



TRENDS IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

DIGITAL MEDIATIZATION AND THE SHARPENING OF MALAYSIAN POLITICAL CONTESTS

Pauline Pooi Yin Leong

ISEAS
YUSOF ISHAK
INSTITUTE

ISSUE

10

2021

TRENDS IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

The **ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute** (formerly Institute of Southeast Asian Studies) is an autonomous organization established in 1968. It is a regional centre dedicated to the study of socio-political, security, and economic trends and developments in Southeast Asia and its wider geostrategic and economic environment. The Institute's research programmes are grouped under Regional Economic Studies (RES), Regional Strategic and Political Studies (RSPS), and Regional Social and Cultural Studies (RSCS). The Institute is also home to the ASEAN Studies Centre (ASC), the Singapore APEC Study Centre and the Temasek History Research Centre (THRC).

ISEAS Publishing, an established academic press, has issued more than 2,000 books and journals. It is the largest scholarly publisher of research about Southeast Asia from within the region. ISEAS Publishing works with many other academic and trade publishers and distributors to disseminate important research and analyses from and about Southeast Asia to the rest of the world.

DIGITAL MEDIATIZATION AND THE SHARPENING OF MALAYSIAN POLITICAL CONTESTS

Pauline Pooi Yin Leong

ISEAS YUSOF ISHAK
INSTITUTE

ISSUE 10
2021

Published by: ISEAS Publishing
30 Heng Mui Keng Terrace
Singapore 119614
publish@iseas.edu.sg
<http://bookshop.iseas.edu.sg>

© 2021 ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, Singapore

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form, or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without prior permission.

The author is wholly responsible for the views expressed in this book which do not necessarily reflect those of the publisher.

ISEAS Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

Name(s): Leong, Pauline Pooi Yin, author.

Title: Digital mediatization and the sharpening of Malaysian political contests / Pauline Pooi Yin Leong.

Description: Singapore : ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute, June 2021.
| Series: Trends in Southeast Asia, ISSN 0219-3213 ; TRS10/21 |
Includes bibliographical references.

Identifiers: ISBN 9789814951876 (soft cover) | ISBN 9789814951883
(pdf)

Subjects: LCSH: Digital media—Political aspects—Malaysia. |
Communication in politics—Malaysia. | Malaysia—Politics and
government—21st century.

Classification: LCC DS501 I59T no. 10(2021)

Typeset by Superskill Graphics Pte Ltd
Printed in Singapore by Mainland Press Pte Ltd

FOREWORD

The economic, political, strategic and cultural dynamism in Southeast Asia has gained added relevance in recent years with the spectacular rise of giant economies in East and South Asia. This has drawn greater attention to the region and to the enhanced role it now plays in international relations and global economics.

The sustained effort made by Southeast Asian nations since 1967 towards a peaceful and gradual integration of their economies has had indubitable success, and perhaps as a consequence of this, most of these countries are undergoing deep political and social changes domestically and are constructing innovative solutions to meet new international challenges. Big Power tensions continue to be played out in the neighbourhood despite the tradition of neutrality exercised by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

The **Trends in Southeast Asia** series acts as a platform for serious analyses by selected authors who are experts in their fields. It is aimed at encouraging policymakers and scholars to contemplate the diversity and dynamism of this exciting region.

THE EDITORS

Series Chairman:

Choi Shing Kwok

Series Editor:

Ooi Kee Beng

Editorial Committee:

Daljit Singh

Francis E. Hutchinson

Norshahril Saat

Digital Mediatization and the Sharpening of Malaysian Political Contests

By Pauline Pooi Yin Leong

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- The introduction of the Multimedia Super Corridor in 1996 was due to the Malaysian government's initiative to tap into the ICT sector. While this move spearheaded Malaysia into the knowledge economy, digital media enabled the opposition and civil society to compete and break the government's monopoly over information flows.
- Digital mediatization of politics in Malaysia encouraged cyberattacks such as DDoS attacks, hacking and spamming. Cyberbullying on social media is also on the rise.
- Information warfare is being perpetuated by organized teams of cybertroopers who disseminate propaganda, fake news, and disinformation in order to influence public opinion.
- Digital mediatization of politics has opened up the public sphere and given ordinary citizens, especially youths, the opportunity to voice their opinions on the issues of the day. Social media campaigns, especially on Twitter, discuss the trending issues through the use of hashtags.
- PN component parties have the incumbency advantage going into the next election. Its narrative is likely to be ethno-religious. The challenge for the opposition PH, therefore, is to provide an alternative message of inclusivity, unity and acceptance of diversity.

Digital Mediatization and the Sharpening of Malaysian Political Contests

By Pauline Pooi Yin Leong¹

INTRODUCTION

The emergence of digital media in the Malaysia was due to the government's initiative to tap into the information and communications technology (ICT) sector in an effort to open up new economic frontiers. The introduction of the Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC) in 1996 was an attempt to lure world-class multinational technology companies into Malaysia to boost the local digital industry. While this move spearheaded Malaysia into the digital economy, it also set off a chain of events that influenced the political and democratic process. Digital media enabled the opposition and civil society to compete and break the government's monopoly of traditional media—print, television, and radio—by circulating news and information that challenged the official narrative. Furthermore, the MSC's Bill of Guarantees stated that the Malaysian government would not censor the Internet as part of its commitment to provide a conducive environment for the digital economy to develop.

Thus, the entry of digital media into Malaysia enhanced political competition and became a catalyst for political change because it provided alternative news and information. This was evident during the sacking of former deputy prime minister Anwar Ibrahim and the *Reformasi* movement in the late 1990s, with the usage of emails and

¹ Pauline Pooi Yin Leong is Associate Professor with the Department of Communication, School of Arts, Sunway University, Malaysia. Her research interests are in political communication, digital media, freedom of speech and journalism.

Usenet newsgroups. Short message service (SMS) was employed in the 2004 general election, while socio-political blogs dominated the 2008 general election. Facebook and other social media such as Twitter were the main forms of political communication in the 2013 general election; in 2018, it was Facebook Live and WhatsApp. Every new iteration of digital technology into the Malaysian ecosystem had an impact on communication in general election campaigns.

IMPACT OF DIGITAL MEDIATIZATION OF POLITICS

Digital mediatization of politics in Malaysia has several consequences, such as cyberattacks and cyberbullying, cybertroopers and propaganda, as well as fake news, disinformation and misinformation.

Cyberattacks and Cyberbullying

Interference with online access, especially to alternative news portals and opposition content, intensifies especially in the run-up to general elections. For example, during the 13th general election in 2013, independent news website *Malaysiakini* experienced a Distributed Denial of Service (DDoS) attack which affected its operations for a period of time.² Cyberattacks also occurred in the 14th general election in 2018 when some political candidates found their mobile phones hacked and spammed by calls from the US and UK on polling day.³ In January 2021, hacktivist group Anonymous Malaysia issued videos and posts on its social media accounts, threatening to launch cyberattacks against government websites to highlight Malaysia's low-level security systems that allow hackers to breach and steal data for sale, which facilitated

² E. Yapp, "GE13: Evidence of Websites, Political Content Being Throttled", *Digital News Asia*, 3 May 2013, <http://www.digitalnewsasia.com/digital-economy/ge13-evidence-of-websites-political-content-being-throttled>

³ P.P.Y. Leong, "Public Sphere in the Digital Age", in *Malaysian Politics in the New Media Age: Implications on the Political Communication Process* (Singapore: Springer Nature, 2019), pp. 62–64.

spamming and cyber-scams.⁴ In 2015, the same group also threatened “all-out Internet warfare” on “strategically selected” websites if then prime minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak did not resign over problems in his administration. Anonymous Malaysia became prominent in 2011 when it managed to hack and disrupt ninety-one websites, fifty-one of which belonged to the Malaysian government.⁵ Although the recent threats did not materialize, this does not mean that cyberattacks will not occur in the near future. Digital mediatization of politics in Malaysia opens up possibilities of cyberattacks, thus political parties and politicians need to consider cybersecurity measures when planning their communication campaign.

