National Front strategists were the impact of concerns over the economy and rising public resentment over its handling of the interests of its polyglot citizenry. More importantly was how these issues began transforming into discourse and content finding a thriving environment in the new media.

## Party communications in the lead up to elections

Screenshot of the UMNO website



Political messaging in the lead up to the elections showed that most parties recognized, via feedback from various sources including opinion polling, that the Malaysian electorate was concerned about rising inflation as well as weaknesses in public service delivery, most notably the imbalance of development between urban and rural areas as well as policing and integrity issues. The National Front's principal slogan to the voters was "We are on the right track" and then proceeded to show that despite criticisms of the economy, crime and ethnic issues, conditions were still much better than that of Malaysia's other neighbors. This defensive oriented message did not go down well with the electorate as voters were not used to such uncertain and negative conditions. Furthermore the National Front message did explain how it was unable to fulfill a large number of its promises made in 2004.

The National Front used all available mediums to influence the public primarily via the print and electronic media but also made attempts to advertise on the internet via banners and pop-ups. In all its communications, the National Front advertisements had a 'clean', 'manufactured' look which gave away its underlying philosophy of communicating the message from the dominant establishment. In all the National Front's web presence was relayed through advertorials placed in online versions of mainstream newspapers and via its own party websites. National Front websites were in general non-interactive and provided only one-way information. In fact, most National Front candidates did not have a website let alone a blog with the exception of a few such as the deputy youth chief Khairy Jamaluddin whose website allowed interaction with viewers and posted regular updates to his activities.

The National Front also realized that the opposition had a dominant position in cyberspace and also sought to address the imbalance by creating its own 'cybertroopers' whose tasks were to visit opposition leaning blogs and web forums to defend the party line and to criticize opposition leaders and policies. It is not certain to what extent that this strategy was successful as developments during the campaign showed that the tide of discontent put forth in the internet was very large and was generated by a big number of ordinary members of the public.

The opposition on the other hand approached the elections with a message anchored on the idea of change and reform. Although the three opposition parties did not formally enter into a coalition ahead of the elections, the messages put forth by all three parties were for the most part identical – proposing clean government, a more equitable sharing of national wealth and better ethnic relationship management. More importantly, the underlying message put forth to voters was to 'send a strong signal to the National Front' by denying its two-thirds super majority. A second but potent message was that the opposition was capable of checking the ruling coalition because it was led by Anwar Ibrahim. Denied space in the electronic and print mainstream media, the opposition relied heavily on the internet which supplemented its traditional methods of campaign speeches and leafleting.

In this sense, the opposition was helped by the fact that internet penetration in Malaysia had grown eight-fold since 1999. During the ten-year period between 1999-2008, dial up connections increased from 500,000 to approximately four million subscribers while broadband subscription remained at just over one million or approximately 8% at the end of the first quarter of 2008<sup>1</sup> – at the time elections were held. Despite this relatively low numbers (as compared to countries such as South Korea or Taiwan), the opposition was still able to take full advantage as they had since 1999,

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<sup>1</sup> Malaysian Multimedia Commission Report 2007

been building up experience in utilizing cyberspace as a tool for political mobilization. But beyond the role played by opposition parties were that of independent news portals and blogs, the majority of which were critical of the ruling National Front and increasingly popular in attracting traffic.

Screenshot of Anwar Ibrahim's blog "*Harapan Baru Untuk Malaysia*" (New Hope for Malaysia)



Table 1: Malaysian internet users 2007-2008

Total internet dial-up subscriptions

Year	Quarter	Total Internet dial-up subscriptions ('000)
2007	1	3791
	2	3862
	3	3910
	4	3920
2008	1	4002
	2	3860

Source: Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission

Table 2: Broadband Subscribers 2007 – 2008

Number of broadband subscriptions by technology

Year	Quarter	FIXED ('000)			WIRELESS ('000)		HOTSPOT ('000)
		ASDL	SDSL	Satellite	HSDPA	Wireless	
2007	1	784.3	5.2	1.9	11.4	9.0	180.1
	2	859.5	5.5	2.0	13.1	9.3	219.1
	3	932.2	6.1	2.0	26.3	9.2	257.6
	4	1002.4	6.5	2.0	96.3	8.4	289.3
2008	1	1070.8	6.8	2.1	140.5	9.1	309.9
	2	1162.5	7.4	2.1	176.1	10.8	358.8

Source: Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission

At the forefront of the opposition's internet strategy was the party organization websites that are maintained by the party headquarters, these were generally fairly conservative sites with information on party policies, personalities and events. For a large part, these represented the 'corporate' front of the party with information in several languages but the real communications function were undertaken by news or communications portals that represent the online versions of the party newsletters. These include websites such as *Harakah* and *Suara Keadilan* which represented the primary media organs of PAS and PKR.

