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Facebooking to Power: The Social Media Presence of Malaysian Politicians

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Social media will be a crucial means of political communication in Malaysia's 14th general election (GE14).
- Social media presence in Malaysian politics is more prominent at the individual politician than at the party level.
- Social media presence amongst Barisan Nasional politicians is very uneven. Najib Razak and Khairy Jamaluddin have large number of followers. Other BN politicians have relatively weak social media profiles.
- Within Pakatan Harapan, Anwar Ibrahim and Mahathir Mohamad have very strong social media presence and a number of PKR and DAP politicians have significant numbers of active followers.
- Political parties, politicians and NGOs need to prepare to counteract the dissemination of fake news through social media in the GE14.

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INTRODUCTION

Talk of elections is thick in the air in Malaysia these days. Though no definite date has been announced for the country's 14th general election (GE14), politicians and political parties have already mobilized and started campaigning.¹ The intensification of such activities can be observed not only at grassroots-level *ceramahs* but also on social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter. Social media did play an important part in the two previous general elections in Malaysia, but will most likely to command an even greater role in the GE14.² In an attempt to urge his supporters to use social media more aggressively in the coming elections, Malaysia's Prime Minister Najib Razak, is reported to have blogged: "We have long been in defensive mode. Enough. It is now time to attack!"³

Given that social media will feature prominently as a tool for political communication in GE14, it is of great interest to the public how prepared Malaysian politicians and political parties actually are. This essay examines the rising importance of social media in Malaysia and the social media presence of politicians and political parties in the country.

IMPORTANCE OF SOCIAL MEDIA

Malaysians can justifiably take pride in their social media prowess. With a population of about 31.2 million, the country has some 16 million Facebook users, 6.5 million Instagram users and at least 3.5 million Twitter users.⁴ The popularity of social networking sites (SNSs) such as Facebook has been made possible by the increase in ICT utilization – in terms of mobile phones, computers and internet access (**Table 1**). All Malaysian states have been experiencing a significant rise in internet usage, even if unevenly across the country. Overall, internet usage amongst individuals in Malaysia increased from 57 percent in 2013 to 71.1 percent in 2015. The digital divide between rural and urban areas remains significant in states such as Sarawak, Sabah, Negeri Sembilan and Perak.

Not only do Malaysians access internet very frequently (86.6% at least once a day), participation in social networks is also extremely high (84.3%) (**Table 2**). In terms of social networking sites, Facebook is the most popular (**Table 3**). In a 2016 survey conducted by the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (MCMC), 96.5 percent of internet users surveyed owned at least a Facebook account and 53.8 percent of the internet users accessed Facebook on a daily basis. The survey also found that some 18.3 percent of social media users share political views.

¹ Technically, the ruling party Barisan Nasional has to call for a general election by August 2018.

² See Pepinsky (2013), Suffian (2013) and Weiss (2013).

³ "Najib urges pro-govt social media activists to go on offensive as Malaysia election looms", Straits Times, 15 April 2017.

⁴ "Facebook opens Malaysian office", STAR, 5 May 2016, "Twitter's impact on Malaysia's landscape", MalayMail Online, 21 March 2016.

Table 1: ICT Usage in Malaysia, 2013 & 2015
(% of individuals)

