

# PERSPECTIVE

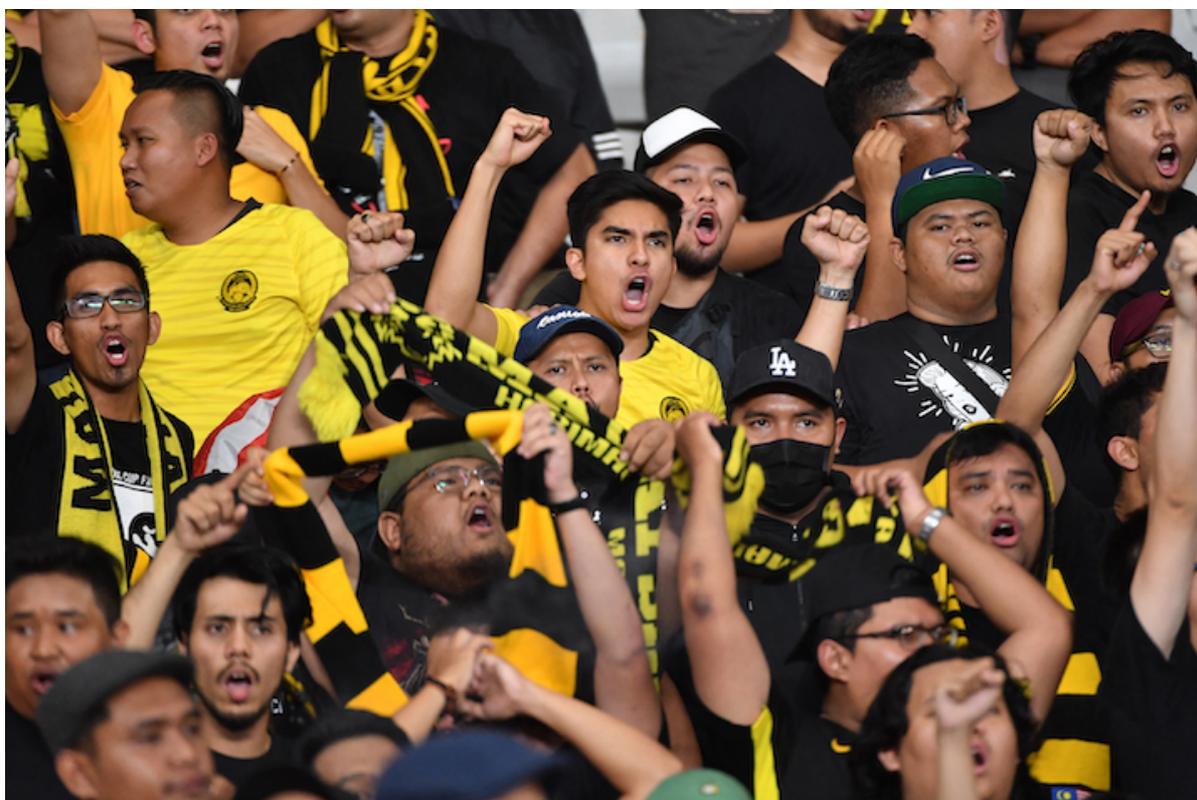
RESEARCHERS AT ISEAS – YUSOF ISHAK INSTITUTE ANALYSE CURRENT EVENTS

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## Digital Media: An Emerging Barometer of Public Opinion in Malaysia

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*While Facebook still dominates the digital landscape, younger Malaysians prefer other social media sites such as Twitter and Reddit. Mr Syed Saddiq Abdul Rahman pictured here (centre in yellow) on September 2019. He was Minister for Youth and Sports till 24 February 2020. Photo: Adek Berry, AFP.*

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## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

- Digital media is an integral part of politics in Malaysia, having become an essential communication channel for both the government and the opposition, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Mobile phone Internet users reached near saturation point at 98.7% in 2020. The top online activity is communicating via text, while social networking is the second most frequent. With the majority of the population being digitally connected, social media can be a barometer of public opinion.
- Politicians in Malaysia are becoming more aware that their online reputation has an impact on their political fortune, and that they need to be sophisticated and savvy when crafting a positive image on social media.
- The Malaysian Election Commission (EC) has recently announced that the Undi18 bill which lowers the voting age to 18 will only be implemented after 1 September 2022, and not in 2021 as scheduled, due to the COVID-19 pandemic.
- This has led to a backlash from the Undi18 movement as well as the Malaysian United Democratic Alliance (MUDA), which plan to sue the Malaysian government to compel the EC to enforce Undi18.

