

A STUDY OF THE IMPACT OF THE INTERNET,  
MALAYSIAKINI.COM AND DEMOCRATISING FORCES ON THE  
MALAYSIAN GENERAL ELECTION 2008

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>TITLE PAGE</b> .....	<b>i</b>
<b>TABLE OF CONTENTS</b> .....	<b>ii</b>
<b>THESIS ABSTRACT</b> .....	<b>iv</b>
<b>COPYRIGHT DECLARATION</b> .....	<b>v</b>
<b>ACKNOWLEDGEMENT</b> .....	<b>vi</b>
<b>LIST OF FIGURES</b> .....	<b>vii</b>
<b>LIST OF TABLES</b> .....	<b>ix</b>
<b>LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS</b> .....	<b>x</b>
<b>PREFACE</b> .....	<b>xi</b>
<b>CHAPTER ONE</b> .....	<b>1</b>
<b>Malaysia’s 2008 General Election: Improving Political Participation</b> .....	<b>1</b>
1.0 Introduction .....	1
1.1 The GE2008 Context .....	1
1.2 Malaysiakini.com.....	7
1.3 Research Aims .....	13
1.4 Research Questions .....	14
1.5 Proposed Theoretical Frameworks .....	14
1.6 Methodology .....	15
1.6.1 Preliminary desktop research.....	16
1.6.2 Textual Analysis .....	17
1.6.3 In-depth Interviews .....	18
1.7 Significance of the Study .....	20
1.8 Keywords .....	23
1.9 Structure of the Thesis .....	24
1.10 Summary .....	25
<b>CHAPTER TWO</b> .....	<b>26</b>
<b>Background to Malaysia’s Internet Infrastructure, Regulatory Environment and the Potential for the Online Democratisation of News</b> .....	<b>26</b>
2.0 Introduction.....	26
2.1 Part One: Rapid Development of the Internet for Economic Reasons .....	26
2.2 Drawing Links Between Internet Penetration and Malaysiakini.com’s Growth .....	32
2.2.1 Status of Internet Regulation in 2008 .....	34
2.2.2 Freedom of Speech and the Press .....	35
2.2.3 <i>Malaysiakini.com</i> and Mainstream Media.....	36
2.3 Part Two: Consolidating a Means for Challenging Government: Political Crisis 1998 Onwards .....	39
2.3.1 <i>Malaysiakini.com</i> and the <i>Reformasi</i> Connection .....	41
2.3.2 Limitations on Content .....	42
2.4 Summary .....	46
<b>CHAPTER THREE</b> .....	<b>47</b>
<b>A Framework for Examining Changes in Malaysian Democracy</b> .....	<b>47</b>
3.0 Introduction.....	47
3.1 Defining Democracies .....	48
3.1.1 Malaysian Democracy Under BN Stewardship.....	51
3.1.2 Deliberative Model of Democracy .....	57
3.2 Observable Changes in the Existing Media Landscape and BN Government’s Power .....	61
3.2.1 The Impact on the Media Landscape.....	61
3.3 Summary .....	73