State	Mobile Phone		Computers		Internet		Internet 2015		
	2013	2015	2013	2015	2013	2015	Urban	Rural	U-R Gap
Johor	93.9	96.4	53.8	67.8	56.7	69.8	72.7	61.5	11.2
Kedah	92.9	98.3	45.4	60.9	45.0	61.8	66.4	50.4	16.0
Kelantan	90.3	94.5	43.7	61.1	44.0	59.5	65.9	53.6	12.3
Melaka	92.0	96.2	63.9	76.6	63.0	77.8	78.5	70.7	7.8
Negeri Sembilan	94.2	97.6	54.0	63.6	55.1	67.8	73.2	54.1	19.1
Pahang	94.2	97.5	55.6	67.4	55.0	71.2	79.3	60.9	18.4
Pulau Pinang	93.2	96.7	56.1	73.9	59.0	75.7	76.0	71.4	4.6
Perak	87.8	93.7	44.3	62.8	46.0	63.7	68.7	49.7	19.0
Perlis	92.5	97.2	50.1	70.0	54.0	65.3	70.8	56.6	14.2
Selangor	97.0	99.6	73.0	83.5	75.9	84.5	85.4	71.7	13.7
Terengganu	93.9	99.4	51.5	70.3	48.6	69.1	73.7	60.5	13.2
Sabah	96.2	99.0	46.5	55.0	45.8	65.8	73.1	54.0	19.1
Sarawak	93.3	95.5	45.9	56.3	44.8	57.3	66.7	43.1	23.6
FT Kuala Lumpur	98.8	99.6	72.1	81.8	74.0	83.5	83.5	n.a	n.a.
FT Labuan	95.7	99.4	66.4	82.7	66.2	87.5	90.2	72.2	18
FT Putrajaya	99.7	100.0	97.6	98.4	98.8	99.0	99.0	n.a	n.a.
Malaysia	94.2	97.5	56.0	68.7	57.0	71.1	76.3	55.0	21.3

Source: Department of Statistics, Malaysia

The percentage of social media users sharing political views may be fairly moderate, but it should be noted that the internet is the important source of information for those who access it (90.1%) and social media is one of the main online information portal (86.9%) (**Table 4**). The importance and impact of social media may in reality be even higher as traditional mass media such as television, newspapers and magazines increasingly cover debates and reactions that originate from the social media.⁵

⁵ One recent example is the controversy over the autobiography by Hannah Yeoh (DAP) which was initiated by a Facebook posting by a university lecturer who claimed that the book contained elements of proselytization. See 'University lecturer lodges report against Hannah Yeoh over proselytization claims', New Straits Times, 17 May 2017.

Table 2: Patterns of Internet Usage in Malaysia, 2015
(% of individuals participating in activities)

State	Using Internet at Least Once a Day	Participating in Social Networks	Getting information about Goods and Services	Sending or Receiving Emails
Johor	86.1	86.2	77.0	68.5
Kedah	82.8	85.9	84.4	71.1
Kelantan	84.0	90.0	64.5	65.6
Melaka	89.8	83.9	82.2	80.7
Negeri Sembilan	86.4	88.6	79.1	64.6
Pahang	88.2	92.2	93.1	76.7
Pulau Pinang	87.4	86.3	78.5	77.8
Perak	81.3	80.1	64.6	60.5
Perlis	84.8	90.7	84.2	84.2
Selangor	89.8	81.1	86.5	68.2
Terengganu	84.4	88.8	78.1	78.9
Sabah	84.0	85.3	69.7	53.0
Sarawak	81.7	79.4	75.5	68.4
FT Kuala Lumpur	92.6	82.5	91.3	75.9
FT Labuan	94.4	87.1	71.4	71.3
FT Putrajaya	97.5	93.7	95.3	90.2
Malaysia	86.6	84.3	79.6	68.4

Source: Department of Statistics, Malaysia

Table 3: Internet Users' Social Media Activities

Account Ownership (%)					
Facebook	WeChat Moments	Instagram	YouTube	Google+	Twitter
96.5	60.2	46.7	42.1	30.9	26.5
Frequency of Social Networking (%)*					
Site	Daily	Weekly	Monthly	Occasionally	Never
Facebook	53.8	13.8	5.1	22.8	1.5
WeChat	31.7	9.0	2.4	14.7	2.5
Instagram	19.8	10.6	1.9	12.3	2.2
YouTube	13.5	10.1	2.8	13.9	1.9
Google+	5.6	5.5	3.4	13.4	3.3
Twitter	8.3	3.6	2.2	9.0	3.6
Time Spent on Social Networking Sites in a Day					
Time	≤ 1 hour	1-4 hours	4-8 hours	8-12 hours	8-12 hours
% Social Media Users	40.4	41.6	11.1	3.1	4.1

Source: Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission, Internet Users Survey 2016.