Cyberbullying is also another common issue in the Malaysia. According to CyberSecurity Malaysia, the Ministry of Communications and Multimedia’s national cybersecurity specialist agency, the number of cyber-harassment cases reported to its Cyber999 Help Centre rose from 260 in 2019⁶ to 596 in 2020.⁷ This shows that cyberbullying is becoming a major issue in Malaysia. One example was the experience of some online activists during the #UndiRosak (#SpoilVote) campaign prior to the 14th general election in 2018. One of the campaigners, Maryam Lee, encountered sexist remarks such as “whore” and “slut” by social media users who disagreed with her crusade.

⁴ Zurairi A.R., “Hacktivist Group Anonymous Malaysia Resurfaces, Vows Cyberattack Against Govt Over Data Breaches”, *Malay Mail Online*, 25 January 2021, <https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2021/01/25/hacktivist-group-anonymous-malaysia-resurfaces-vows-cyberattack-against-go/1943943>

⁵ Liau Y.-S. and N. Koswanage, “Hackers Disrupt 51 Malaysian Government Websites”, *Reuters*, 16 June 2011, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-malaysia-hackers-idUSTRE75F06Y20110616>

⁶ Malaysia Computer Emergency Response Team, “Reported Incidents Based on General Incident Classification Statistics 2019”, 2019, <https://www.mycert.org.my/portal/statistics-content?menu=b75e037d-6ee3-4d11-8169-66677d694932&id=0d39dd96-835b-44c7-b710-139e560f6ae0>

⁷ Malaysia Computer Emergency Response Team, “Reported Incidents Based on General Incident Classification Statistics 2020”, 2020, <https://www.mycert.org.my/portal/statistics-content?menu=b75e037d-6ee3-4d11-8169-66677d694932&id=2650ed29-88be-4cec-86cc-13f8e07ae228>

A recent cyberbullying incident involved Veveonah Mosibin, a foundation studies student with Universiti Malaysia Sabah, who posted a YouTube video of her experience spending twenty-four hours on a tree in her remote village to obtain sufficient Internet connection to take her online exams. Her viral video highlighted the difficulties that students in the interior regions of Malaysia face with online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic, as a result of inadequate Internet connection. This issue became a source of embarrassment for the Perikatan Nasional (PN) government such that two federal deputy ministers claimed that Veveonah faked her video to gain publicity for her YouTube channel. The negative online comments and attacks affected Veveonah, who posted her exam schedule on Instagram and expressed her sadness, hurt and disappointment. She said, “Fake news is dangerous, I get lots of negative comments. All clear but we need to be fair [*sic*].”⁸ Former deputy women, family and community development minister Hannah Yeoh lambasted the two federal deputy ministers by tweeting, “If you don’t recognize it—this is cyberbullying in action by two deputy ministers against a young child.”⁹

Cybertroopers and Propaganda

Prior to the 12th general election in 2008, the Barisan Nasional (BN) government, confident of its hegemonic control of traditional media and overwhelming success in the 2004 general election, underestimated the impact and influence of socio-political bloggers who dominated cyberspace. This led to BN losing its two-thirds majority in Parliament

⁸ S. Lee, “‘Treetop girl’ Veveonah Goes off the Grid Following Negative Comments on Social Media”, *Star Online*, 6 September 2020, <https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2020/09/06/039treetop-girl039-veveonah-goes-off-the-grid-following-negative-comments-on-social-media#:~:text=KOTA%20KINABALU%3A%20Veeonah%20Mosibin%2C%20the,have%20gone%20off%20the%20grid>

⁹ J. Bunyan, “Hannah Yeoh Slams Two Deputy Ministers for Cyberbullying of Sabah Student Veveonah”, *Malay Mail*, 8 September 2020, <https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2020/09/08/hannah-yeoh-slams-two-deputy-ministers-for-cyberbullying-of-sabah-student-v/1901156>

and the control of five states. Then Premier Abdullah Ahmad Badawi said, “We certainly lost the Internet war, the cyberwar ... It was a serious misjudgement ... We thought that the newspapers and TV were supposed to be important, but young people were looking at SMSes and blogs.”¹⁰

BN learned a bitter lesson from that episode and started engaging bloggers and cybertroopers to counteract the opposition’s influence in cyberspace. The United Malays National Organization (UMNO) created a New Media Unit, headed by Tun Faisal Ismail Aziz. During the 13th general election, Tun Faisal said he managed 45 paid full-timers, 175 part-timers and 750 volunteers in his Cybertroopers Club, which was a more “systematic and extensive group” as “the opposition were releasing lies through Facebook, Twitter and through blogs”, and the government had to “counter false news more quickly”.¹¹

Just before the 14th general election, UMNO organized a social media convention in November 2017 during which then prime minister Najib Razak called upon some 4,000 cybertroopers to defeat cyberattacks from the opposition. Their mission was to explain BN’s policies, counteract attacks by the opposition coalition Pakatan Harapan (PH) and conduct online psychological warfare. Najib said, “We must press the button now and we must all move even stronger as the 14th general election is a battlefield where the cyberwar will decide the victor. The cyber [*sic*] is our new battlefield, and we must fight through it”.¹² Syarul Ema Rena Abu Samah, whose moniker is Ratu Naga (Dragon Queen), was one of the many cybertroopers then aligned to BN. She revealed that during the 13th general election, she headed a team of eighty cybertroopers who created and operated fake social media accounts. Some pretended to be opposition supporters and made fake statements to stoke public

¹⁰ T.C. Kee, *March 8: The Day Malaysia Woke Up* (Malaysia: Marshall Cavendish, 2008).

¹¹ R. Tapsell, “Negotiating Media ‘Balance’ in Malaysia’s 2013 General Election”, *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs* 32, no. 2 (2013): 39–60.

¹² Hakim J., “Social Media the Key Factor to Win GE14: Najib”, *Sun Daily*, 4 November 2017, <http://www.thesundaily.my/news/2017/11/04/social-media-key-factor-win-ge14-najib>

anger against the opposition. She disclosed that cybertroopers were paid from thousands to millions of Malaysian ringgit, depending on their expertise.¹³

According to the *Malaysian Insight*, some cybertroopers were paid by the Special Affairs Department (JASA) under the Prime Minister's Office, which was later disbanded by the PH government; others by businessmen linked to UMNO leaders. One UMNO cybertrooper revealed that their "coordinators have all gone missing", adding that some have switched to PH, while some were still being paid by their divisions or branches, or a senior leader with deep pockets.¹⁴ Nevertheless, their fortunes were revived when the new PN government came into power in March 2020. Deputy Communications Minister Zahidi Zainul Abidin said in July 2020 that JASA would be revived to assist those who had lost their jobs under PH. He added, "We have appointed a deputy director-general and opened up job vacancies, conducted interview processes to rehire them. JASA used to have over 1,000 staff but we can only take 500 of them for now."

In November 2020, the Communications and Multimedia Ministry allocated RM85.5 million to JASA to recruit and train staff to be skilled communication practitioners, especially in social and digital media, and to equip the department with sufficient digital infrastructure to ensure that information is disseminated to the community.¹⁵ This amount is a 185 per cent increase from the previous allocation of RM30 million by the BN government under Budget 2018.¹⁶ The Communications and Multimedia Minister, Saifuddin Abdullah, said that JASA would be

¹³ P. Guest, "'Queen of Dragons': The Inside Story of Malaysia's Election Fixer", *Wired*, 9 May 2018.