In addition to such sites are ancillary sites put together by party organizations at state and district levels. Some of these sites attract a significant amount of traffic that mirror the political intensity of their areas. These sites include those such as Tranungkite, Laman Marhean and others which report mainly in the vernacular.

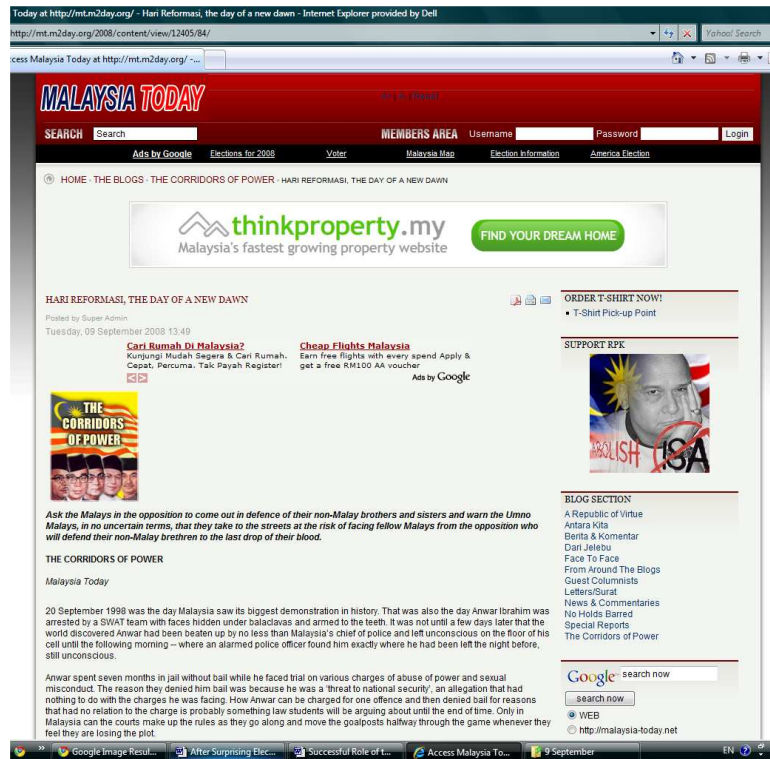
These blogs were for the most part raised by independent individuals with little or no formal links to the opposition. Many of which simply started out as concerned and critical individuals but later generated a following due to their skillful and talented approach at approximating citizen journalism. Many blogs were started by senior journalists themselves chafing under the stifling media environment seeking an outlet to air their thoughts<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> These blogs include some notable ones such as Rocky's Bru which is the effort of Ahiruddin Atan, a senior journalist formerly with the Malay Mail, Other Thots, by Kadir Jasin, a former editor in the New Straits Times, Jalan Sudin, by Nuriana Samad as well as others such as those by Susan Loone, a journalist formerly with online portal Malaysiakini.