Note: * Multiple Response

Table 4: Internet Users’ Source of Information

Internet Users’ Source of Information					
Source of Information	Internet	People Around You	TV	Printed Media	Radio
% Internet Users	90.1	75.0	67.0	65.9	50.7
Types of Portal Accessed for Information					
Portal	Instant Messaging	Search Engine	Social Media	Online Video	News
% Internet Users	90.4	87.2	86.9	69.5	65.5

Source: Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission, Internet Users Survey 2016.

Note: * Multiple Response

SOCIAL MEDIA PRESENCE OF POLITICAL PARTIES & POLITICIANS

Given the importance of social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter in Malaysia, one would expect political parties and politicians to have invested effort and time to develop greater social media presence. One way to explore this is to consider the number of followers of such political sites. **Table 5** and **Table 6** summarize the number of followers of major political parties and politicians in Malaysia, respectively.⁶ Both tables clearly suggest that Facebook, and to a lesser extent Twitter, are the major social networking sites for political parties and politicians in Malaysia. The use of social media for politics is clearly more intensive at the individual politician level than at the political party and political coalition level. There is no information on whether political parties provide allocations to individual politicians for their social media activities.

Comparing politicians, the level of social media presence measured by the number of followers is clearly uneven within coalitions and parties (**Table 6**). Within Barisan Nasional (BN) and UMNO, Prime Minister Najib Razak has clearly invested a lot of effort to maintain a high social media profile. With the exception of Khairy Jamaluddin and Hishammuddin Hussein Onn, other UMNO politicians appear to lag behind in social media presence. A similar problem is observed in the Pakatan Harapan coalition – a few politicians have a very high number of followers, especially Mahathir Mohamad (PPBM), Anwar Ibrahim (PKR), Wan Azizah Wan Ismail (PKR) and Muhyiddin Yassin (PPBM).

⁶ The term “major” here refers to political parties that have won more than one parliamentary seat in the 13th general elections (GE13). Appendix Table 1A provides a list of seats won by various political parties in GE13.

Table 5: Number of Followers at Social Networking Sites of Political Parties⁷

	Facebook	Instagram	YouTube	Twitter
Barisan Nasional	353,302	1,973	295	114,000
UMNO	69,224	13,900	7,873	85,400
MCA	173,311	-	1,540	4,977
MIC	10,453	-	-	8,656
Gerakan	16,867	-	n.a.	450
PBB*	78,472	-	-	34
PRS*	543 ^x	-	-	-
SUPP*	16,034	-	-	-
SPDP*	3,379	-	-	-
UPKO**	137	528 ^y	-	564
PBS**	593	41	-	92
Pakatan Harapan	39,055	-	-	4,293
PKR	47,008	n.a.	-	85,800
DAP	624,452	-	22,444 ^z	116,000
AMANAHAH	122,787	17	784	370
PPBM	166,209	-	-	310
Others				
PAS	475,768	52,800	6,777	8,530

Note: *Sarawak-based parties, **Sabah-based parties,
x - Pergerakan Wanita PRS, y – UPKO Penampang, z – UbahTV
Source: Author’s compilation – 14 September 2017

The DAP, though lacking “superstar” status (> 1 million followers) on Facebook amongst them, have more politicians with a moderately high number of followers (100,000-400,000). Political leaders from PAS and AMANAHAH (a splinter group from PAS which is now with Pakatan Harapan) have relatively fewer followers compared to political leaders from PKR and DAP. The social media presence of other political parties and politicians from East Malaysia that are part of BN is even weaker. This could mean that social media are not likely to play an important role in Sabah and Sarawak, especially in the rural areas.

⁷ Abbreviations: United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA), Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC), Parti Pesaka Bumiputera Bersatu (PBB), Sarawak United People’s Party (SUPP), Malaysian People’s Movement Party (Gerakan/PGRM), United Sabah People’s Party (PBRS), United Pasokmomogun Kadazandusun Murut Organisation (UPKO), United Sabah Party (PBS), Sarawak Progressive Democratic Party (SPDP), Parti Rakyat Sarawak (PRS), Democratic Action Party (DAP), People’s Justice Party (PKR), National Trust Party (AMANAHAH), Malaysian United Indigenous Party (PPBM), Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS).