¹⁴ Radzi R., "As Funding Dries Up, Umno Cybertroopers Fade Away or Switch Sides", *Malaysian Insight*, 11 June 2018, <https://www.themalaysianinsight.com/s/53913>

¹⁵ Adib P., "Communications Ministry: Jasa Revival Vital in COVID-19 Era", *New Straits Times Online*, 8 November 2020, <https://www.nst.com.my/news/nation/2020/11/639334/communications-ministry-jasa-revival-vital-COVID-19-era>

¹⁶ *Malaysiakini*, "Govt Revives Jasa Propaganda Unit with RM85.5m Budget", 6 November 2020, <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/549769>

rebranded the Department of Community Communication (J-KOM) and would not function as the government's propaganda machine.¹⁷ He explained that the objective of J-KOM was to establish two-way communication between the government and the people, especially at grassroots level during the COVID-19 pandemic. Saifuddin added that J-KOM is different from the Information Department which is responsible to "provide an understanding of government's policies, programmes and initiatives to the public through ... communications." In comparison, J-KOM's main task is to implement strategic communication to promote the new normal following COVID-19.¹⁸ Sceptics, however, believe that J-KOM will function as the PN government's propaganda machine, just as JASA had done for BN. Political analyst Associate Professor Ahmad Martadha Mohamed from Universiti Utara Malaysia said, "The government knows that the only way forward to garner support for the elections is to establish a social media presence ... This is reflected in the amount of money allocated to JASA in the budget this year ..."¹⁹

Fake News and Disinformation

Fake news is not a new phenomenon; rumours, disinformation, and propaganda have long existed in human history. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) defines news as "verifiable information in the public interest", and information that do not meet these standards should not be labelled as such. In its

¹⁷ E.S.M. Chin, "Saifuddin: Jasa to be Rebranded as J-Kom, Won't Function as Govt Propaganda Machine", *Malay Mail Online*, 25 November 2020, <https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2020/11/25/saifuddin-jasa-to-be-rebranded-as-jkom-wont-function-as-govt-propaganda-mac/1925968>

¹⁸ Bernama, "JASA Rebranded as J-KOM with Different Roles, Functions, Says Saifuddin", *Edge Markets*, 25 November 2020, <https://www.theedgemarkets.com/article/jasa-rebranded-jkom-different-roles-functions-says-saifuddin>.

¹⁹ Amir Y., "Why There Is Robust Debate in Malaysia's Parliament Over a Move to Revive the Government's 'Propaganda Unit'", *Channel NewsAsia*, 12 November 2020, <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/asia/malaysia-budget-2021-propaganda-jasa-pn-ph-dap-umno-13514056>

view, “fake news” is an oxymoron which undermines the credibility of “real news” that meet the standards of verifiability and public interest. According to UNESCO, fake news can be seen as acts of fraud, and “as a particular category of phony information within increasingly diverse forms of disinformation”. The organization explained that disinformation is the deliberate orchestration of “attempts to confuse or manipulate people through delivering dishonest information to them”. In other words, disinformation occurs when false information is deliberately disseminated by the person who knows that it is false.

In contrast, misinformation refers to “misleading information created or disseminated without manipulative or malicious intent”. In this case, the person disseminating the false information believes it to be true. UNESCO warns that both phenomena are problematic, but disinformation is “particularly dangerous because it is frequently organized, well resourced, and reinforced by automated technology”. Disseminators of disinformation exploit the susceptibility and potential bias of its receivers, whom they aim to recruit as “amplifiers and multipliers” by using their predisposition to share information through social networks and social messaging. UNESCO states that disinformation is a “deliberate, intentional lie”, resulting in “people being actively disinformed by malicious actors”.²⁰ Digital media has facilitated unprecedented acceleration of the production, circulation and consumption of false content through cyberspace.

Similarly, the Malaysian digital public sphere is rife with disinformation from cybertroopers who manipulate, exaggerate and distort information. For example, just before the 13th general election in 2013, there were viral claims and purported photographs online that BN had flown in 40,000 Bangladeshi workers to become “phantom voters”. Many believed the allegations despite refutations by authorities such as the Election Commission, immigration, police, and national

²⁰ United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), *Journalism, ‘Fake News’ & Disinformation: Handbook for Journalism Education and Training* (France: UNESCO, 2018).

registration department,²¹ as well as the Bangladesh High Commission;²² and aggressively confronted voters who resembled Bangladeshi foreign workers.

Another example of viral fake news during the same general election were accusations of a “blackout” due to power outage at a vote-counting centre in Bentong town, and reports of the sudden appearance of a suspicious ballot box, which led to the belief that there was fabrication of the election results.²³ The Election Commission investigated and said that the alleged photograph circulating on the Internet was a fake, and that the claims were lies.²⁴ Although opposition leaders from the Democratic Action Party (DAP) subsequently clarified that there was no such blackout nor was there any additional ballot box, there were people who still believed that the election results were tainted.

The use of cybertroopers to create and disseminate disinformation was confirmed by former BN operant Syarul Ema Rena Abu Samah, also known as Ratu Naga (Dragon Queen). She admitted that by 2013, she and her team of eighty cybertroopers created and managed thousands of fake social media accounts, purportedly of opposition supporters, and concocted fake racist comments to spur anger and hatred towards opposition parties to undermine and delegitimize them. For example, in 2014, she created a fake quote that was attributed to opposition politician Teresa Kok, which resulted in the latter being charged with sedition.²⁵ Hannah Yeoh was another opposition politician who became the target of fake news. University lecturer Kamarul Zaman Yusoff alleged on Facebook that Yeo’s 2014 memoir, which discusses how her Christian

²¹ Chong L.T., “The Negative Impact of Fake News”, *Straits Times*, 6 May 2017, <https://www.straitstimes.com/opinion/the-negative-impact-of-fake-news>

²² Aidila R., “40,000 Bangladeshi Voters in GE13? That’s Absurd!”, *Malaysiakini*, 3 June 2013, <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/231903>

²³ Chong, “The Negative Impact of Fake News”.

²⁴ *Star Online*, “EC: Blackout Photo Is a Fake”, 25 May 2013, <https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2013/05/25/ec-blackout-photo-is-a-fake-many-elements-in-picture-did-not-conform-to-sop-says-wan-ahmad>

²⁵ Guest, “‘Queen of Dragons’: The Inside Story of Malaysia’s Election Fixer”.

faith had prompted her entry into politics, could “coax, influence and instigate” people to convert, and thus could be seen as proselytizing to Muslims, which is a crime in Malaysia. That viral post became the basis of a disinformation campaign on social media, and users, many anonymous, produced doctored quotes on memes with her image, alleging that she had called for the establishment of a Christian state in Malaysia and was an overt supporter of Israel.²⁶

Meanwhile, former prime minister Najib Razak claimed that the BN government had fallen victim to fake news in the previous general election, and he believed that “the same thing will happen during the 14th general election”. At the launch of BN’s portal TheRakyat.com (ThePeople.com), in preparation for the upcoming 14th general election, he said, “The reality is, fake news has become the opposition’s weapon and has brought about consequences for us.” He added, “That is why we need a platform that can be used to connect, and to spread accurate and quick information to the people. In other words, (all) information in the portal must be authoritative.”²⁷ Just a year earlier, the Communications and Multimedia Ministry, in collaboration with the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (MCMC) launched *sebenarnya.my*, a one-stop information verification portal for the public to check on the authenticity of news content that they receive online through digital media. Then Communications and Multimedia Minister Salleh Said Keruak said that the portal was part of the government’s efforts to curb fake news that could endanger national harmony and security, disrupt the economy, and create chaos in society.²⁸

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ *Straits Times*, “Barisan Nasional Launches Portal to Combat ‘Fake News’”, 5 January 2018, <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/barisan-nasional-launches-portal-to-combat-fake-news>

²⁸ Fairuz M.S., “Communications Ministry Launches *sebenarnya.my* to Quash Fake News, Information”, *New Straits Times Online*, 14 March 2017, <https://www.nst.com.my/news/2017/03/220604/communications-ministry-launches-sebenaryamy-quash-fake-news-information>

Anti-Fake News Act

Just months before the 14th general election was held in May 2018, BN decided to introduce the Anti-Fake News Act. Azalina Othman Said, then Minister in the Prime Minister's Department, said the Act was to stop the transmission of false news that "threatened public order and national security", adding that the law would protect society "from becoming victims of fake news".²⁹ Critics condemned the haste in which the Act was passed, and how that was done without much debate, labelling it as another tool for BN to cover up any inconvenient news stories about itself. Amnesty International considered it a "blatant attempt to shield the government from peaceful criticism", while Lawyers for Liberty said that it was "the death knell for freedom of speech".³⁰

The Anti-Fake News Act was passed in April 2018. However, the tide of political sentiment against BN was so strong then that it lost the 14th general election in May 2018 to PH, which had, in its manifesto, pledged to repeal the said Act.³¹ On 16 August 2018, the Dewan Rakyat (Lower House) voted to repeal the Act but this motion was rejected by Dewan Negara (Upper House). Former senator Khairul Azwan from UMNO denied that they were trying to stymie its repeal, saying that, "I understand that this is a very unpopular law, but we must also recognize that we live in a world of fast information. Just this week the Prime Minister was a target of fake news. The threat is real and I fear our political landscape is too young to be further polarized because of fake news."³² The PH government tabled a bill to repeal the Act again in October 2019, after a cooling off period of one year under Article 68 of

²⁹ *Star Online*, "Azalina: Media Providers Consulted over Fake News Laws", *Star Online*, 14 March 2018, <https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2018/03/14/azalina-media-providers-consulted-over-fake-news-laws/>

³⁰ Guest, "'Queen of Dragons': The Inside Story of Malaysia's Election Fixer".

