

Liberalisation of the Malaysian Media and Politics: New media, Strategies and Contestations

LEE YUEN BENG & MAHYUDDIN AHMAD
Universiti Sains Malaysia, Malaysia

On 28 April 2012, 'Bersih 3.0', a rally calling for freer and fairer elections estimated that 250,000 people gathered to support its cause. Government controlled newspapers the *New Straits Times* and *Utusan Malaysia* accused this rally attended by 20,000 demonstrators as a plot to destabilise and overthrow the ruling coalition through chaos and disorder. Online news portals *Malaysiakini* and *Malaysian Insider* however reported that the rally attended by 150,000 demonstrators began peacefully but ended chaotically as demonstrators, journalists and police personnel were attacked and manhandled. While the conflicting reports of Bersih 3.0 and other news reports unpublished by the state controlled media through the new media suggests political dissent and possible media liberalisation, it does not necessarily mean that press freedom is well and alive. It however marks the beginning of a larger movement in cyberspace that threatens the hegemony of the ruling coalition. This paper examines the proliferation of the new media within the political economic structure of the Malaysian society and media; selected representations and messages in the old and new media; and whether the strategies and if representations in the new media are counter hegemonic tools capable of creating space for diverse voices, dissent and transformation.

Keywords: New media, internet, political economy, civil society, counter-hegemony

Over the past three decades, the democratic process in many Southeast Asian nations has been sidelined with emphasis placed on economic growth. Coupled with the effects of neoliberal policies and globalization which, in effect, enlisted many of these regimes within the service of capitalism, many of such Asian regimes are also seen as authoritarian governments. According to Rodan "Authoritarian regimes are characterized by a concentration of power and the obstruction of serious political competition with, or scrutiny of, that power. The free flow of ideas and information is therefore an anathema to authoritarian rule. Almost by definition, authoritarian regimes involve censorship" (2004, p. 1). Despite the controls and the fact that the state was emphasizing economic growth until the financial meltdown of 1998, "the structure of Southeast Asian societies had also been transformed resulting in considerable political ferment...(leading to)...the re-emergence and resurgence of democratic politics" (Saravanamuttu and Loh, 2004, p 352). It is also during the period leading up to and in the aftermath of the 1998 Asian financial crisis that many civil liberty and social movements led by the middle-classes began to question the dominant discourse and challenge the hegemony of the Malaysian government.

Since 2003, a series of power transitions occurred as Mahathir resigned from all governmental positions. The post of Prime Minister was taken over by his deputy, Abdullah Ahmad Badawi and in 2009; Najib Razak took over the reins of power. Since the resignation of Mahathir, many academics, politicians and media practitioners have stated that the authoritarian methods

Correspondence to: Lee Yuen Beng, School of Communication, Universiti Sains Malaysia 11800, Penang, Malaysia. E-mail: baljy@yahoo.com

of governing the nation and holding on to power were a thing of the past. Apparently, Malaysians are now allowed more space as more freedom has been given to the media, politicians and Malaysians in general, while freedom of speech and expression had supposedly become permissible. It was during the rule of Abdullah Ahmad Badawi and Najib Razak that large scaled as well as minor street protests organized by non-governmental organisations (NGOs) such as Bersih, Himpunan Hijau, Turun, Hindraf and Perkasa rallied for issues that ranged from electoral and governmental reforms, educational reforms; against price hikes, racial and religious injustice.

Such forms of protests that were all held during the post-Mahathir era have been organized either for or against the ruling coalition. The organization of such rallies post-Mahathir has on one hand witnessed hundreds of thousands of Malaysians gathered onto the streets as reported by the press makes one contemplate if indeed such political and social reforms have indeed been granted by the Malaysian government. On the other hand, it is not uncommon to see heavy police presence and heavy handed tactics used during such rallies; and then the call from the state for crackdowns upon bloggers and "netizens" that present a so called threat towards what is often labelled as "national security".

In 2007, Bersih (The Coalition for Free and Fair Elections) an elections watchdog group made up of a coalition of 62 NGOS employed the Internet and the social media in particular to raise democratic awareness in Malaysia. Because Bersih stated that the practice of electoral democracy in Malaysia is wanting, Bersih submitted eight demands for electoral reform. In short, the eight demands made are for the electoral roll to be cleaned, postal ballot reformed, usage of indelible ink, minimum 21 days campaign period, free and fair access to media, strengthen public institutions, stop corruption and stop dirty politics. In order for its voice to be heard, Bersih then organised a series of street demonstrations. The first was carried out in 2007, then in 2011 and the third, Bersih 3.0 was held in 2012.

Bersih 3.0 becomes the focus of this study because it is recorded that an estimated 250 000 protestors had participated in this rally. Historically, Bersih 3.0 is recorded as the rally with the largest turnout in Malaysia and a rally that generates such a magnitude of support would not go unnoticed by the ruling elite. In return, the mainstream media controlled by the ruling elite was utilised to counter the claims made by Bersih. The mainstream media was also used to highlight Bersih's activities during the street rally. Because the Bersih 3.0 rally had brought upon potential counter hegemonic possibilities, it was portrayed as a controversial movement with violent supporters that attempted to depose the ruling elite. Such claims were however different from those portrayed in online news portals such as Malaysiakini. One such difference in reporting was when state controlled newspapers the *New Straits Times* and *Utusan Malaysia* stated that the 20 000 demonstrators had attempted to destabilise and overthrow the ruling coalition through chaos and disorder. Online news portals *Malaysiakini* and *Malaysian Insider* however reported that the rally attended by 150,000 demonstrators began peacefully but ended chaotically as demonstrators, journalists and police personnel were attacked and manhandled.