## INTRODUCTION

Ever since digital media entered the Malaysian landscape in 1996 as part of the government's initiative to tap into the online economy, they have played a key role in the country's democratic journey by enabling civil society and opposition parties to circumvent the government's control of traditional media. Digital media provide an alternative platform for Malaysians to obtain information that differs from the official narrative; it also became the major sphere for public discussion.

In the late 1990s, the Internet was less interactive, and those who had online access, such as the late M.G.G. Pillay, would surf the World Wide Web for the latest news from international media such as Reuters and disseminate information through e-mail lists such as *Berita Malaysia*, *Sangkancil* and *Bunga Raya*. Those who received these emails would download and distribute the news via printed copies, compact discs (CDs) and Digital Video Discs (DVDs) to those who did not have an online connection. Usenet groups such as *soc.culture.malaysia* existed for news aficionados, but the impact was limited as public opinion was still controlled by the traditional media – newspapers, television, and radio. The advent of blogging in the mid-2000s became a game changer as citizens discovered this new avenue to voice their opinions publicly. The rise of socio-political bloggers such as Haris Ibrahim, Rocky's Bru and Zorro Unmasked helped to turn the tide of public opinion against the establishment. In fact, Jeff Ooi, a prominent socio-political blogger during his heyday, contested in the 2008 general election and won a Parliamentary seat.

Realising the influence of online media, politicians from the incumbent *Barisan Nasional* (BN) jumped on the digital bandwagon by creating their own websites, blogs, and social media accounts. With its financial largesse, BN was able to employ teams of "cyber-troopers" to improve its online narrative to counteract the opposition's dominance on the Internet. The 2013 general election saw both BN and the opposition battling for public support on social media such as Facebook and Twitter. This intensified in 2018 as more Malaysians became connected to the information superhighway through their mobile phones, and particularly through WhatsApp.

## DIGITAL MEDIA IN MALAYSIA TODAY

Today, digital media is an integral part of politics in Malaysia. It has become an essential communication channel for both the government and the opposition, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. Social media is the platform where politicians and their parties issue press releases and livestream their press conferences. It has also become a barometer of public opinion as it facilitates reactions from Netizens about current socio-political issues. While Facebook still dominates the digital landscape, younger Malaysians prefer other social media sites such as Twitter and Reddit. In fact, the Malaysian Twitter community calls itself *Twitterjaya*, a play on Putrajaya, which is the seat of government in Malaysia. Syahredzan Johan, a prominent lawyer who joined Twitter in 2009, witnessed how it grew from "just another way of expression of individual status to a bona fide medium for discourse". He added, "The social aspects of Twitter have evolved into a socio-political gauge of national sentiments".<sup>1</sup>

According to the 2020 Internet Users Survey conducted by the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission, 50 per cent of the population spend between five and 12 hours

online to communicate via text, voice or video, and social networking sites. Mobile phone Internet users have reached near saturation point at 98.7% in 2020, up from 93.1% in 2018. Communicating via text is the top online activity at 98.1%, an increase from 96.5% in 2018, while social networking is the second most frequent, rising from 85.6% in 2018 to 93.3% in 2020. The survey also found that reading online publications such as newspapers, magazines or e-books has become more popular, increasing from 56.3% in 2018 to 68.3% in 2020.<sup>2</sup> Thus, it is not surprising that Malaysia's mainstream media today is digital, while traditional media – print, radio, and television – have been relegated to the position of “legacy media”, and are considered as mature media established by the elite corporate “old guards”. The one-way communication and passivity of legacy media, as compared to digital media's interactivity, makes it less popular and less profitable.

With a large majority of the population digitally connected, social media has become a barometer of public opinion. In fact, public uproar over certain government initiatives and policies have resulted in reversals and apologies. For example, during the COVID-19 Movement Control Order (MCO) in 2020, the Women, Family and Community Development Ministry published a series of posters on Facebook and Instagram, advising married women on how to manage their households and avoid domestic arguments, such as dressing well, not nagging, and—mimicking the voice of Doraemon, a Japanese cartoon cat—speaking coyly with a feminine laugh.<sup>3</sup> Public flack over the ministry's statements, especially on social media, led it to subsequently apologise and delete the posts. The Higher Education Minister also received public criticisms for suggesting a TikTok competition to persuade Malaysian youths to stay at home.<sup>4</sup> Netizens pointed out that the minister should have instead focused on the welfare of undergraduate students during the MCO and their online learning issues.