³¹ A. Karen, "PH Vows to Abolish Anti-Fake News Law", *Sun Daily*, 3 April 2018, <http://www.thesundaily.my/news/2018/04/04/ph-vows-abolish-anti-fake-news-law>

³² *Malaysiakini*, "Dewan Negara Rejects Anti-Fake News Act Repeal", 12 September 2018, <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/442741>

the Federal Constitution. This was passed in Dewan Rakyat and tabled in Dewan Negara. Regardless of the Dewan Negara's decision, the bill was presented to the Malaysian King for his assent within thirty days, after which it automatically became law.³³

However, the change from PH to the current PN government in March 2020 has revived talk of reintroducing the Anti-Fake News Act to deal with the proliferation of fake news, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. According to Bernama news agency, the proposal would be presented by Shahidan Kassim, Member of Parliament (MP) of Arau, at the Dewan Rakyat via a question to the Communications and Multimedia Minister during Question Time.³⁴ The Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC) also urged the government to reintroduce the Anti-Fake News Act, after a string of arrests involving those who spread disinformation about the COVID-19 outbreak. National MIC Youth leader R. Thinalan said that the law was necessary as disinformation worsened panic and hampered efforts to contain the pandemic. He added that existing platforms and laws were insufficient to deal with the surge of fake news during the crisis, and that the *sebenarnya.my* portal did not solve the problem. Thinalan believed that existing laws such as section 505 of the Penal Code and section 233 of the Communications and Multimedia Act 1998 were “grossly insufficient” to deal with the issue of fake news during the COVID-19 pandemic, and that PH was too “short-sighted” to see the significance of the Anti-Fake News Act, which had appropriate mechanisms and features in place to battle the problem, especially in crisis situations.³⁵ While supporters of the Anti-Fake News Act want its

³³ *Star Online*. “Anti-Fake News Act Scrapped”, 20 December 2019, <https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2019/12/20/anti-fake-news-act-scrapped>

³⁴ *Straits Times*, “Malaysia to Discuss the Revival of Anti-Fake News Act in Parliament”, 16 November 2020, <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/malaysia-to-discuss-the-revival-of-anti-fake-news-act-at-parliament>

³⁵ P. Yiswaree, “MIC Urges Govt to Reinstate Anti-Fake News Act After Influx of False News Related to COVID-19”, *Malay Mail Online*, 31 March 2020, <https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2020/03/31/mic-urges-govt-to-reinstate-anti-fake-news-act-after-influx-of-false-news-r/1852041>

reinstatement, which gives more power to the authorities to clamp down on free speech, it is unlikely that this will happen in the near future, with Parliament being suspended from 11 January until 1 August 2021 through an emergency proclamation.

Digital Media Literacy

The Center for Media Literacy (CML) states that media literacy “provides a framework to access, analyse, evaluate and create messages in a variety of forms—from print to video to the Internet. Media literacy builds an understanding of the role of media in society as well as essential skills of inquiry and self-expression necessary for citizens of a democracy.”³⁶ To address the issue of fake news and disinformation, UNESCO, in its *Handbook for Journalism Education and Training*, created a module that introduces the concept of media and information literacy, which it believes is an essential life skill to understand the consumption, production, discovery, evaluation and sharing of information in today’s digital society.³⁷

Nevertheless, digital media literacy among Malaysians is rather low. In a 2019 study conducted on a small sample of university undergraduates, more than half of the respondents (61.7 per cent) were found to have medium level of media literacy; only 32 per cent had high levels.³⁸ Other studies done by Malaysian scholars found that schoolchildren were able to search for information using digital media but were not critical in analysing content. Often, they passively accepted online content,

³⁶ E. Thoman and T. Jolls, *Literacy for the 21st Century: An Overview and Orientation Guide to Media Literacy Education*, 2nd ed. (Santa Monica, CA: Center for Media Literacy, 2005).

³⁷ UNESCO, *Journalism, ‘Fake News’ & Disinformation: Handbook for Journalism Education and Training*.

³⁸ Y.S. Chin and H. Zanuiddin, “New Media Literacy and Media Use Among University Students in Malaysia”, *International Journal of Engineering and Advanced Technology (IJEAT)* 8, no. 5C (2019): 469–74.

“blindly shared information”, and freely posted comments.³⁹ In Malaysia, digital technology is seen as a tool to promote economic growth, and little attention is paid to the raising of media and information literacy.⁴⁰ As disinformation becomes more and more sophisticated, a higher level of media literacy is required for the common citizen to distinguish fake news, disinformation and misinformation.

Often, Malaysian netizens share unverified news and information, with the caveat “forwarded as received”, contributing to the viralization of dubious content with questionable origins, resulting in chaos, confusion and misinformation. On the information superhighway, they have access to diverse and extensive content, but are not sufficiently media literate to be able to analyse and evaluate the authenticity and credibility of the material they receive. The lack of critical thinking may affect the quality of decision-making among Malaysian voters to rationally choose their government.

Unfortunately, there has not been any major concerted effort from the authorities to promote digital media literacy in the school curriculum. To address this gap, civil society and media practitioners have started their own media literacy programmes. One such grassroots group is Media Education for All (ME4A), Malaysia’s first national movement to equip youths with media literacy skills so that they can be more “critical, discerning and assertive”. The team comprises of media practitioners who train and provide educators with the “right skills, tools and knowledge to process information”, who will then pass on their awareness to their students.⁴¹

Another initiative is the Malaysia Information Literacy Education (MILE), which aims to educate youths on media, information, and digital

³⁹ S. Baboo, “Media Literacy in the Lifeworlds of Malaysian Children”, *Global Studies of Childhood* 3, no. 1 (2013): 72–85, as cited in Sabariah M.S., “Malaysia”, in *Media and Information Literacy Education in Asia*, edited by M. Kajimoto, M. Ito, and M.K. Lim (Paris and Bangkok: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2020), pp. 56-64.

⁴⁰ Sabariah M.S., “Malaysia”.