Such conflicting reports of Bersih 3.0 have on one hand portrayed the rally negatively as the rally was portrayed as illegal and destructive while independent online news portals carried news reports about police brutality and how the protestors were mistreated. The difference in reporting demonstrates how the Internet has opened up a new space of contestation and representation in contrast to the news and information disseminated by the mainstream Malaysian media. This paper examines the proliferation of the new media within the political economic structure of the Malaysian society and media; selected representations and messages in the old and new media; and whether the strategies and if representations in the new media are counter hegemonic tools capable of creating space for diverse voices, dissent and transformation.

Internet and the Rise of Civil Society

Throughout the post-Mahathir years, certain significant events have indeed led or contributed towards the commencement of a sense of democratization within the Malaysian media, freedom of speech and expressions, and within the political arena. While such forms of freedoms have been enshrined within the Malaysian Federal Constitution, the awareness of the majority of Malaysians towards such rights that they have had all along only began to take place with the rise of the Internet. It is through the Internet, which was allowed to be established and grow by Mahathir as a way of modernizing the country had instead been used as a means of creating socio-political and cultural awareness. Allow me to now discuss the influence of the Internet in Malaysia, which began through the establishment of the Malaysian Multimedia Super Corridor, its influence during the Anwar Ibrahim *Reformasi* era, awareness towards the ownership and control of the media by the state and the rise of civil society.

As the nation experienced its worst economic crisis similarly impacted the political state of affairs in Malaysia. The rift and clash of personality between the then Prime Minister, Mahathir Mohamad and his deputy, Anwar Ibrahim was irreconcilable; resulted in the sacking and imprisoning of the latter. The sacking of the Deputy Prime Minister led to the rise of the *Reformasi* movement as the supporters of Anwar Ibrahim deemed his sacking as unjust and politically motivated. Besides rallying in mass demonstrations in the streets calling for the resignation of Mahathir Mohamad, this sacking also caused the supporters of Anwar Ibrahim to leave his political party UMNO (United Malays National Organisation).¹ Anwar Ibrahim's followers launched the new multi-ethnic Parti KeADILan Nasional (now popularly known as Parti KeADILan Rakyat/PKR) as their chosen vehicle for contesting upcoming elections and for bringing about change. And it is noteworthy that PKR joined hands with the other opposition parties, including the Chinese-based Democratic Action Party (DAP) and the Malay-Muslim based Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS) to forge a multi-ethnic opposition coalition, the Barisan Alternatif (BA), now a loosely based unregistered coalition known as the Pakatan Rakyat (PR).

It was also during this period that the Internet began to become a new site for the dissemination of information and contestation of ideas. Made possible by the launch of the Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC), the project was aimed at creating an 'information and knowledge-based' society competent of competing globally. Stretching fifteen kilometres wide and fifty kilometres long, from the Kuala Lumpur City Centre (KLCC) to the Kuala Lumpur International Airport (KLIA), it houses 'intelligent city' Putrajaya and 'cybercity' Cyberjaya, and the Multimedia University (Ibrahim and Goh 1998, p. 9). Backed by the '10-point Multimedia Bill of Guarantees', the MSC will bring together four key elements: the best possible physical infrastructure; new laws; policies and practices; high capacity global telecommunications; and logistics infrastructure and a high-powered non-stop shop (Ibrahim and Goh 1998, p. 25). The introduction of the Internet through the MSC, while allowing for newer media technologies to materialise also emerged as a site for disseminating information across borders.

The Internet as a new paradigm of electronic media provides resources for self-imaginings as a space of contestation or 'imagined space' that transforms the discourse of mass mediation through new resources and new disciplines for the construction of imagined selves and worlds (Appadurai 1996, p. 3). As the mainstream media was largely owned and controlled by the ruling elite, the dissemination of news and information was therefore controlled by the ruling elite. For example, the broadcast channels of TV1, TV2 and TV3, and newspapers *The Star*, *Utusan Malaysia* and *New Straits Times* are owned either directly or indirectly by the ruling elite. It was during the peak of the *Reformasi* movement in the 1990s that online news portals such as *Malaysiakini* started gaining popularity amongst Malaysians who were deprived of news and information. *Malaysiakini*

became widely read as it provided alternative and quite often conflicting views with the official narratives concerning issues in Malaysia.

Apart from this news portal, other websites such as the now defunct *Mahazalim*, *Mahafiraun* and *Free Anwar Ibrahim* proliferated into providing alternative views and information. The Internet was further used as an alternative channel to the government media for information, analysis and commentary through *freemalaysia*, *sangkancil*, *adilnet*, and *saksi*. Such websites also featured spirited, critical, alternative reports and commentaries. The popularity of using the Internet as an alternative media is reflected through visits to *Reformasi* sites such as *Laman Reformasi* registering over 5 million hits while approximately 30 *Reformasi* related sites existed. The *Reformasi* movement was also supported by 'international links' by followers residing in countries such as Japan (*Anwar Support*), Thailand (*Reformasi Anwar Ibrahim*), and Australia (*Australia Reform Web*).