<b>CHAPTER FOUR</b> .....	<b>74</b>
<b>Emerging Signs of Deliberative Democracy and Internet Elections</b> .....	<b>74</b>
4.0 Introduction.....	74
4.1 The Internet’s Potential as a Democratisation Tool.....	74
4.2 The Question of ‘Internet Elections’ .....	77
4.3 Examples of Internet Elections in Other Countries .....	79
4.3.1 United Kingdom (UK) and the 2010 General Election .....	79
4.3.2 United States (US) 2008 Presidential Election .....	82
4.3.3 Singapore: The 2006 Election.....	85
4.4 Malaysia’s GE2008.....	88
4.5 Summary .....	101
<b>CHAPTER FIVE</b> .....	<b>102</b>
<b>Changes in the Existing Media Landscape and Government’s Power</b> .....	<b>102</b>
5.0 Introduction.....	102
5.1 Malaysiakini.com Shifting the Media Landscape.....	102
5.2 Moving Towards the Change of Government .....	111
5.2.1 <i>Malaysiakini.com</i> as Political Mobilisation and Resistance Tool .....	114
5.2.2 <i>Malaysiakini.com</i> ’s Formative Techniques .....	117
5.2.3 Locating the Participation Group – Third Force: Malaysiakini.com’s Networking with NGOs and Civil Society Movements, Youth (including university students) and the Middle Class .....	125
5.3 Contention Between the Government and Malaysiakini.com .....	129
5.3.1 Internal Political Unrest Caused by Freer Reportage .....	129
5.3.2 Reluctant Acceptance of INP Credibility .....	133
5.7 Summary .....	134
<b>CHAPTER 6</b> .....	<b>135</b>
<b>GE2008 in the Election Coverage and from the Perspectives of Media Practitioners</b> ...	<b>135</b>
6.0 Introduction.....	135
6.1 Malaysiakini.com versus Utusanmalaysia.com GE2008 reporting .....	135
6.2 Issues that led to public deliberation.....	138
6.3 Responses from the Category A Respondents (Media Practitioners ).....	157
6.4 Summary .....	182
<b>CHAPTER 7</b> .....	<b>184</b>
<b>GE2008 From the Perspective of Election Observers</b> .....	<b>184</b>
7.0 Introduction.....	184
7.1 Election Observers’ Interviews.....	184
7.2 Summary .....	214
<b>CHAPTER 8</b> .....	<b>215</b>
<b>Conclusion</b> .....	<b>215</b>
8.0 Introduction.....	215
8.1 Major Findings.....	217
8.2 Limitation of thesis scope .....	227
8.3 Future Research .....	228
<b>BIBLIOGRAPHY</b> .....	<b>232</b>
<b>APPENDICES</b> .....	<b>255</b>

## ABSTRACT

This thesis argues that the role played by the independent news portal (INP), *Malaysiakini.com* has expanded since 2007 in Malaysia's political culture, enriching the country's traditional public sphere with new democratic features. It has helped to speed up democratic action by enabling oppositional viewpoints, and has shifted the traditional media landscape towards greater diversity, and the possibility of changing the government in power.

The thesis uses Malaysia's 2008 General Election (GE2008) as the case study to illustrate the power of *Malaysiakini.com*, particularly at election times. Malaysia's GE2008 almost caused the defeat of the *Barisan Nasional* (BN), which had been in power for fifty one years. With a less than two-thirds majority in the Federal Parliament, it lost five out of the thirteen states to the Opposition, *Pakatan Rakyat* (PR).

It will be shown that the Internet's impact in Malaysia is partly caused by the raised expectations of the 'Internet Election' era, where electoral conduct in some countries during the period of 2004-2010 was impacted by greater Internet access. As the national elections in the US (2004, 2008), UK (2010), and Singapore (2006) were called 'Internet Elections', Malaysian commentators used the same term about GE2008. This claim is discussed in this thesis through comparison.

The thesis also argues that the popular success of *Malaysiakini.com* led mainstream media journalists to rethink news-gathering practices and that the competitive nature of, for example, *Malaysiakini.com*'s use of trained citizen journalists and networking with NGOs that was used to help produce the news. The thesis uses the concept of informationalism to discuss the emerging forms of news production, which transformed people from being simply INP consumers to becoming active information distributors.

Further, the thesis argues that *Malaysiakini.com* enabled greater political participation and focussed opposition to government; and that *Malaysiakini.com*'s roles as a site of resistance, and its pastoral power have helped to increase Malaysians' political engagement through active online participation and political activities.

The thesis methods are qualitative: It uses textual analysis of *Malaysiakini.com*'s news and a selected mainstream media online news website, *Utusanmalaysia.com*, to provide evidence of the INP's influence. In-depth interviews with media practitioners and other observers of the 2008 election period (scholars, NGO representatives and policy makers), identify a range of key perspectives on Internet regulation, major differences in news reporting, the key issues of public concern, and judgements on the INP.

The thesis concludes that *Malaysiakini.com* played a significant role in generating democratic elements in Malaysia during GE2008. Post-election, mainstream media news reporting changed to reflect the INP's; challenges the ruling government were generated by a new network, the Third Force (consisting of middle class, Opposition parties, youth and university students, NGOs and civil society movement); and the government became more aware of issues to do with 'the rise of the people'.