⁴¹ <https://me4a.arusacademy.org.my/>

literacy awareness as well as critical thinking. The group has created Infolit workshops for high school students between the ages of 13 and 15. It has several modules with interactive lessons, videos and games to create awareness of fake news and how to identify them. The modules also aim to develop critical thinking among the youths and draw their attention to the echo chambers that they inhabit.⁴² Recently, MILE launched a fun role-playing game called “Choices I Make” that enables players to learn and experience how fake news is created and spread, as well as its impact on others. The game, which is available in English, Bahasa Malaysia, Tamil and Chinese, can be played on desktop and mobile at www.choicesimake.com. It is funded by the Institute for War and Peace Reporting, an international non-profit organization, while the illustrations are produced by Studio Behind 90, a creative studio.⁴³

UNDI18 AND MUDA

Such initiatives from the ground are critical and timely to prepare youths as voters in future general elections, especially when the Undi18 (Vote18) Bill comes into effect once it is gazetted by Parliament. The Undi18 Bill, which lowers the voting age from 21 to 18 and includes automatic voter registration, may see 7.8 million first-time voters in the next 15th general election which has to be held by September 2023.⁴⁴ However, this has not occurred as Parliament has been suspended from 11 January until 1 August 2021. The Malaysian Election Commission (EC) also recently announced that Undi18 will only be implemented after 1 September 2022, and not in 2021 as scheduled, due to the COVID-19 pandemic,

⁴² <https://www.facebook.com/milemsia/>

⁴³ Astro Ulagam, “Navigate Malaysia’s COVID-19 Pandemic with This New Browser Game”, 18 January 2021, <https://www.astroulagam.com.my/lifestyle/navigate-malaysias-covid19-pandemic-new-browser-game-181347>

⁴⁴ Nuradzimmah D. and Nur Ain M.R., “Over 7 million New Voters by 2023 if Voting Age Lowered, Says PM”, *New Straits Times*, 16 July 2019, <https://www.nst.com.my/news/nation/2019/07/504741/over-7-million-new-voters-2023-if-voting-age-lowered-says-pm>

adding that it needed time to re-evaluate constraints, obstacles and issues that affected the initial planning and preparations.⁴⁵

Supporters of Undi18 say that it empowers youths to take an active role in the nation's political process. Critics, however, are worried that youths will be easily manipulated as they have inadequate understanding of socio-political and governance issues in the country. It is difficult to predict how these youths are likely to vote; political parties that are savvy in the digital environment can gain a competitive advantage in the next general election, as digital media will be the key channel for political communication, participation and mobilization. Thus, it is not surprising that the former Youth and Sports Minister, Syed Saddiq, started a new political party called Malaysian United Democratic Alliance (MUDA) in anticipation of this new voting bloc. Furthermore, it was through his efforts that the Undi18 Bill was passed in Parliament. Although the acronym MUDA means youth in Bahasa Malaysia, the party is to represent all levels of society, regardless of age, ethnicity, or religion.⁴⁶ Syed Saddiq said that he took inspiration from French President Emmanuel Macron's La Republique En Marche! party and the now-defunct Future Forward Party of Thailand.⁴⁷

Syed Saddiq's strong presence and engagement on social media, with 1.8 million Instagram, 1 million Twitter and 500,000 Facebook followers respectively, is an important leverage in Malaysia's competitive political scene. As many as 50 per cent of Malaysians spend between 5 and 12 hours online communicating via text, voice or video, and social networking sites. This is according to the 2020 Internet Users Survey conducted

⁴⁵ R. Loheswar, "EC Defers Undi18, Automatic Voter Registration to Next Year", *Malay Mail*, 25 March 2021, <https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2021/03/25/ec-defers-undi18-automatic-voter-registration-to-next-year/1960986>

⁴⁶ Mazwin N.A., "Syed Saddiq Applies to Register New Party, Muda", *Star Online*, 17 September 2020, <https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2020/09/17/syed-saddiq-registers-new-party-malaysian-united-democratic-alliance-muda>

⁴⁷ FMT Reporters, "Syed Saddiq to Form Own Youth Party", *Free Malaysia Today*, 24 August 2020, <https://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/nation/2020/08/24/syed-saddiq-to-form-own-youth-party/>

by the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission. The survey also found social networking to be the second most frequent online activity, rising from 85.6 per cent in 2018 to 93.3 per cent in 2020, and that reading online publications such as newspapers, magazines or e-books has become more popular, increasing from 56.3 per cent in 2018 to 68.3 per cent in 2020.⁴⁸ MUDA's publicity blitz during the campaign launch was successful; within a month of submitting its application to the Registrar of Societies (ROS), it received more than 30,000 applications.⁴⁹

However, ROS rejected its application via email on 6 January 2021 without giving any reasons. MUDA said in a press statement it believed that the rejection was a strategy by the PN government to prevent it from contesting in the next general election.⁵⁰ MUDA has since initiated legal proceedings against ROS.⁵¹ It will take some time before the courts can decide on the merits of the case; meanwhile Syed Saddiq and his supporters will need to try another gambit. This blue ocean strategy has ignited the excitement and imagination of youths and the “young-at-heart” voters. But despite its savviness on social media, the party still needs to build up its membership and grassroots support, as well as its political machinery on the ground.

DIGITAL PARLIAMENT

Political awareness among youths has been increasing since the passing of the Undi18 Bill in Parliament. In fact, the PN government's suspension

⁴⁸ Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission, “Internet Users Survey”, Cyberjaya, 2020, <https://www.mcmc.gov.my/skmmgovmy/media/General/pdf/IUS-2020-Report.pdf>

⁴⁹ K. Tee, “A Month Since Official Registration, Muda Says Now Boasts Over 30,000 Members”, *Malay Mail Online*, 18 October 2020, <https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2020/10/18/a-month-since-official-registration-muda-says-now-boasts-over-30000-members/1913927>

⁵⁰ A.Y. Teh, “RoS Rejects Registration of Muda as Political Party”, *New Straits Times Online*, 7 January 2021, <https://www.nst.com.my/news/politics/2021/01/655291/ros-rejects-registration-muda-political-party>

⁵¹ Hidir Reduan A.R., “Muda Goes to Court over Registration as Political Party”, *Malaysiakini*, 24 January 2021, <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/560268>

of Parliament and its refusal to hold online sessions resulted in youth-led civil society organizations organizing a “digital parliament” session in July 2020 to demonstrate that virtual parliamentary proceedings are possible.⁵² The two-day online mock session, organized by Challenger Malaysia, Undi 18, Liga Rakyat Demokratik and United Nations Association Malaysia (UNAM) Youth, saw 222 “parliamentary representatives” debating and discussing new “laws” and “policies” on economic and education issues that affect Malaysian youths, using Microsoft Teams. The co-founder of Undi18, Tharma Pillai, said that this endeavour encouraged youths to “express their thoughts and engage in Malaysia’s policy-making and nation-building exercise. ... By providing access to youth and digitalizing democracy, we can encourage greater youth participation in the process.”⁵³ Parlimen Digital, which was broadcast on Facebook, had 88,000 views, with 561 shares and 693 reactions, and it received positive feedback and support.⁵⁴

However, the authorities were rather concerned about the online assembly; the police contacted some participants after the virtual sessions ended.⁵⁵ Ramkarpal Singh, MP for Bukit Gelugor constituency, said that such moves by the authorities can be perceived as an “act of intimidation” as the programme had not breached any laws by simulating

⁵² Azril A., “Youths Show Malaysia’s Lawmakers That Virtual Parliament Completely Possible”, *Malay Mail*, 4 July 2020, <https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2020/07/04/youths-show-malaysias-lawmakers-that-virtual-parliament-completely-possible/1881385>

⁵³ G. Dashika, “The World’s First-Ever Youth-Led Digital ‘Parliament’ Goes Live with Microsoft Teams”, Microsoft Malaysia News Center, 17 July 2020, <https://news.microsoft.com/en-my/2020/07/17/worlds-first-ever-youth-led-digital-parliament-goes-remote-with-microsoft-teams/>

⁵⁴ Azril A., “Youths Show Malaysia’s Lawmakers That Virtual Parliament Completely Possible”

⁵⁵ Soo, W.J. “Parlimen Digital Representatives Contacted by Police, Says Organisers”, *Malay Mail*, 4 July 2020, <https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2020/07/04/parlimen-digital-representatives-contacted-by-police-says-organisers/1881470>

a virtual parliamentary session. He added that the police had no justification for its action, unless the intention was to “stifle freedom of speech and valid criticism of the government”. Organizers said in a press statement that its participants had engaged elected lawmakers from both the ruling coalition and federal opposition to guide them in preparing for the simulated Parliament sitting. They added that Parlimen Digital was supposed to be a “safe space” for Malaysian youths to debate and discuss pressing issues that affect them, and that all information can be found on its digital platforms—website, Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. The organizers urged the police to contact them for clarification and expressed gratitude for the outpouring offers of support, solidarity and assistance.⁵⁶

Such incidents do not bode well for the state of free speech in Malaysia, and has an overall “chilling effect” in society.