This tremendous influence of the Internet in altering the Malaysian political landscape was also influential in the awakening of civil society. During the height of the Mahathir/*Anwar Reformasi* crisis, the growing accessibility of the Internet and information technology savvy-ness created an alternative platform for the publication and dissemination of information, ideas, and views deemed too sensitive for mainstream media controlled by the ruling elite. This led to the Internet emerging into an alternative site of information, which is further empowered with the government's 'no censorship' guarantee. Dubbed the 'Fifth Estate', the Internet has been manipulated and utilised to facilitate communication and interaction, virtual mobilisation and participation among individuals and groups in civil society, and performs checks and balances on the state (Tan 2010). The internet as the location for rebellion, the subject of insurgent agency and a site of cultural hybridity (Bhabha 2004, p. 294-5), helped broaden and locate a platform for public discussion and social action (Naughton 2001, 147). Mass rallies were largely organised and spread using the internet, leading to the rise of *Reformasi* politics. The internet was therefore utilised by *Reformasi* activists as a platform to circulate alternative voices, communicate and discuss social and political criticisms that led to an immense loss in the ruling government's hegemony over civil society (Khoo 2003, p. 99-107). The MSC which was initialised as the state's project in preparing the nation for an increasingly globalised world in the information age had instead been usurped as a popular alternative method of disseminating information, exchanging ideas and discussing issues on socio-political consciousness across space and time.

Regardless of ethnicity and social class, the *Reformasi* movement sparked the socio-political awakening that led to a re-ignition of Malaysian nationalism and political awareness through a heightened consciousness of the government's sinister power, a suppressive legislative and judicial power that can so easily be brought to bear on political dissent (Johan 2001, p. 105). Silent voices surfaced from within the Malay community who were now both sceptical and critical of state policies (Lee 2005, p. 212). These voices also emerged from the ruling coalition's Barisan Nasional (BN) dominant Malay-Muslim political party, UMNO, and raised doubts and anxieties regarding the unconstructive outcomes of affirmative action on the Malay community (ibid.). The *Reformasi* movement was primarily an uprising that inspired new forms of expression that changed the Malaysian socio-cultural and political environment. This awakening of civil society also led towards the significance of multi-ethnicity in Malaysia. The contestations of issues based on class, politics, ethnicity, and intellectual dynamics, all of which occur in a decade that witnesses the transition of power between three Prime Ministers: Mahathir Mohamad to Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, then to Najib Razak.

The accessibility of the Internet and freedom from censorship has led to the emergence of news portals and blogs that provided alternative news and critical views. Popular websites such as Malaysiakini, Malaysia Today, and Free Malaysia Today have provided a platform for alternative

news and views to be discussed openly. Opposition political parties have established websites such as PAS's Harakah Daily, PKR's Suara-Keadilan and DAP's DAP Rocket without requiring a printing permit under the Printing Presses and Publication Act (1984). The eventual development of new media technology and the popularisation of the Internet continued to play a significant role ten years later.

In the 2008 General Election, online news portals, social media websites and blogs provided Malaysians with alternative information and allowing discussions to take place online. During the past decade, the popularisation and development of weblogs was rapidly rising and was nothing short of phenomenal (Tan & Zawawi 2008, p. 1). Blogging, as it was subsequently known became counter-hegemonic forces that capably challenged many authoritarian regimes and their comprehension of democracy. As the online contestations became a form of activity that became a "force for the breakdown of authoritarian political system" (Tan & Zawawi 2008, p. 4), the 2008 General Election was a trying period for the ruling regime. This was because the popularisation of blogging, sharing of information through social media and Internet websites became an activity that potentially increased greater democratic participation among the masses. As a result, the hegemony of the ruling elite was challenged and resulted in a loss of the much coveted two-thirds Parliamentary majority and the rule of five states.

Based upon this guarantee of Internet freedom, a great number of Malaysians have taken upon the Internet as an alternative site for political and cultural contestations. The prominence of the Internet that was utilised as a site for contesting hegemonic and state-led ideologies was however initially downplayed by the BN. Before the 12th General Elections, prominent political bloggers such as Raja Petra Kamaruddin, Anil Netto and Syed Azidi Syed Aziz who respectively own Malaysia Today, anilnetto.com and Kickdefella exploited the internet as an alternative approach of disseminating information, exchanging ideas, and discussing concerns on socio-political issues otherwise not highlighted by the mainstream media. The inroads made by the PR, which can partly be attributed to the rise of the Internet and prominence of an online dissenting communities then led to politicians from the BN being instructed to set up and maintain a blog that requires them to keep in touch with their constituents online. This alternative method of spreading information and ideas across time and space was further utilised by politicians from both sides of the political divide during the 13th General Election due to its immediacy and impact upon society, especially amongst urban Malaysians.