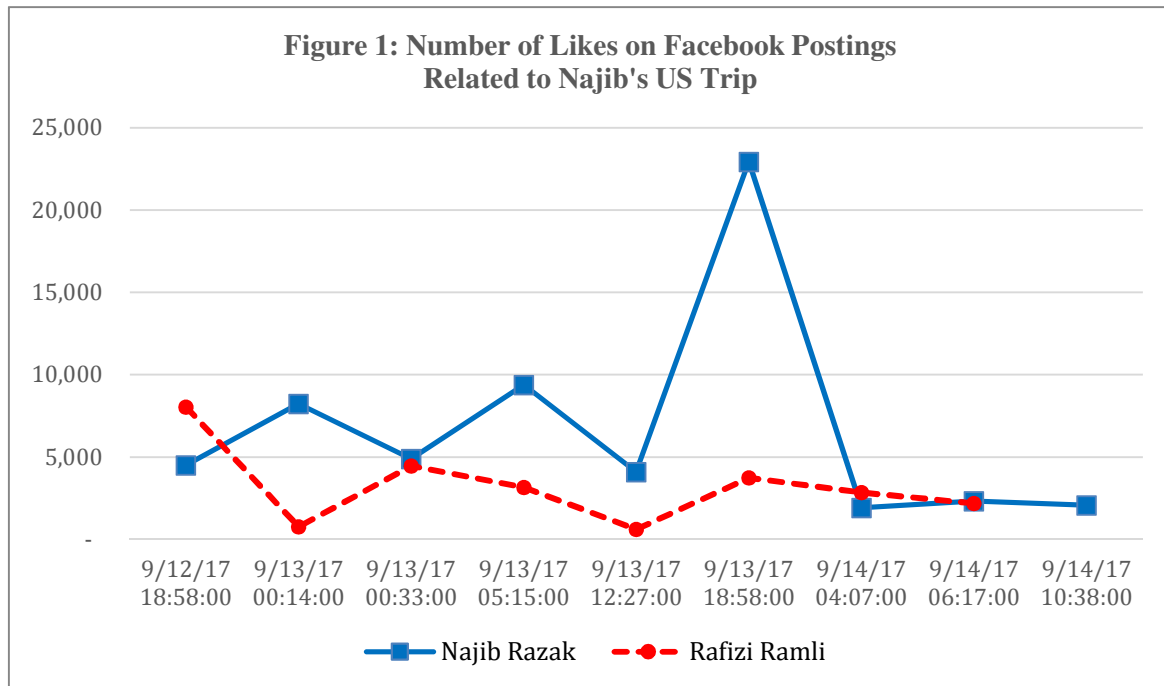
Table 6: Number of Followers at Social Networking Sites of Politicians

	Facebook	Instagram	YouTube	Twitter
BN - UMNO				
Najib Abdul Razak	3,293,417	327,000	9,418	3.76 mil
Ahmad Zahid Hamidi	146,768	82,600	1,460	328,000
Hishammuddin Hussein Onn	543,146	146,000	934	877,000
Mustapa Mohamed	131,425	25,000	-	58,100
Khairy Jamaluddin	1,165,397	815,000	1,512	2.28 mil
Shahrizat Abdul Jalil	16,022	55,700	-	85,000
Mas Ermieyati Hj Samsudin	49,604	17,000	4	15,800
BN - Others				
Liow Tiong Lai (MCA)	147,629	1,064	-	83,700
S. Subramaniam (MIC)	26,833	-	-	2,420
Abang Johari Abang Openg (PBB)	16,606	-	-	628
James Jemut Masing (PRS)	5,018	-	-	-
Joseph Pairin Kitingan (PBS)	inactive	-	-	-
Wilfred Madius Tangau (UPKO)	40,005	3,382	-	1,182
Pakatan Harapan				
Anwar Ibrahim (PKR)	1,587,345	39,400	8,166	1.09 mil
Wan Azizah Wan Ismail (PKR)	904,435	6,927	-	258,000
Mohamed Azmin Ali (PKR)	178,213	48,200	1,148	278,000
Rafizi Ramli (PKR)	624,563	41,800	-	435,000
Lim Guan Eng (DAP)	407,796	-	-	403,000
Lim Kit Siang (DAP)	334,002	-	-	306,000
Tony Pua (DAP)	314,975	12,800	-	199,000
Liew Chin Tong (DAP)	123,370	-	-	23,600
Mohamad Sabu (AMANAH)	35,314	-	-	-
Salahuddin Ayub (AMANAH)	49,554	-	-	-
Khalid Samad (AMANAH)	27,384	2,348	-	114,000
Mahathir Mohamad (PPBM)	2,490,959	166,000	-	209,000
Muhyiddin Yassin (PPBM)	821,940	-	-	572,000
Others				
Abdul Hadi Awang (PAS)	333,124	-	--	36,100
Tuan Ibrahim Yuan Man (PAS)	198,864	-	-	20,000