SOCIAL MEDIA CAMPAIGNS

Digital mediatization of politics in Malaysia has opened up the public sphere and given ordinary citizens the opportunity to voice their opinions on issues of the day. Social media campaigns emerge periodically, especially on Twitter, depending on trending discussions. For example, when Undi18 was postponed, Twitterjaya, the Malaysian Twitter community, vented its frustration through the #PNipu hashtag, a play on the current PN government and the Malay word *penipu* for cheat. Other hashtags included #PNakut (#PNScared) and #PNgecut (#PNCoward).⁵⁷ Frustrations with the PN government’s alleged failure to manage the

⁵⁶ I. Lim, “DAP MP Says Cops Quizzing Parlimen Digital Youth Participants Possibly Seen as Intimidation, Organisers Urge Authorities to Contact Them Directly Instead”, *Malay Mail*, 5 July 2020, <https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2020/07/05/dap-mp-says-cops-quizzing-parlimen-digital-youth-participants-possibly-seen/1881691>

⁵⁷ V. Ragananthini, “#PNipu Trends on Twitter as Young Malaysians Rage over Undi 18 Reversal”, *Malaysian Insight*, 26 March 2021, <https://www.themalaysianinsight.com/s/307311>

COVID-19 pandemic and the economy led to another trending hashtag, #KerajaanGagal (#GovernmentFail).⁵⁸

A recent brouhaha involved the monarchy, which stemmed from a comment made by the Queen on her Instagram account when she was asked whether the chefs working at the palace had been vaccinated. Her reply, “*dengki ke?*” (are you jealous) became a trending hashtag #DengkiKe with more than 70,000 related posts, which led her to temporarily suspend her account. The sheer number of hashtags led lawyer-activist Azira Aziz to share a contact list of legal aid centres in every state, should anyone become arrested for their posts.⁵⁹ At the same time, activist Fahmi Reza, who curated a Spotify playlist based on #DengkiKe, was arrested by the police for investigations on sedition.⁶⁰

In the era of postmodern politics, reality is often perceived through the lens of media hype. Ventilating frustrations online are often cathartic but whether such actions have offline impact remains to be seen. A survey conducted by public opinion research firm Merdeka Center from 31 March to 12 April 2021 found that Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin’s approval rating was relatively stable, between 63 per cent and 74 per cent since he took office in 2020. The same survey also showed that 70 per cent were satisfied with his government’s handling of the COVID-19 crisis.⁶¹ The contradictory positions indicate that the hype in online campaigns do not necessarily reveal actual ground sentiment.

⁵⁸ *Malaysiakini*, “#KerajaanGagal: Twitterjaya Vents over PN’s ‘Incompetence’ on COVID-19, Economy”, 16 April 2021, <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/570976>

⁵⁹ *TheVibes.com*, “#DengkiKe Trending Hashtag Manifestation of Malaysians’ Frustration”, 20 April 2021, <https://www.thevibes.com/articles/news/24577/dengkike-trending-hashtag-manifestation-of-malaysians-frustration>

⁶⁰ I. Lim, “Lawyer: Fahmi Reza Out This Evening as Magistrate Gave Just One-Day Remand in Spotify Playlist Probe”, *Malay Mail*, 24 April 2021, <https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2021/04/24/lawyer-fahmi-reza-out-this-evening-as-magistrate-gave-just-one-day-remand-i/1969084>

⁶¹ E.S.M. Chin, “Muhyiddin’s Approval Improves to 67pc, Perikatan’s COVID-19 Pandemic Handling Viewed Favourably”, *Malay Mail*, 23 April 2021, <https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2021/04/23/muhyiddins-approval-improves-to-67pc-perikatans-covid-19-pandemic-handling/1968905>

THE AFTERMATH OF THE 14TH GENERAL ELECTION

The 14th general election was significant in Malaysian history as this was the first time that the opposition managed to unseat BN, which was at that time, the world's longest-serving elected government. There was widespread unhappiness among the Malaysian electorate, thanks to the 1 Malaysia Development Board (1MDB) scandal involving Najib Razak, and the unpopular Goods and Services Tax (GST) that was introduced in 2015 by BN. The opposition seized on this public dissatisfaction and effectively used digital media in its political communication campaign to successfully whip up sufficient support to win the 14th general election.

For the first six months, there was euphoria that the new PH government would be able to “right” the past “wrongs” and resuscitate Malaysia from its sick bed. Of the ten promises in its manifesto that it hoped to achieve within 100 days of its administration, it fulfilled two—abolishment of the unpopular GST and the initiation of a comprehensive review of all megaprojects awarded to foreign countries. Five other promises were partially fulfilled. For example, the weekly fuel float price system for RON95 and diesel was abolished, thus stabilizing petrol prices. However, the introduction of targeted petrol subsidies was delayed as PH had to manage the RM1 trillion debt that it inherited from the BN government. PH was also unable to fulfil its promise to postpone the repayment of the National Higher Education Fund (PTPTN) student loans for all graduates whose salaries were below RM4,000 per month, due to procedural and bureaucratic difficulties. However, it did manage to abolish the policy that blacklisted defaulters from travelling.⁶²

PH also took steps towards ethnic inclusivity by appointing non-Malays to high-ranking positions such as Lim Guan Eng as Finance Minister, Tommy Thomas as Attorney General and Richard Malanjum as Chief Justice. To ensure separation of powers, agencies that were

⁶² N. Aw and S. Ho, “10 Promises in 100 Days: Monitoring Pakatan Harapan’s Manifesto Pledges”, *Malaysiakini*, 2018, <https://pages.malaysiakini.com/100days/en/>

previously under the Prime Minister's Office such as the Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission, Election Commission, and National Audit Department, now function independently and report to Parliament.⁶³

However, other promises have remained unfulfilled such as abolishing unnecessary debts imposed on Federal Land Development Authority (FELDA) settlers. The Economic Affairs Ministry said that it was looking at ways to reduce the debt of these settlers such as revising the loan interest rate, but no concrete steps were taken. Similarly, PH had promised to establish a Royal Commissions of Inquiry on 1MDB, FELDA, Majlis Amanah Rakyat (MARA) and Tabung Haji in order to reform their governance. While it could not do so for 1MDB since that would have conflicted with ongoing investigations by enforcement agencies, not much headway was made to investigate allegations of impropriety in the other organizations. PH was also unable to introduce *Peduli Sihat*, a national healthcare scheme that gives low-income groups RM500 (US\$122) a year for basic healthcare treatment in registered private clinics. It also did not manage to equalize the minimum wage between East and West Malaysia due to opposition from East Malaysian employers concerned about cost.⁶⁴ One of the reasons given for the delay was the country's financial situation due to the previous government's mismanagement of funds.⁶⁵

In August 2018, then Prime Minister Dr Mahathir Mohamad admitted that PH had overpromised and underdelivered. In a closed door-meeting, he told PH and Parti Warisan Sabah MPs that "actually, we did not expect to win, and we made a thick manifesto with all kinds of promises. We need to make sacrifices to fulfil our promises. If we can't fulfil them, we

⁶³ Serina R., "Many Unrealised Promises to Tackle, as the Pakatan Harapan Government Approaches 100 Days in Office", *Channel NewsAsia*, 5 August 2018, <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/commentary/pakatan-harapan-hundred-days-in-office-promises-unrealised-10585592>

⁶⁴ N. Aw and S. Ho, "10 Promises in 100 Days: Monitoring Pakatan Harapan's Manifesto Pledges".