Politicking, campaigning, and lobbying were heavily done online with politicians bidding to acquire the highest number of followers on their official Facebook pages, videos of political rallies uploaded onto YouTube, and political discussions emerging on Twitter, blogs, and Facebook pages. To a certain extent, the popularity of the traditional media began to rapidly decrease as more Malaysians, especially those of urban backgrounds had better faith in reading and accepting what was posted on their friends' Facebook pages, Twitter accounts and on YouTube. While it is difficult to ascertain the validity and legitimacy of such news and its sources posted through the social media, many Malaysians preferred to rely on such sources for they believed that such forms of information were not only immediate and easily accessible, they also believed that such forms of information and its sources were not tampered with nor censored.

Since the traditional media or mainstream media are owned either directly or indirectly by the state, the declining rate of readership and viewership meant a significant reduction of methods to disseminate state propaganda. As the Internet continued to become the preferred site of contestation, the state then stepped in to introduce the regulation of the Internet. It began with the setting up of the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission and BN politicians continued to call for the Internet to be censored or for Facebook that is used by more than 13

million Malaysians to be banned entirely. Bloggers have also been arrested and charged under the Internal Security Act and Sedition Act as political activists, bloggers and concerned citizens plan, strategize, and organise methods of dissent against the state. This is because many incidences of street protests have been coordinated through Facebook or through websites such as Tukar Tiub, which disseminates information about gathering places, contact numbers of legal representatives should one be arrested by the police, what clothing to wear and even what needs to be done to reduce the effects of coming in contact with tear gas and chemical laced water shot by police cannons. Most recently, the impact of political dissent that seemed to make inroads into threatening the hegemony of BN can be best seen through Mahathir's statement that he deeply regretted guaranteeing freedom on the internet with no forms of censorship. This rise of issues related to democracy, democratic governance and civil society seems to be led by the increased awareness that many Malaysians no longer adhered to the appeal of communalism.

Communalism and Democracy in Malaysia

Since Malaysia, or Malaya as it was known during the nation's independence, ethnic-based political parties have been the main feature that determines the electoral politics. Malaysia remains to be one of the few remaining countries in the world that continues to be ruled by the same government since independence in 1957.

The BN or the Alliance Party as it was initially known is a coalition of other political parties with UMNO as the dominant member. As the coalition claims to be a multi-ethnic based party, with other member parties from the Chinese, Indian and ethnic communities from Sabah and Sarawak, many decisions and policies are formulated along ethnic lines. It was also the BN that has led Malaysia into achieving profound economic and political stability. While the nation has achieved relative political, cultural and economical developments, the sustained growth of democratic development remains "frozen" (Jesudason 1995, p. 336). Such forms of development can be seen as 'relative' because Malaysia's politics is relatively influenced by the economy of the nation. In short, the Malaysian economy and the structure of the society are very much dependent on the political system and the power of the state. This is because, according to Jomo (1990, p. ix) the "social and political developments in Malaysia, as in anywhere else, cannot be understood without any reference to underlying economic influences, but economic transformation has in turn been profoundly affected by social and political, even cultural changes". And since the economic development of the nation is shaped to reveal a direct relationship between economics and politics, the state-capitalist system in this country work alongside the mainstream and dominant political ideas of the ruling elite to determine the shape of the economic development.

The mobilisation of the state machinery in the country's economy was mainly to meet the demands and aspirations of the National Economic Policy which aimed at reducing the economic gap between the different ethnic groups. While its main target was to abolish the "identification of ethnicity with economic function" (Jomo 1990, p. 154), in practice the main objective of the state inadvertently became an exercise to restructure and increase the economic share of the *Bumiputeras* and Malays.² This economic restructuring programme became an effort to create and further enhance the Malay middle class and the Malay bourgeoisie's position by using the state machinery as the platform to assist, consolidate and monitor the growth of Malay capital. The NEP however, was criticised as the majority of the Malays receiving affirmative action are from the upper echelon of the community (Loh 2009, p. XV). Despite widespread poverty decreasing, relative poverty remained on the rise especially amongst the rural Malays.

The relative transformation in economical terms however did not prevail politically. Despite promises of political and democratic transformations by the state, state power had instead

increased over the years. The democracy practised in Malaysia is a "statist democracy" (Jesudason 1995, p. 337), in which the "rules of electoral competition are tolerated and are indeed useful as legitimising devices, but there is weak regime adherence to democratic norms as a matter of principle". The lines that separate the powers of the judiciary, legislative and executive which is the main attribute of any democratic system is also blurred in Malaysia. This is because "while procedurally adhering to constitutionalism, in actual practice the constitution has become an apparatus of rule rather than a constraint on power" (Jesudason 1995, p. 338). The idea of separation of power in Malaysia therefore exists as a myth as there is no clear demarcation in the separation of powers.

This increase in the powers of the executive became intensified during the rule of Mahathir Mohamad. During the 1980s, the Malaysian Constitution was amended so that the powers of the executive would be enhanced. Any bills tabled with a majority in Parliament can become a law after 60 days even if it does not receive the approval from the Yang di-Pertuan Agong (the King and the head of the State). Further practices and norms of Malaysian democracy also demonstrate that the judiciary has become more subjected to the other two estates. In theory, the appointment of judges is the prerogative of the Yang di-Pertuan Agong, but in practice he can only appoint judges upon the 'advice' from the Prime Minister. Several judges were also sacked with the most pertinent being the dismissal of Lord Justice Salleh Abbas in 1988 (Crouch 1992, p. 26). In practice, the legislative and executive is the same bloc while the judiciary is very much influenced by the executive. These trends demonstrate how authoritarian control has been intensifying as a legal political system in the country.