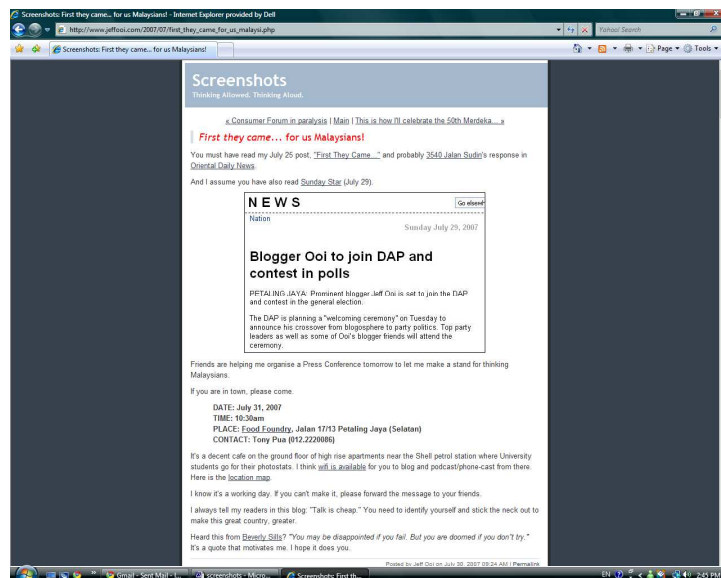
## Screenshot of Malaysia Today



mt.m2day.org, previously www.malaysia-today.net

Over time some of these bloggers themselves became enmeshed with politics with several changing sides from writing about events to generating them. Several of these include individuals such as Jeff Ooi whose blog Screenshots was originally featured on Malaysiakini and later opted to run for office as the member of parliament in Penang. Other bloggers who were also political activists such as Tony Pua, Nik Nazmi, Elizabeth Wong among others also contested in the elections and were subsequently elected.

## Screenshoot of Jeff Ooi's blog



www.jeffooi.com

Complementing the blogs by politicians, activists and that of political party organizations are the non-affiliated news portals. Different from portals representing online versions of the mainstream media, this recent general election saw the advent of several new news portals which rose specifically to take advantage of the hype over the elections. Formerly alone in cyberspace, longstanding Malaysiakini, Merdeka Review (publish in Mandarin), and Agendadaily (which is published in the Malay language) now has competition in the form of Malaysian Insider and the Nut Graph (the earlier site was called Malaysia Votes but has since changed name).

Screenshot of Malaysiakini



In addition to these portals which were set up to run as small media firms were other sites that could be termed as quasi blogs such as Malaysia Today which was most vehement in its criticisms of the ruling party and its leaders. Websites such as Malaysia Today played a critical role in spreading stories and gossip about the regime and its leaders. In this case the site's administrator Raja Petra Kamaruddin eventually garnered a following and became himself a news item as he becomes the target of legal action by those he lambasts on the site. Stories and reports carried by sites such as Malaysia Today gained widespread currency in the lead up to the general elections



because in addition to providing what it purports to be 'insider' views into political events, the site also carried reports on corruption and irregularities that sometimes were replete with leaked official documents. The sites unforgiving and hard hitting style created a stir in the internet going public and made it an irritant of ruling politicians<sup>3</sup>. More importantly, this site along with others like it were instrumental in influencing the Malaysian urban middle class, hitherto, a base of support for the ruling coalition to turn and instead lodge a massive protest by voting opposition.

The availability of such information portals and the trend of increasing internet penetration meant that cyberspace was one area where the ruling party was least dominant and the opposition had the best chance to transmit their ideas and information. The stage was set for the electoral battle.

## Web Based Strategies

The political campaign presence on the web in the weeks leading to the 12<sup>th</sup> Malaysian General Elections were dominated by the opposition parties of PKR, PAS and DAP. Parties in the ruling coalition's footprint on the web was miniscule despite investing in spiffed up websites and recruitment of 'cybertroopers' to beat back the flood of pro-opposition messages.

Using its web pages but particularly blogs of individual contesting candidates, the opposition parties generally carried identical messages to the voter. It was clear that through the use of opinion polling and observation of the local issues, the opposition candidates focused their communications to stress on the following attack messages:

1. High inflation and negative condition of the economy was due to government mismanagement and inefficiency, resulting in an inordinate burden on ordinary citizens
2. Government inability to resolve ordinary problems like crime, public transportation and settlement of local problems denote a ruling party that is out of touch with the lives of its citizens
3. The failure of government to address the long standing and now rampant problem of corruption and cronyism, and most importantly
4. Attacked the credibility and capability of the prime minister in running the affairs of government

In contrast, the opposition promoted a message of change that were anchored on the notion of a more equitable and practical redistribution of national wealth (through lowering petrol prices), promises to dismantle monopolies, and a more responsible and clean government. More importantly in the personality driven political environment of Malaysia was the portrayal of opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim as the alternative leader for the country.

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<sup>3</sup> The Malaysia Today administrator Raja Petra Kamaruddin was eventually detained under the Internal Security Act and has been handed a two-year detention order without trial. The minister in charge of law Zaid Ibrahim resigned in protest of the use of the law which permits detention without trial. At the time of writing, Raja Petra is also defending against charges for sedition and criminal defamation.