⁶⁵ Serina R., "Many Unrealised Promises to Tackle, as the Pakatan Harapan Government Approaches 100 Days in Office".

will need a good reason that is acceptable to the people”.⁶⁶ PH’s inability to deliver on its election manifesto was a point of contention for then opposition UMNO. Zahida Zariq Khan, Puteri UMNO chief, stated that PH should stop giving excuses for failing to honour its election promises. In a speech delivered at the movement’s annual general assembly, she said, “In the Malay community, a promise is considered as a debt. One should not make any promises if he or she cannot fulfil them ... And in the Malay community, the dignity of a person lies on the extent to which he adheres to his promise.”⁶⁷

While PH’s mastery of political communication during the 14th general election contributed towards its electoral success, it could not maintain the momentum of its performance once it settled into governing the country. After overcoming the initial shock of losing power, BN slowly regrouped and rebuilt itself to challenge PH. The then opposition’s rhetoric on race, religion and royalty came to the fore when PH tried to ratify United Nations International Convention for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (ICERD) and Rome Statute treaty, on which is established the International Criminal Court to prosecute individuals on genocide, war crimes, crimes against humanity and crimes of aggression. Despite explanations to the contrary, the then opposition incited protests and fuelled the perception that the ratifications could affect the position of Islam, the Malay-Muslim and bumiputra (sons of the soil) community, and royalty in Malaysia. MP Maria Chin Abdullah decried the “coordinated disinformation campaigns” on social media that led to the failure to ratify ICERD and the Rome Statute treaty.⁶⁸ Another MP, Lim Kit Siang, also noted that both treaties became “grist in the mill for Malay extremists to

⁶⁶ FMT Reporters, “We Over-Promised, Dr M Tells Ruling MPs”, *Free Malaysia Today*, 17 August 2018, <https://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/nation/2018/08/17/we-over-promised-dr-m-tells-ruling-mps/>

⁶⁷ Masriwanie M., “Puteri UMNO to PH Govt: ‘Honeymoon Is Over’”, *New Straits Times*, 29 September 2018, <https://www.nst.com.my/news/politics/2018/09/416143/puteri-umno-ph-govt-honeymoon-over>

⁶⁸ Chin Abdullah, M., “Disinformation Killing Our Democracy”, *Sun Daily*, 28 August 2019, <https://www.thesundaily.my/opinion/disinformation-killing-our-democracy-AA1310651>

drum up the campaign” that the “allegedly anti-Malay, anti-Islam and anti-royalty DAP was running the PH government.”⁶⁹

To gain further political mileage, the then opposition, led by UMNO and Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS) ratcheted up the “three-R rhetoric of race, religion and royalty”. Malay rights groups exploited the appointments of non-Malays to key government positions by claiming that the bumiputra affirmative action policies may diminish under the PH government.⁷⁰ Furthermore, Parti Bumiputera Perkasa Malaysia (Putra) vice-president Hamidah Osman, alleged that more than 100,000 Chinese nationals received Malaysian citizenship under the PH administration.⁷¹ This claim was promptly debunked as “baseless and irresponsible” by the Home Ministry, which said that only thirty-seven persons from China became citizens between 10 May 2018 and 15 May 2019.⁷² Another example of disinformation on social media came from UMNO’s former secretary-general Annuar Musa, who tweeted a picture of a Chinese-looking man burning a Malaysian flag, with the post “UMNO n BN have laid strong foundation for the nation. We live in peace and harmony for almost seven decades...BUT NOW IT STARTS TO CRUMBLE, piece by piece, bit by bit...[sic]”⁷³ This caused outrage among the Malay community, with some netizens demanding for unpatriotic

⁶⁹ Lim K.S. “Saifuddin Claims He Was Unaware of JASA’S RM85.5 million Budget Allocation”, *The Rocket*, 11 November 2020, <https://www.therocket.com.my/en/saifuddin-claims-he-was-unaware-of-jasas-rm-85-5-million-budget-allocation/>

⁷⁰ Mohsin A., “Politics and Policy: The PH Government, Its Low Ratings and Ineffective Communication”, *Edge Weekly*, 16 May 2019.

⁷¹ Lim, I., “In Malaysia, Are China’s Citizens Becoming the New Bogyman?”, *Malay Mail*, 22 January 2020, <https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2020/01/22/in-malaysia-are-chinas-citizens-becoming-the-new-bogyman/1830299>

⁷² *Malay Mail*, “Home Ministry Denies Allegations That 100,000 Chinese Nationals Were Granted Citizenship under Pakatan Govt”, 30 May 2019, <https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2019/05/30/home-ministry-denies-allegations-that-100000-chinese-nationals-were-granted/1757870>

⁷³ Annuar M. (@AnnuarMusa), 22 August 2019, <https://twitter.com/AnnuarMusa/status/1164218206942191616> (accessed 5 May 2021).

“Chinese pigs” to leave Malaysia. However, it was discovered through a reverse image search that the photo was from a 2013 protest in Manila and that the man was a former Filipino police officer.⁷⁴ All these issues that went viral on social media spurred concerns, doubts and insecurities among a large segment of the Malay-Muslim community towards PH.

On the other hand, Najib Razak reinvented his branding from a defeated prime minister facing multiple corruption charges into a hip champion of Malay-Muslim working-class youths. His “*Malu Apa Bossku*” (Why the shame, boss?) media campaign tapped on the “*Mat Rempit*” (illegal motorcycle racing) culture,⁷⁵ with viral memes, music videos, t-shirts, caps, motorcycle stickers and logos.⁷⁶ Large crowds gathered and cheered widely during publicity events which saw Najib wearing black parka, jeans and sneakers, while riding a black-and-red Yamaha Y15ZR 150cc motorcycle, which is popular among working-class Malay youths. All ground events were also featured on social media to make the most of the publicity stunt and create positive hype for the former prime minister.

The combined digital media attacks on the PH government and its inability to effectively communicate its position impacted its approval ratings, which dropped from 79 per cent on 31 May 2018 to 39 per cent on 11 March 2019, according to a Merdeka Center poll. Even Mahathir’s popularity dropped from 83 per cent in May 2018 when he became prime minister, to 46 per cent. The public also felt that the country was “headed in the wrong direction”—from 24 per cent in August 2018 to 46 per cent

⁷⁴ A. Chew, “Malaysia’s Dangerous Racial and Religious Trajectory”, *The Interpreter*, 25 September 2019, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/malaysia-s-dangerous-racial-and-religious-trajectory>

⁷⁵ Zurairi A.R., “From Bijan to Bossku: Najib Taps into ‘Rempit’ Culture in Working Class Rebranding”, *Malay Mail Online*, 18 January 2019, <https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2019/01/18/from-bijan-to-bossku-najib-taps-into-rempit-culture-in-working-class-rebran/1713790>

⁷⁶ T. Tang, “The Najib ‘Bossku’ Hype: Chance on Speed or Planned Campaign?”, *Malay Mail Online*, 29 April 2019, <https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2019/04/29/the-najib-bossku-hype-chance-on-speed-or-planned-campaign/1747928>

in March 2019. Merdeka Center attributes the results to three factors: perception of economic conditions; administrative performance; and concerns about Malay rights and privileges as well as fair treatment of other ethnic groups in Malaysia.⁷⁷

Unsurprisingly, PH lost the Semenyih and Tanjung Piai by-elections in March and November 2019 to BN. However, the ultimate turning point came when more than thirty MPs left PH, causing it to lose its parliamentary majority and triggering the resignation of Mahathir at the end of February 2020. Also known as the “Sheraton Move” due to the defectors having a covert meeting with certain BN leaders at that hotel in Petaling Jaya, it subsequently led to the formation of a new government under the leadership of Muhyiddin Yassin in March 2020. Despite protests about the legitimacy of his government, Muhyiddin consolidated his power base as Malaysia went into lockdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic. His government’s ability to manage the COVID-19 crisis during the first movement control order saw his approval rating shoot up. In a statement issued on 2 September 2020, Merdeka Center found that the prime minister had a 69 per cent approval rating, and that PN was the most popular political party or coalition (51 per cent), better than PH (25 per cent). Meanwhile, 74 per cent of Malay respondents viewed PN favourably while almost two-thirds supported the participation of UMNO and PAS in PN.⁷⁸

However, the situation changed when COVID-19 cases started rising after the Sabah election, which was triggered by the defection of several assemblymen in the state government to opposition allies linked to Prime Minister Muhyiddin,⁷⁹ causing then Chief Minister Shafie Apdal to