Source: Author's compilation – 14 September 2017

The number of Facebook followers for politicians is a static measure that does not provide an indication of the degree of responsiveness to the politicians' postings. Furthermore, some measure of caution should be exercised in using the number of followers as a measure of social media presence as this can be inflated using fake accounts. One approach that can be used to address these issues partially is to monitor the number of Facebook likes, comments and shares on postings by two or more politicians on the same topic. One such recent topic is Najib Razak's three-day visit to Washington DC from 12 to 14 September 2017. **Figure 1** provides a depiction of how the number of "Like" responses to postings by Najib Razak

and Rafizi Ramli (PKR) unfolded over real time during this period.⁸ The number of “Likes” received by Najib Razak exceeds that for Rafizi Ramli but the ratio between the two is less than the 5.2 ratio between Razak and Rafizi’s followers.⁹



Source: Author’s compilation – 15 September 2017

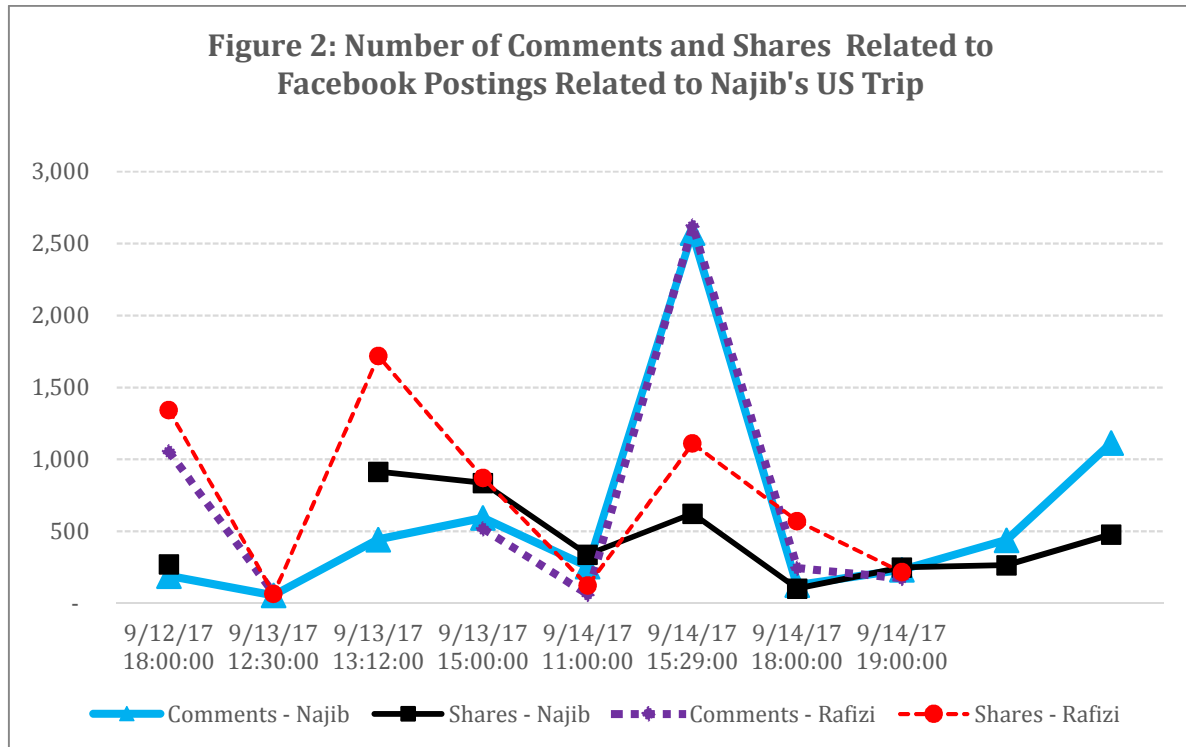
The use of “Likes” as a measure of social media presence is not entirely fool-proof to manipulation as spam accounts with bots can be used to generate fake “Likes”. Bots can also be used to generate fake comments, but fake shares are more difficult to generate as it requires linked accounts. **Figure 2** provides the number of comments and shares from the Facebook accounts of Najib Razak and Rafizi Ramli which are related to postings on Najib Razak’s visit to the US.