Table 3. Malaysian mobile phone penetration 2007 - 2008

Penetration Rate of the Communications and Multimedia Industry

Year	Quarter	DEL Exchange (per households)	Direct Lines 100	Broadband (per households) 100	Cellular phone (per households) 100
2007	1	48.9		11.4	77.0
	2	48.6		12.5	78.2
	3	48.3		13.5	80.8
	4	47.8		14.4	85.1
2008	1	46.6		15.3	87.9
	2	45.9		16.6	90.6

Source: Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission

Anwar’s party, PKR, centered its campaign message almost solely around him – thus emphasizing its key strength and assets to the maximum utility. Thus the PKR campaign team, inspired by the Turkish AK Party’s successful experience of promoting former Istanbul mayor, Raccip Tayep Erdogan and propelling the party to win elections in recent history, fully utilized the image of Anwar as a symbol and bearer of change. In cyberspace, Anwar’s blog featured prominently as a source of information about the party, his campaign speeches and commentaries on developing events. By taking the style of a ‘presidential campaign’, PKR was able to deflect criticisms about the party and its lack of experience or pool of established leadership.

Front covers of People’s Justice Party (left) and National Front (right) manifestos



In delivering such messages, the opposition relied upon a small but experienced band of web savvy professionals and independent bloggers who relayed information and opinion items to other sites and audiences.

Ultimately, the key factor in contributing to the successful use of the internet and information technology was the content and human factor involved. The atmosphere surrounding the lead up to elections was such that an energized public was not only a consumer of information, it was also the generator and distribution system. Several key events in the lead were telling in the impact of information technology.

The BERSIH rally of 10<sup>th</sup> November 2008 and a subsequent rally by HINDRAF on 26<sup>th</sup> November 2008 were key watershed events that marked the beginning of the informal campaign for the elections. BERSIH was a coalition of civil society organizations and opposition political parties formed to call for free and fair elections. HINDRAF (Hindu Rights Action Force) was a grouping of ethnic Indians and Hindus formed to raise the issue of economic and cultural marginalization of the minority. From these two events we are able to discern the use of technology to influence and disseminate information.

Press photo of the November 10 2008 BERSIH demonstration



Photo credit: [www.jeffooi.com](http://www.jeffooi.com)

These two events highlighted the use of alternative media channels to mobilize public political support. In the weeks leading to BERSIH rally, opposition and NGO leaders made press conferences which were largely ignored by the mainstream and electronic media but carried in full by the alternative media. Activists posted the press conferences on Youtube and over time, individuals began posting self-made advertisements, some spoofing that of commercial products on Youtube and other video sharing sites.

One week prior to the rally, posters advertising the event began appearing in Kuala Lumpur and text messages began spreading through the public, ostensibly started by BERSIH and opposition activists sending to their friends who in turn forward it to others. These messages spread across the country, beyond the capital region of the Klang Valley. These text messages asked people to participate in the rally and told them the coordinates of assembly areas before marching to the national palace.

The authorities perhaps aware of the situation began warning the public to stay away from what it saw as an illegal assembly. Two days prior to the event, road blocks were set up by the police to discourage people from converging to the assembly points. Some of these roadblocks were set up as far away as in Johor Bahru and Sungai Petani in the southern and northern ends of the expressway leading to Kuala Lumpur – more than 400 kilometers away from the demonstration site. On the eve of the event, the prime minister in an address at the UMNO party convention (coincidentally held at the same period) issued stern warning for the public not to challenge his resolve – this message was carried prominently by the mainstream press, electronic media and the internet.

The demonstration took place as planned with thousands of young Malaysians responding to the numerous text messages. This writer learnt that groups from outside Kuala Lumpur organized buses from various locations and that at least five thousand people made the 500 kilometer drive from Kota Bharu in the northeast corner of the peninsula to be present at the rainy event. It was estimated that anywhere between 40,000 to 60,000 Malaysians defied official orders and demonstrated in front of the king's palace demanding for reforms to the elections process.

Riot police standing guard in front of the entrance to a Hindu temple complex during the HINDRAF demonstrations



Photo credit: malaysiaunplug.blogspot.com





Photo credit: [www.jeffooi.com](http://www.jeffooi.com)

The event spawned increased interest in the general public and those who were politically motivated to share their views of the events and the ensuing discourse. Aside from appearing in numerous online photo galleries and shared among those participating in social networking sites such as Facebook and Myspace, the more creative activists began posting videos of the event as well as began making feature presentations of the event, many of which caricatured and made ruling leaders the object of humor for their apparent powerlessness in halting the will of the public. In one case, the on-air clip as well as transcript of the interview between the Malaysian minister of information and the international news channel Al Jazeera became the de rigueur item to be forwarded – as an object of humor at the minister's poor grasp of English and his blasé statement that "we are not stopping them to demonstrate" at a time when the visual showed riot police in full gear pummeling pro-democracy marchers and spraying them with chemical laced water.