This form of authoritative control is also widespread within the media and communications industry. Regulations and laws that control the media such as the Sedition Act, Official Secrets Act and Communications and Multimedia Act have stifled the freedom of the media. This has thus rendered the Malaysian media into a toothless 'watchdog' unable to provide alternative views and information for the masses. The conglomeration of broadcast and print corporations such as TV3, ntv7, 8TV, *New Straits Times* and *Utusan Malaysia* under the company Media Prima further concentrates the media industry into the hands of the ruling bloc and its proxies through direct and indirect ownership of the ruling elite. As the media is essential in upholding its function within a democracy, it should be allowed to function independently without any government interference. While Mahathir Mohamad states that the democratic government has the right to control a press that abuses its right by agitating the people unnecessarily (1981, p. 19), this statement becomes a paradox as the media is already placed under the control and influence of the ruling elite. In short, the media in Malaysia is "free" but needs to be controlled, and so long as it does not challenge the ruling elite, the media can and does function in a purportedly democratic manner.

Bersih and the Rise of Civil Society

It is important to examine Bersih within the context of a civil society organisation. While civil society exists as an "essentially contested concept" and its "usage is subject to intense and endless debate" (Lee 2004, p. 1), Saravanamuttu (as cited in Lai 2004, p. 123) argues that there are two different perspectives to examine the roles played by civil society in Malaysia. The first is a liberal perspective that views civil society as an instrument to enhance and "deepen democracy and to check the power of the state" (Lai 2004, p. 123). The second perspective is state sanctioned civil society, advancing most of the time the idea of a "strong authoritarian state with capability to govern as well as maintain economic prosperity and law and order in society" (Lai 2004, p. 123). These are just perspectives which is problematic to a certain extent are. This is because in Malaysia, the struggle for human rights and civil liberties was carried out by civil organisations relatively independent from the state.

Discussions about civil society in this country ultimately lead to questions about democracy. This is because of the tendency of evaluating the democratic development of a country based on the amount of freedom provided to its civil society. Ramasamy (2004, p. 203-204) identifies two ways of understanding the relationship between democracy, the state and civil society. The first is questions as to "why democracy has not fully developed" and the other looks at the underdevelopment of civil society as a result of the underdeveloped nature of democracy and the political system itself. The relationship between these two is not arbitrary and is quite often structured according to the power relations in society. In this context, the state provides both spaces for civil society to develop while controlling the institutions of civil society.

Amongst the most notable forms of civil disobedience are the 1946 UMNO demonstrations protesting the Malayan Union; the 1947 Hartal-all Malaya of a large scale demonstration organised to pressure the British to grant independence to the country, the establishment of ABIM (Malaysian Muslim Youth League) in 1971 which focused on the areas of education and welfare; the Chinese Educationist Movement or *Dong Jiao Zong* as a pressure group focusing on issues of Chinese education; and the *Reformasi* movement of the late 1990s.

Such forms of civil disobedience had of course gone unnoticed by the ruling elite. The rapid development of authoritarian politics in Malaysia, in particular during the rule of Mahathir Mohamad had eroded the liberty of civil arena as a platform of contestation. In so doing, state-led apparatuses were employed as an effort of curbing activities of civil society organisations actively opposing the ruling elite. Such forms of oppression had however served as a catalyst for civil society groups to further develop and grow.

The 1987 "Operasi Lalang" became a turning point in which any discussion about the present context of the Malaysian media and civil society should be based upon. This incident affected media organisations when the licenses of *The Star* and *Watan* were revoked. A total of 106 individuals comprising politicians, activists and academics were arrested under the infamous (now repealed) Internal Security Act (ISA). At that point of time, the hegemony of the ruling elite was under threat as factions within UMNO and the BN became prevalent. This divide culminated in UMNO being declared illegal an organisation and a splinter group of UMNO, for the next couple of years, posted a challenge towards the hegemony of Mahathir's administration. After Operasi Lalang, Aliran, a social justice movement made its presence felt in the civil society arena as it focused on activities that advocated issues of social justice, political and democratic rights. During this time, Suaram (Voice of The Malaysian People) was formed in 1989 as a response towards Operasi Lalang. What began as support group for the ISA detainees and their families eventually evolved into a full-fledge civil society outfit. As a result of this crackdown on social activists, the civil sphere became a site of contestation and resistance between the ruling elite and civil organisations.

This sudden rise in counter-hegemonic politics was completely unprecedented. Even the 1998 *Reformasi* movement which also opened up a new site of contestation in the form of new media on the Internet provided a new space for democratic practices and freedom of expression and speech. This form of awareness gave rise to an array of activities centred on the new media that would not take place within the context of traditional media. Cyber activism and alternative news portal such as Malaysiakini, Malaysian Insider and The Nutgraph provided alternative information to the masses. It was also within cyberspace that Bersih managed to spread out and expand its influences that helped disseminate information and news related to its activities.