⁷⁷ *Malaysiakini*, “Poll: PM Sees Massive Dip in Approval Rating, Down to 46pct”, 26 April 2019, <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/473840?fbclid=IwAR2ZKvN5FQL7Q5kr91ca701q5j93GEoFZW87-5gY5CebzZercAO4yAn-SZ0>

⁷⁸ Merdeka Center, “Poll Finds 51% of Malaysian View PN Positively”, 2 September 2020, <https://merdeka.org/v2/poll-finds-51-of-malaysians-view-pn-positively/>

⁷⁹ S. Teoh, “Sabah Government Set to Fall to Malaysia PM Muhyiddin’s Coalition”, *Straits Times*, 23 July 2020, <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/sabah-government-set-to-fall-to-malaysia-pm-muhyiddins-coalition>

dissolve the state assembly and call for a snap election.⁸⁰ Subsequently, Muhyiddin conceded that the campaigning during the Sabah state election was among the causes of the country's COVID-19 spike in cases.⁸¹ Thus, it was not unexpected that his public approval ratings dropped. In a nationwide survey conducted by think-tank Emir Research at the end of 2020, 35 per cent of the respondents were of the opinion that the PN government was viable, down from 43 per cent in August 2020. About half felt worried about the country's future and economy as well as the government's ability to lead; almost one-fifth (19 per cent) did not see the government as viable, a huge jump from 9 per cent.⁸²

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE 15TH GENERAL ELECTION

Moving towards the 15th general election, the political situation remains unstable. In October 2020, opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim met the Malaysian King to inform him that he had the majority of MPs who supported him to become the next prime minister; but he did not present the list of names to support his claim. Therefore, the King advised him to follow and respect the legal process as stated in the Federal Constitution.⁸³ Within PN itself, the coalition seems precarious as the

⁸⁰ J. Chan, "Snap Polls Called for Sabah as Shafie Dissolves State Assembly", *Malay Mail Online*, 30 July 2020, <https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2020/07/30/snap-polls-called-for-sabah-as-shafie-dissolves-state-assembly/1889488>

⁸¹ R. Loheswar, "PM Concedes Sabah State Poll Campaigning Among Reasons Behind Recent COVID-19 Spike", *Malay Mail Online*, 6 October 2020, <https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2020/10/06/pm-concedes-sabah-state-poll-campaigning-among-reasons-behind-recent-covid/1910150>

⁸² A. Ram, "Drop in Approval for Malaysia PM Muhyiddin's Government: Survey", *Straits Times*, 1 February 2021, <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/drop-in-approval-for-muhyiddins-government-survey>

⁸³ Zakiah K., "Istana Negara: Anwar Only Gave Number of Mps Supporting Him, Not the List (Updated)", *Star Online*, 13 October 2020, <https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2020/10/13/istana-negara-anwar-only-gave-number-of-mps-supporting-him-not-the-list>

UMNO supreme council has issued a letter to Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia (Bersatu) that it will end their current political cooperation when the next general election is announced.⁸⁴ One possible reason for this decision is that UMNO is unhappy playing second fiddle to Bersatu when it came to government appointments and decision-making; the former had threatened to vote against the budget which was presented to Parliament at the end of 2020. The decision to break off the cooperation was made despite the fact that Malay voters, who form the majority of the country's population, prefer UMNO to remain part of PN. According to a survey conducted by Merdeka Center late December 2020, 62 per cent of the Malay respondents agreed that PN should stay intact, while only 21 per cent agreed that UMNO should leave PN. The opinion research firm said in a press release that it believes "PN's dominance among the Malay electorate will be negatively affected should UMNO decide to go it alone and ... cast uncertainty as to the outcome if elections were held."⁸⁵ Meanwhile, PAS secretary-general, Takiyuddin Hassan, said that the party is committed to strengthening ties with UMNO and Bersatu for the continuity and stability of the current government.⁸⁶

Nevertheless, Najib Razak has been vocally active with his criticism of the PN government on social media. For example, in a Facebook post, he talked about the Twitter hashtag #KerajaanGagal and wondered why UMNO and BN were still associating with a failed government "unless there are those who prioritize positions instead of the welfare

⁸⁴ K. Tee, "Bersatu Takes Note of Umno's Plan to Sever Ties for GE15, Will Raise It with Perikatan Partners", *Malay Mail Online*, 4 March 2021, <https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2021/03/04/bersatu-takes-note-of-umnos-plan-to-sever-ties-for-ge15-will-raise-it-with/1954715>

⁸⁵ S. Teoh, "Voters in Malaysia, Especially Malays, Want Umno to Stick with Perikatan Nasional: Survey", *Straits Times*, 5 January 2021, <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/voters-in-malaysia-especially-malays-want-umno-to-stick-with-perikatan-survey>

⁸⁶ Rahimy R. "PAS to Strengthen Ties with UMNO and Bersatu, Rejects Working with Pakatan, Says Takiyuddin", *Star Online*, 5 March 2021, <https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2021/03/05/pas-to-strengthen-ties-with-umno-and-bersatu-rejects-working-with-pakatan-says-takiyuddin>

of the country, the *rakyat* (citizens) and the party”. In response, Perlis UMNO chairperson Shahidan Kassim advised the former premier to give “positive view to the government” in order to attract the confidence of foreign investors, adding that PN had done its best to stimulate the country’s economic recovery.⁸⁷ This public rebuke did not deter Najib who continued to question the PN government’s use of the National Trust Fund to purchase COVID-19 vaccines when Parliament had approved RM3 billion in the 2021 budget and a subsequent RM2 billion to acquire the vaccines.⁸⁸

If the component parties in PN are able to present a united front going into the next election, that will enable dissemination of coherent campaign messages to the electorate that they are capable of governing the country for another five years. It is likely that the narrative will centre on identity politics, focusing on race and religion as unifying factors; Malay-majority seats form 60.3 per cent of federal constituencies (134 out of 222),⁸⁹ and the community dominates 70 per cent of the top twenty largest constituencies in Peninsular Malaysia.⁹⁰ A post-2018 election survey by Merdeka Center found that the Malay vote was divided between BN (35–40 per cent), PAS (40–43 per cent) and PH (25–30 per cent). Thus, the contest for the Malay electorate will intensify in the next general election.⁹¹

⁸⁷ Ramieza, W., “Give Positive Views to Govt Instead of Criticisms—Shahidan to Najib”, *Malaysiakini*, 18 April 2021, <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/571217>

⁸⁸ FMT Reporters, “Where Has the RM5bil for Vaccines Gone to, Najib Asks Govt”, *Free Malaysia Today*, 25 April 2021, <https://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/nation/2021/04/25/where-has-the-rm5bil-for-vaccines-gone-to-najib-asks-govt/>

⁸⁹ Harris Z., “Reality Check: The End of Identity Politics?”, Institute of Strategic and International Studies (ISIS) Malaysia, 13 May 2019, <https://www.isis.org.my/2019/05/13/reality-check-the-end-of-identity-politics/>

⁹⁰ Wong, C.H., “How to Electorally Marginalise the Malays”, *Malaysiakini*, 22 February 2020, <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/511794>

⁹¹ Harris Z., “Reality Check: The End of Identity Politics?”.

Furthermore, PN has the incumbency advantage, with access to vast resources, strong grassroots support, and a sophisticated, well-oiled, experienced election machinery that can be activated whenever necessary. Digital media are an effective amplifier when the conditions are right; it can create a strong wave to influence public opinion during elections. The desire to maintain power may incentivize PN component parties to overcome their political differences and strategically cooperate in the next general election. The challenge, therefore, is for PH to offer a counter-narrative that can inspire voters to support them. One possible blue ocean strategy is to team up with Parti Warisan Sabah, which is planning to expand into Peninsular Malaysia, as well as MUDA. If PH and its political alliances advocate messages of inclusivity, unity, and acceptance of diversity, this may provide an alternative to the ethno-religious rhetoric of their opponent.

ISEAS
PUBLISHING

30 Heng Mui Keng Terrace
Singapore 119614
<http://bookshop.iseas.edu.sg>

ISSN 0219-3213

TRS10/21s

ISBN 978-981-4951-87-6