The BERSIH demonstration was followed two weeks later by the HINDRAF demonstration which saw nearly 30,000 ethnic Indians demonstrating. The demonstration turned violent and became a running battle between demonstrators and the police. Again, the principal mobilization tools were text messages spread amongst members of the community informing them of assembly points. Likewise, cheap and widely available technology in the form of the cell phone camera made each bystander and participant become a witness and documenter of events. As the day wore on, charges emerged that the riot police, in their attempts to disperse groups of protestors had shot tear gas canisters into a Hindu temple where they were sheltering. These charges were denied by the government but within hours there emerged video postings on Youtube showing the contrary. Such video postings became standard feature for most civil society and opposition campaign. In the case of the HINDRAF protests, some of the postings generated more than three hundred thousand views.

This became the benchmark of the campaign during the elections which saw the wide use of video sharing sites such as You Tube and Metacafe as portals to store visuals of important events and



speeches. Some such as Anwar Ibrahim generated large enough content to be able to launch his own Youtube Channel.

Screenshot of coverage of HINDRAF demonstration on Youtube.com



By February 2008, the air that elections were going to be called soon was palpable. During the period it became apparent that the opposition parties, more so that those in the National Front were gathering their strength to disseminate communications largely by using the new media and the internet. When parliament was dissolved and campaign period commenced on February 13<sup>th</sup>, a new but unseen and highly effective communications machine ran by volunteers was unleashed.

### Application of Information Technology in the Elections

Our observations of the communications that took place during the elections indicate that the opposition and to a lesser extent some elements within the National Front campaigners utilized a wide spectrum of IT products in order to spread their message across the electorate. But the evidence clearly indicates that the opposition was clearly more prepared and deliberate in their approach in using the internet and other means. Some of these include:

- **Text Messages** – short message services (SMS) was utilized to the maximum by campaigners in the opposition. Based on the coverage and pervasive incidence of people receiving such SMS, it was highly likely that some elements within the opposition had developed a strong capacity to send targeted messages to individuals living in particular locations. We understand that some candidates and party organizations of the opposition had the ability to inundate voters in a particular location with SMS blasts carrying various

messages. These text messages were utilized to inform voters about opposition events occurring near them as well as to send teaser messages to get them to visit particular websites. On the eve of the election day, several tens of thousands of voters in targeted constituencies received a pre-recorded audio message by Anwar Ibrahim asking them to vote for change. We understand that some candidates and party organizations of the opposition had the ability to inundate voters in a particular location with SMS blasts carrying various messages.

- **Candidate Websites** – numerous campaign websites sprouted in support of candidates, the majority of which were developed by opposition candidates not only at the parliamentary contest but also at state assembly levels. These websites not only carried information about the candidates and reported on events, some also utilized their sites to solicit donations. Some notable successes were online donation drives by blogger-turned candidate Jeff Ooi who ran against a federal minister in Penang, not only did he raise tens of thousands of dollars online, he also won handsomely as well. Other lesser known candidates were also successful – Badrul Hisham a candidate from the People's Justice Party ran against Khairy Jamaluddin, son-in-law of the prime minister and object of attacks in opposition aligned websites – raised more than RM30,000 within a week.

Screenshot of Khairy Jamaluddin's website



- **Party Media Portals** – Party sites such as Harakahdaily and Suara Keadilan had been active from before the elections but became portals that carried material in a format that was downloadable for subsequent duplication and transmission amongst the public. PAS developed a daily newsletter called "Harian" which carried the statements and reportage of campaign issues and events. This newsletter was prepared in both print and downloadable format and was widely distributed during the campaign by party activists.

## Screenshot of Harakahdaily

The screenshot shows the HarakahDaily.Net website interface. At the top, there's a navigation menu with categories like 'Laman', 'Berita', 'Negeri', 'Khas', 'Minda', 'Kolum', 'Blog', and 'Iklaneka'. Below this is a banner for 'Aneka Rasa Ramadhan' and a search bar. The main content area features a large article titled '60 peratus ahli Gerakan mahu parti itu keluar BN' by Abdul Aziz Mustafa, dated 2008-09-29. The article discusses the political stance of the party members. To the right, there are several smaller articles and advertisements, including 'Koleksi: Perlantikan Menteri Besar Selangor', 'Masa untuk menyertai PAS', and 'Kunjungi: HANYA DARI KAMI'. The page footer shows the date 'Isnin 29 September 2008 | 28 Ramadhan 1429 Hijrah' and the website's URL.