Poignantly, university student Veveonah Mosibin created a YouTube video about her experience spending 24 hours on a tree in her village in the interior of rural Sabah in order to obtain sufficiently good Internet connection to take her online exams.<sup>5</sup> Her video became viral and received widespread support from Netizens, reaching more than 200,000 views and 2,000 comments. However, Deputy Communications and Multimedia Minister Zahidi Zainul Abidin and Kudat Member of Parliament (MP) Abdul Rahim Bakri, claimed that Veveonah was lying, and that the video was made to publicise her YouTube channel. Her university confirmed that she did take the exams. The deputy minister apologised for his remarks, claiming that he had received “inaccurate information”<sup>6</sup> while the Kudat MP, who is also deputy finance minister, deleted his Facebook post after being criticised by social media users for picking on a young student instead of focusing on improving Internet connection in Sabah.<sup>7</sup> This incident, which occurred just before the Sabah state election, was a cause of concern for the federal government which feared its negative impact on public opinion in Sabah. Science, Technology, and Innovation Minister Khairy Jamaluddin apologised to Veveonah on behalf of the government, while Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin flew into Sabah and invited Veveonah and her parents for dinner, in an attempt to contain negative fallout from the episode.

## **ONLINE REPUTATION AND DIGITAL PRESENCE**

Politicians in Malaysia today are aware that their online reputation has an impact on their political fortune. Crafting a positive image on social media is now vital to their future. For example, the appointment of Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin by the Malaysian King as the country's eighth prime minister on 1 March 2020 came under a cloud of protests as he was centrally associated with the “Sheraton Move” that saw more than 30 MPs defecting from the then

*Pakatan Harapan* (PH) government, causing its collapse. Social media users vented their frustrations online with the hashtag “#NotMyPM” trending on Twitter with more than 47,000 tweets. Twitter user Ms Sharifah Hani Yasmin said, “A government not voted in by its own citizens. One day, the *rakyat* (citizens) will rise. #NotMyPM”. However, there were those who disagreed with the hashtag which they felt was disrespectful to the Malaysian King, while Muhyiddin’s supporters congratulated him on his appointment.<sup>8</sup> Realising the damage to his political reputation, Muhyiddin rebranded himself as “*abah*” (father in Malay) relying on his easy-going paternal demeanour during press conferences, when he marked his 100<sup>th</sup> day in office.<sup>9</sup>

Other ministers linked to the Sheraton Move also attempted to reinvent themselves. For example, @JatIkhwan tweeted a picture of Datuk Zuraida Kamaruddin, Minister of Housing and Local Government, saying that he greeted her when he personally bumped into her cycling around a lake in Putrajaya without her entourage. After Twitter users questioned the tweet’s authenticity, @JatIkhwan admitted that he was paid to tweet using a given template, and he had not met the minister in person.<sup>10</sup> Women, Family, and Community Development Minister Datuk Seri Rina Mohd Harun’s recent 2021 Hari Raya fashion photo shoot at her ministerial office to showcase her transformative weight loss also did not sit well with *Twitterjaya*. Netizens criticised her for focusing more on her personal achievements than her role to assist women and children affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Datin Paduka Che Asmah Ibrahim, ex-chief executive officer of the National Welfare Foundation released a post on Facebook, stating that it was highly inappropriate for the minister to use her office space for the photoshoot, especially during the crisis.<sup>11</sup>

Online political communication requires sophistication and subtlety, as shown by experienced ministers such as Science, Technology, and Innovation Minister Khairy Jamaluddin. When he suffered minor injuries after hitting a pothole while cycling in Banting, Selangor, the newly elected president of the Negeri Sembilan Cycling Association tweeted, “Pothole, ditch, KJ. 2020 keeps giving”, together with pictures of his bruised face and the accident area. Many Twitter users commiserated with him, sharing their own personal experiences of being similarly injured. The Kuala Langat district’s Public Works Department (PWD), which is responsible for road conditions in Banting, apologised and immediately filled up the pothole. Critics, however, decried the department’s double standards, stating that it should also apologise to other road users who have been similarly injured.<sup>12</sup> In response to the criticisms, Khairy said that the PWD should not just pay attention to the issue because of his status, but should take pro-active measures to address it. He mooted the idea of a special online complaints portal for potholes, and said he would discuss this with the Works Ministry as soon as possible.<sup>13</sup> Khairy’s ability to deflect criticisms and turn matters into positive publicity shows his finesse and ability in navigating the possible “potholes” in the online environment. Clearly, politicians of the future need to be sufficiently savvy on social media if they are to construct a positive image of themselves.