A comparison between Figure 1 and Figure 2 clearly indicates that the gap in Facebook engagement between Najib Razak and Rafizi Ramli is much smaller than what is suggested by the number of followers or Likes. This is even more evident from the number of shares for postings by Rafizi Ramli, indicating that his supporters are more keen to disseminate information posted by him. This brings us to an important point about social media as a channel of political communication – the characteristics of (Facebook) users matter. It is

⁸ Rafizi Ramli was chosen for comparison because he was the most active politician from Pakatan Harapan in terms of commenting on Najib’s visit to the US.

⁹ The highest number of “Likes” recorded for Najib Razak was around 23,000 on 13 September 2017. The posting was a photo of Najib exercising on a treadmill.

thus not surprising that Najib Razak has called on his supporters to be more aggressive on social media.



Source: Author's compilation – 15 September 2017

Finally, one aspect of social media preparedness which is difficult to assess prior to the election is the extent to which political parties and politicians are prepared and plan to use false stories or fake news to influence voting behavior. Social media is particularly vulnerable as news are often shared without any third-part verification.¹⁰ Politicians and political parties that run high risks of being disadvantaged by fake news will therefore feel a greater need to prepare for such a possibility. Similarly, NGOs have an important role to play in social media to mitigate such risks so as to ensure that GE14 will be conducted as fairly as possible.

CONCLUSIONS

Social media will be an important medium and tool for political communication in Malaysia's next general elections. As means of political communication in Malaysian politics, they are more prominent at the individual than at the party level. The social media presence of politicians within the Barisan Nasional coalition is very uneven. Two key

¹⁰ See Allcott and Gentzkow (2017) for a discussion on fake news in the 2016 US presidential elections.

UMNO politicians who have strong social media presence are Najib Razak (Prime Minister and UMNO President) and Khairy Jamaluddin (Minister of Youth and Sports and UMNO Youth leader). Other BN politicians including those from MCA, MIC and other East Malaysian political parties have relatively weak social media presence.

In the Pakatan Harapan coalition, Anwar Ibrahim (PKR) and Mahathir Mohamad (PBBM) have strong social media presence. At the same time, a number of PKR and DAP politicians have significant social media presence. There are also indications that PKR (and possibly DAP) supporters on social media are relatively active in terms of commenting and sharing news. PAS politicians have relatively weak social media presence.

Finally, there is a need for political parties, politicians and NGOs to prepare counter-measures for fake news in the GE14.

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APPENDIX
Table A1: Parliamentary Seats Won by Political Parties in GE13

Parties	No. Seats	% Share
UMNO	88	39.6
DAP	38	17.1
PKR	30	13.5
PAS	21	9.5
PBB	14	6.3
MCA	7	3.2
PRS	6	2.7
MIC	4	1.8
PBS	4	1.8
SPDP	4	1.8
UPKO	3	1.4
Gerakan	1	0.5
SUPP	1	0.5
PBRIS	1	0.5
	222	100.0

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