Bersih exists as a coalition of civil society organisations and is not a formally shaped organisation. As it exists as a social movement not aligned to any political party, the crux of the coalition is to democratically enhance the voting system that has been accused of being partisan,

gerrymandering and vote rigging. It is therefore important to confuse Bersih as an organisation and its collective action in pursuing the above mentioned objectives. Social movements according to Tilly (2004, p. 6–7) are not owned by anybody as it embeds the essence of history. Tilly also states that the term has evolved, at least within the Western context as it covers various aspects of public politics that began in the eighteenth century and gained recognition throughout Western Europe and North America by the nineteenth century. Tilly (2004, p. 3) then states that a social movement has three major elements: campaign; the social movement repertoire; and displays or worthiness, numbers and commitment (WUNC). Because Bersih displays all these three elements, it would be categorised as social movement.

In Malaysia, businesses and societies are required to register either with the Registrar of Companies or the Registrar of Society. Bersih however, which began as the Joint Action Committee for Electoral Reform in 2005 did not comply with this ruling. Since 2007, Bersih has been campaigning by making “collective claims on target authorities” or the ruling elite through continued efforts of rallies organised. Secondly, Bersih practices “the social movement repertoire” as it has employed various forms of political actions through meetings, press releases, and street rallies. Bersih’s choice of using the colour yellow to symbolically represent its movement is often displayed through its badges and is the colour worn by its demonstrators. This reflects a display of commitment from its coordinators and members as a display of worthiness, numbers and commitment (WUNC).

In short, while human rights are being selectively guarded and adhered to religiously, there exist limitations when it comes to civil liberties, freedom of speech and freedom to information, freedom to assembly, free press and a clear separation of powers. This variance can be analysed through the difference in reporting of Bersih within the mainstream and alternative media.

Mainstream Media and Portrayal of Bersih

The development of democracy in Malaysia continues to be hampered by the lack of media freedom. As the mainstream media is either linked or controlled by the ruling elite, the media becomes an ideological apparatus used to enhance its hegemonic position. This is carried out through the reproduction and legitimisation of the existing social order and to maintain status quo. Because of the nature of media systems, social movements that question existing structures in advocating democratic rights and civil liberties find themselves at odds with the ruling elite. In this context, the development of new media is said to give some much needed space for marginalised groups to provide alternative opinions.

This paper examines how Bersih is represented in three major dailies: *Utusan Malaysia* (UM), *Berita Harian* (BH) and *New Straits Times* (NST) and in Malaysiakini. Founded in 1967, *Utusan Malaysia* is a Malay-language daily which began as a platform to nurture anti-colonial sentiments while inculcating nationalism amongst its readers. It played an instrumental role in developing Malay intellectuals of that era and continued to be instrumental to Malaysian society until it was taken over by UMNO in 1961. It has become the mouth piece of UMNO since. *Berita Harian* and *New Straits Times* are two national newspapers placed under the control of UMNO’s proxy conglomerate company, Media Prima. Both *Utusan Malaysia* and *Berita Harian* are Malay-language dailies while NST is an English newspaper with a different target audience.

The news reporting samples for this study cover a period leading up to the Bersih 3.0 rally and after the rally was concluded. Within a period of less than two months (the first report was published on 20 April 2012 and the last on 10 May 2012), there are 74 pieces of news items. Within the same period, NST published the highest number of news reports (36); UM published 28 news reports in April alone; and BH published 10 news reports. From these figures, only one (published by UM) reported about the Bersih movement and it quoted the Bersih chairperson as the source of the news reports.

Enemy within: Bersih, Communism and Destabilising the Nation

The narrative of these reporting focused negatively on Bersih negatively. Firstly, as an opposition ploy to win governmental power using illegal means. These reports drew its sources from government leaders and civil servants who provided official views and narratives about the impending rally and the aftermath. Bersih, being a legitimate social movement fighting for democratic rights and civil liberties became silenced and was portrayed as the enemy of the state. Such forms of fear tactics were used to frighten the Malay Muslims voters through the employment of religion. Certain Muslim clerics quoted were of the opinion that supporting Bersih is forbidden as doing so is tantamount to sinning.

Secondly, accusations of Bersih having Communist struggles. The Communist insurgency that officially occurred from 1948-1960 was also known as the Malayan Emergency. During this time, the Malayan Communist Party attempted to overthrow the British colonialists and subsequent government of the Alliance Party through an armed struggle. This accusation of Bersih and the communists was done by Mahathir Mohamad. In an effort to legitimise his claim, these newspapers published supporting articles and reports with two former Inspector General of Police providing statements that Bersih being usurped by communist elements. They also stated that Bersih activities should be stopped as the objectives of such struggles aims at toppling the legitimately elected government.

Third, the destabilisation of the national economy by the Bersih rally. During the aftermath of the rally, the majority of the mainstream newspapers focused onto the impact of the rally on the economy of the country. The newspapers in this study similarly shifted their focus onto this economic issue which blamed the protesters and Bersih leaders Bersih of damaging the economic stability of the country. A number of police reports were also made by individuals who claimed that their businesses and properties were badly affected by the rally. As a result, these accusations were used by the ruling elite who stated that the responsibility needs to be placed upon the Bersih steering committee.