- Supporter websites – in addition to party websites, a number of homepages operated by party activists and supporters also carried additional information and generated materials and leaflets that could be downloaded and distributed.
- Youtube and other video sites – the opposition was denied access to mainstream television networks and as such relied upon video sharing sites like Youtube to showcase its events and speeches. Aside from party produced material which included adverts and 'music videos' by parties such as the DAP and PKR, a large quantity of user generated material found their way on Youtube and provided the opposition with an outlet that was otherwise unavailable. One of the more popular video clips was one which depicted the Malaysian prime minister sleeping at various public events.



## Screenshots of volunteer produced political ads "Siri YB" and others on Youtube

The image contains two screenshots of YouTube video pages. The top screenshot shows a video titled "Setem YB" from the channel "y4cmalaysia". The video player shows two men standing and talking. The video has 474,254 views and a 5-star rating. The bottom screenshot shows a video titled "Abdullah Badawi ( MUST SEE )" from the channel "yy5rr1yy5rr1". The video player shows a man in a black cap speaking at a podium. The video has 125,038 views and a 5-star rating. Both screenshots show the YouTube interface with navigation tabs, search bar, and related video recommendations.

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

## Impact of Information Technology on Impact Assessment

The National Front ran its 2008 general elections campaign in defensive stance yet retained a hubristic outlook that assumed members of the public would simply accept what was handed to them. It underestimated the level of resentment and disillusionment latent within the Malaysian electorate. Long used to a regime that did not shrink from authoritarian measures when needed, voters by large masked their outward sentiments and proved hard to read by ruling party canvassers and intelligence agencies.

The National Front also failed to comprehend the reach and transmission network of opposition and dissident citizen communications. A post election survey conducted by the Merdeka Center, a polling organization, found that while more than 90% of Malaysians learned about the elections via the mainstream media, two-thirds also had access to secondary and alternative sources of information such the internet, leaflets, meet ups with political activists and conversations with acquaintances. Although these alternative forms of communications were difficult to maintain over time and were largely aided by the huge mobilization of volunteer resource, it nonetheless achieved a decisive impact in the outcome of the elections – the massing of resources within a short space of time on a key area for breakthrough to occur. More importantly, campaigners from the ruling party failed to comprehend the corrosive nature of the content of the material being transmitted to the internet and subsequently carried by the secondary information network on their legitimacy and standing in the eyes of the electorate.

Anwar Ibrahim sworn in as member of parliament



Photo credit: Reuters Pictures

The internet and its secondary information networks will be a permanent feature of election campaigns. Its potency will be fueled by the type and nature of issues at hand as well as the strategy adopted by the mainstream media. At the time of writing, the Malaysian mainstream media continues to resist further liberalization, in particular the Malay vernacular and television and radio networks remain wedded to the wishes of the National Front ruling coalition. This takes place at the cost of further loss of credibility as the electorate has clearly become increasingly cynical of the mainstream media and its masters. A Merdeka Center poll conducted in July 2008<sup>4</sup>,

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<sup>4</sup> The results of the poll can be downloaded from [www.merdeka.org](http://www.merdeka.org)



four months after the general elections found that only 25% of Malaysian voters felt that they had some trust in the political news coverage of the local mainstream media. Of this number, less than 10% stated they had "strong trust" in the medium.

The outlook for the internet and information technology driven communications is bright given that Malaysia continues to invest in its broadband networks and as internet access continues to widen beyond the urban areas of the country. More importantly, the political actors in the arena are now more empowered and better resourced – the disparate opposition has coalesced into the People's Alliance who now control five provincial governments. Of these, the states of Penang and Selangor the most urbanized and economically endowed polities provide the opposition with the necessary base to develop their capacity for alternative communications.

At the same time, the evolution of the Malaysian political values will likely continue at an increased rate as information becomes more freely available to the public. This factor along with the increasingly younger proportion of the electorate – many of which are likely to have Internet access – will promise that we have not seen the end but merely the beginning of a wider role for ICT in Malaysian political and social discourse.

#### **Impressum**

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