## YOUNG VOTERS IN THE NEXT GENERAL ELECTION

Malaysian politicians have a special reason to be concerned about how they are perceived on digital media. In the next general election, the 15<sup>th</sup>, a significant number of young digitally savvy first-time voters is expected, following the passing of the Undi18 bill, which lowers the voting age to 18. This significant development was due to the efforts of former Youth and Sports Minister Syed Saddiq, who approached Members of Parliament from both sides of the

political divide to garner support for the bill. Supporters applaud this move, noting that this was part of PH's manifesto and that 90 per cent of democracies in the world have already lowered the vote age to below 21.<sup>14</sup> Sceptics, however, are concerned that youths have insufficient knowledge about socio-political issues and governance to be able to vote wisely.<sup>15</sup>

Political parties are unable to predict how these youths are likely to vote. This means that the next general election, which has to be held by September 2023, is anybody's game. Mastery of digital media is a given if one is to gain a competitive advantage. Currently, the bill, which includes automatic voter registration, is yet to be in force and is awaiting parliamentary gazetting. During the state of Emergency proclaimed on 11 January and effective until 1 August 2021, parliament is suspended. The Malaysian Election Commission (EC) has recently announced that Undi18 will only be implemented after 1 September 2022, and not in 2021 as scheduled, due to the COVID-19 pandemic. It said that it is "committed to implementing the Undi18 and automatic voter registrations that were approved in Parliament for the 15th General Election in 2023" but needed to time to re-evaluate constraints, obstacles, and issues that affected the initial planning and preparations.<sup>16</sup>

This postponement received backlash from the Undi18 movement as well as the Malaysian United Democratic Alliance (MUDA), led by Syed Saddiq. Both organisations plan to sue the Malaysian government to compel the EC to enforce Undi18.<sup>17</sup> <sup>18</sup> Subsequently, some 100 youth and opposition lawmakers protested outside Parliament, some bearing banners stating "*Mana undi kami?*" (Where is our vote? in Malay). Nur Rifayah, 18, who spoke at the protest, said that the EC's decision will cause 1.2 million youths aged between 18 and 20 to lose their right to vote, if the 15<sup>th</sup> general election is held at the end of 2021.<sup>19</sup> The police said that they plan to investigate 11 individuals over the protest and record their statements.<sup>20</sup> Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin, however, denied allegations that PN is afraid of the youth vote and said that the Perikatan Nasional-led (PN) government should not be blamed for this, adding that it was just being realistic about the implementation.<sup>21</sup> This development, which limits the number of young first-time voters in the next general election, may become a flashpoint during campaigning. There might also be possible consequences in the following 16<sup>th</sup> general election as today's youths will then become eligible to vote.

## CONCLUSION

Meanwhile, concerns are growing over the clamping down of free speech on digital media. This is in the wake of the recent Federal Court judgement to fine *Malaysiakini* RM500,000 for contempt of court due to five comments posted by readers on its website. In its defence, *Malaysiakini* stated it was unaware of the offensive comments as its filter did not detect any of the "suspected words", and that its editorial team immediately reviewed and removed the comments the same day after it was alerted by the police.<sup>22</sup> *Malaysiakini's* editor-in-chief Steven Gan expressed his fears that the judgement could result in a "tremendous chilling effect on discussions of issues of public interest" in Malaysia and affect freedom of speech and expression.<sup>23</sup>

While public opinion on digital media may not necessarily represent the full spectrum and diversity of views in Malaysia, it is to a significant extent a barometer of the sentiments of the politically aware citizens who are monitoring social issues. These articulate members of the online community may not exemplify the majority, but their discussions may gain sufficient traction and may influence the direction of mass public opinion. For example, a Twitter

campaign #KitaMintaLima (We Ask for Five) urged the Malaysian King to grant five specific requests from the people to combat the economic and public health issues that emerged due to the COVID-19 pandemic. These requests were compiled from Netizens' comments on an Istana Negara Facebook post, which showed the Malaysian monarch granting Prime Minister Muhyiddin an audience for a pre-Cabinet meeting. If the five requests could not be fulfilled, then the campaign poster urged for a change of government.<sup>24</sup> More than 48,000 tweets with the hashtag were posted, which made it one of Twitter's top Trending Topics in Malaysia.

Although some critics are sceptical of social media campaigns due to clicktivism or slacktivism, there is always the possibility that such ideas, which emerge online, can ignite the imagination of the masses and fan the flames and lead to offline ground activism. Politicians from both sides of the divide are conscious of this possibility, and hence actively monitor current trends on digital media as a barometer of public opinion.

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