Fourth, allegations of foreign infiltration and violence. Allegations and accusations that Bersih has been infiltrated by foreign agents attempting to take control of the country unlawful means. Besides that, on 29 April and the following weeks, news report within these newspapers discussed about acts of provocation and violence carried out by the protesters. The police however, were condoned as carrying out acts of bravery out to protect the nation and democracy that was under siege by Bersih. All these despite reports of abuse of power and police brutality, usage of tear gas, chemical laced water, and the mass arrests of protesters and opposition leaders. All newspapers had on their front pages; images depicting acts of violence that ensued after the barrier blocking the path to the Merdeka Square had been breached.

All three newspapers, UM, BH and NST negatively portrayed Bersih while blaming the violence that ensued on the protestors as images of policemen being beaten were printed. On the other hand, none of these reports mentioned about police brutalities. As such, the police were depicted as the victims while the demonstrators as the ones responsible for the chaos. The newspapers also chose to ignore the facts that the rally began as a peaceful and carnival like event and that the protesters were in the process of dispersing when the barrier was breached. During the aftermath of this rally, protesters continued to be arrested around the country.

New Media, New Democracy

Given the nature of the media industry in Malaysia, counter hegemonic activities and dissenting voices have very limited to occur. The manufacturing of consent by the ruling elite through the mainstream media is difficult to check because its tight rein on the media will not allow space for

voices of criticism and dissent to occur. The popularity and advent of the Internet, coupled with the guarantee that it would not be regulated and controlled has allowed for social movements to operate on a larger scale.

The Internet has opened up spaces and opportunities for social movements such as Bersih to reach a larger range of audiences in providing 'counter' narratives, discourses and information regarding issues of democratic rights in Malaysia. Indeed, this phenomenon has been occurring since the 1998 Asian economic crisis and the political turmoil that came as the aftermath of this crisis. The intensified development and popularity of the Internet in Malaysia has seen many oppositional social forces using the Internet as a new platform of contestation. Bersih for example, has been actively using the new media, blogs and news portal to distribute news, ideas and perspectives on various issues confronting Malaysian society and has thus interrupted the dominance of the traditional media. Apart from the space given by news portals such as Malaysiakini and Malaysian Insider, Bersih also relied heavily on blogs, micro blogging and social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter.

Malaysiakini in particular, has become an alternative news portal instrumental in providing information and balanced reporting. This online news portal has carried out reports about the different Bersih rallies that demanded for fair and clean elections in Malaysia. Malaysiakini, which can be seen as the catalyst to the increased of criticism and venting of dissenting voices towards the ruling elite has however, been accused by the ruling elite and those aligned to it as carrying out biased reporting, failing to be objective and threatening national security. The latest in the series of its rallies, the Bersih 3.0 sit down rally carried out in 2012 as a follow up to the rallies in 2007 and 2011. Carried out before the 13th General Election, Bersih 3.0 was also conducted in other Malaysian cities such as Penang, Kuching and Melaka and carried out simultaneously in 85 cities in 35 countries around the world through Global Bersih. As a matter of fact the rallies in Kuala Lumpur and Penang had a festive like atmosphere as children, the disabled, senior citizens and everyday Malaysians joined in the rally. Despite the occasional tension due to the presence of the police, those who attended behaved accordingly and for about three hours the participants marched while chanting and listening to the speeches made by the leaders of the movement. Nothing happened and the police were there to monitor the event. The rally in Kuala Lumpur however, despite beginning in a peaceful manner ended up with a mass arrest of demonstrators.

A total of 512 protestors were arrested as trespassers made their way into the Dataran Merdeka (Merdeka Square) which was an area prohibited for the rally. In order to disburse the protestors, water cannons and tear gas were used while reports of police brutalities and a police vehicle being overturned were made. The fact remains that the negative portrayals of Bersih by the mainstream media did very little to dampen the spirit of the people. This is due to the availability of information dispersed by news portal such as Malaysiakini and pro-Bersih and opposition blogs and micro blogging sites.

Malaysiakini has been reporting and updating its coverage of the Bersih 3.0 rally since its announcement. Throughout the months of April until September 2012, Malaysiakini has published a total of 87 reports and articles about Bersih 3.0 and its related events. As Malaysiakini attempts to be objective, multiple sources from both sides of the political divide were quoted in its reporting. The interesting element in Malaysiakini's reporting is its ability to include the opinions of its reader in the news piece. This so-called people's participation in creating public opinion comes in the form of comments where by paying subscribers are allowed to express their opinions about the subject being discussed in the news report or the article. In addition, the Malay news version of Malaysiakini allows its readers free access and to comment using their personal Facebook accounts.

Malaysiakini also has the advantage of immediacy in comparison to the traditional mainstream media in Malaysia. Quite often, Malaysiakini provides an up-to-date live coverage in its reports of major events and provides updated news and information as compared to traditional print media that is confined by deadlines and print time. Although certain press organisations from the mainstream media have similarly co-opted the same strategy of providing live updates through their news portals, the majority of the live news reports would ultimately become the same material to be published later in print.

Conclusion

While the true long term effects of the new media on Malaysian public and politics is yet to be known, the emergence of the Internet as a site of contestation must not yet be a cause of celebration as this does not necessarily mean that freedom of speech and expression is well and alive in Malaysia. The emergence of independent online news portals such as Malaysiakini and Free Malaysia Today, political blogs such as Malaysia Today and the usage of social media sites such as Facebook to share alternative information and news however do mark the beginning of a larger movement that is taking space within cyberspace and as such, represents an unseen and anonymous threat that is rupturing the hegemony of the ruling coalition.

This paper has discussed how the new media and the Internet have altered the relationship between the state, media and democratic aspirations within the Malaysian society. In analysing how the mainstream media aligned to the ruling elite and Malaysiakini have differently portrayed the civil society organisations and Bersih in particular, it is apparent that media freedom and of speech is still wanting. It is therefore important that the understanding of basic human and democratic rights and the function of social movements as discussed in this paper remain important structures that need to be further examined. This is because understanding these factors would allow a more critical understanding about the very essence of democracy, decline of rule of law and consolidation of authoritarianism in Malaysia.

Funding: Authors wish to acknowledge that the research was funded by the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) Grant.

Notes

ⁱ The United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) is the dominant Malay-Muslim political party in the 14-party Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition. Founded by Onn Jaafar in 1948 to oppose the formation of Malayan Union, UMNO cooperated with the Malayan Chinese Association (MCA), and later the Malayan Indian Congress (MIC) to form the Alliance to contest in the first General Election on July 27, 1955. After the May 13, 1969 race riots, the Alliance concept of cooperation between various and multiple parties was reinstitutionalised as Barisan Nasional (BN) on July 1, 1974 (Brown 1996).

ⁱⁱ The term *Bumiputera* can be literally translated as 'sons of the soil'. Originating from a Sanskrit word, the categorisation of the term *Bumiputeras* include the Malay majority and the indigenous communities of Sabah and Sarawak.

References

- Appadurai, A. 1996. *Modernity at large. Cultural dimensions of globalization*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Bhabha, H. K. 2004. *The location of culture*. London, New York: Routledge
- Crouch, H. (1992). Authoritarian trends, the Umno split and the limits to state power. In F. K.W. Loh & J.S. Kahn (Eds.), *Fragmented Vision: Culture and politics in contemporary Malaysia* (pp. 21-43). Sydney: Allen and Unwin.
- Ibrahim, A., and C. C. Goh. 1998. *Multimedia Super Corridor*. Kuala Lumpur: Leeds.
- Jesudason, J.V. (1995). Statist democracy and the limits to civil society in Malaysia. *Journal of Commonwealth & Comparative Politics*. 33(3), 333-356. DOI: 10.1080/14662049508447708

- Johan, S. 2001. Malaysian civil society–Awakenings? In M. Maznah and S. K. Wong (Eds.), *Risking Malaysia. Culture, politics and identity* (pp. 93-112). Bangi: Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia Press
- Khoo, B. T. 2003. *Beyond Mahathir. Malaysian politics and its discontents*. London: Zed.
- Lai, S.Y. (2004). Participation of the women's movement in Malaysia: The 1999 General Election, In H.G. Lee (Ed.). *Civil society in Southeast Asia* (pp. 122-143). Singapore: ISEAS.
- Lee, H. G. (Ed.) (2004). *Civil Society in Southeast Asia*. Singapore: ISEAS.
- Lee, H. G. 2005. Affirmative action in Malaysia. In D. Singh and T. K. Liak (Eds.), *Southeast Asian affairs* (pp. 211-228). Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies.
- Loh, K.W. F (2009). *Old vs New Politics in Malaysia. State and Society in Transition*, Petaling Jaya: Aliran and SIRD.
- Mahathir, M. (1981, July 9) *Freedom of the Press - Fact and Fallacy*. *New Straits Times*. pp. 14 – 17.
- Naughton, J. 2001. Contested space. The internet and global civil society. In H. K. Anheier, M. Glasius and M. Kaldor (Eds.), *Global civil society* (pp. 147-168), New York: Oxford University Press.
- Ramasamy, P. (2004). Civil society in Malaysia: an area of contestations? In H.G. Lee (Ed.). *Civil Society in Southeast Asia* (pp. 198-216). Singapore: ISEAS.
- Rodan, G. (2004). *Transparency and Authoritarian Rule in Southeast Asia: Singapore and Malaysia*, New York: Taylor & Francis.
- Saravanamuttu, J. & Loh, K.W.F. (2004). Development and democracy in Southeast Asia. In R.E. Ahmad (Ed.). *Globalisation, culture and inequalities* (in honour of the late Ishak Shari) (pp. 352-375). Bangi: Penerbit UKM.
- Tan, J-E. & Zawawi I. (2008). *Blogging and democratization in Malaysia: A new civil society in the making*. Petaling Jaya: SIRD.
- Tan, L. O. 2010. The emergence of a virtual civil society. In K. W. Loh (Ed.), *Building bridges, crossing boundaries: everyday forms of inter-ethnic peace building in Malaysia* (pp. 273-296). Jakarta: The Ford Foundation.
- Tilly, C. (2004). *Social movements, 1768–2004*. Colorado, USA: Paradigm Publishers, Boulder.

Dr Lee Yuen Beng is a senior lecturer at the School of Communication, Universiti Sains Malaysia. His research interests are in Yasmin Ahmad films, horror cinema, and the cinema and media of Malaysia.

Dr Mahyuddin Ahmad is a senior lecturer at the School of Communication, Universiti Sains Malaysia. His research interests are in P. Ramlee films, and the cinema and media of Malaysia.