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Selected data from the thesis has been discussed in conference papers (at ANZCA, Adelaide, 2012 'Independent News Portals Vs. Mainstream Media: Experiences and Practicalities in Electoral Reporting' and ANZCA, Perth, 2013 'Malaysia's Online Democracy in Action-The case of *Malaysiakini.com*'; and at MediaAsia, Osaka Japan, 2012) and as part of the co-authored journal article: 'Looking Back at Malaysia's GE2008: An Internet Election and Its Democratic Aftermath' which is in Appendices.

SARASWATHY CHINNASAMY

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## LIST OF FIGURES

FIGURE 1: BERSIH 1.0 RALLY ON 10 NOVEMBER 2007.....	3
FIGURE 2: HINDRAF RALLY ON 25 NOVEMBER 2007.....	3
FIGURE 3: INDEPENDENT NEWS PORTAL, <i>MALAYSIAKINI.COM</i> .....	8
FIGURE 4: EXAMPLE OF <i>MALAYSIAKINI.COM</i> 'S HEADLINE ON 8 MARCH 2008.....	12
FIGURE 5: MULTIMEDIA SUPER CORRIDOR (MSC MALAYSIA).....	29
FIGURE 6: THE GROWTH OF MSC MALAYSIA STATUS COMPANIES.....	30
FIGURE 7: MSC MALAYSIA STATUS COMPANIES' CONTRIBUTION TO THE MALAYSIAN ECONOMY.....	31
FIGURE 8: MALAYSIA'S INTERNET USERS GROWTH BY 31 DECEMBER 2008.....	33
FIGURE 9: <i>MALAYSIAKINI.COM</i> COMPARISON OF READERSHIP WITH MAINSTREAM MEDIA NEWS WEBSITES IN 2008.....	37
FIGURE 10: <i>MALAYSIAKINI.COM</i> 'S TRAFFIC HISTORY.....	37
FIGURE 11: THE MEDIA LANDSCAPE IN MALAYSIA'S GE2008.....	64
FIGURE 12: THE FEDERAL CONSTITUTION OF MALAYSIA.....	67
FIGURE 13: EXAMPLES OF 'OPINIONS' SECTION IN <i>MALAYSIAKINI.COM</i> .....	71
FIGURE 14: AN EXAMPLE OF BLOG POSTING <i>MALAYSIAKINI.COM</i> 'S NEWS.....	93
FIGURE 15: LIVE REPORTS ON BERSIH NEWS.....	94
FIGURE 16: THE BN GE2008 SLOGAN.....	98
FIGURE 17: <i>MALAYSIAKINI.COM</i> REPORT CARD NEWS.....	105
FIGURE 18: COMPARING <i>MALAYSIAKINI.COM</i> AND <i>UTUSANMALAYSIA.COM</i> NEWS ON HINDRAF CASE .....	107
FIGURE 19: <i>MALAYSIAKINI.COM</i> 'S VIDEO – KINI.TV .....	118
FIGURE 20: KINI.TV UPLOADED IN YOUTUBE.....	119
FIGURE 21: <i>MALAYSIAKINI.COM</i> 'S CITIZEN JOURNALISTS (CJ.MY) VIDEOS.....	119

FIGURE 22: EXAMPLE OF <i>MALAYSIAKINI.COM</i> 'S LETTER.....	122
FIGURE 23: EXAMPLE OF VOX POPULI.....	123
FIGURE 24: <i>MALAYSIAKINI.COM</i> QUESTIONING POLITICAL EVENTS.....	124
FIGURE 25: <i>MALAYSIAKINI.COM</i> 'S HITS TREND CONTINUES TO GE2013.....	229
FIGURE 26: 'MEDIAFAST BEFORE GE2013' .....	230



## LIST OF TABLES

TABLE 1: NUMBER OF PARLIAMENTARY SEATS WON BY THE <i>BARISAN NASIONAL (BN)</i> AND THE OPPOSITION (1959-2008).....	5
TABLE 2: MALAYSIA'S INTERNET USAGE AND POPULATION GROWTH BY 31 <sup>ST</sup> DECEMBER 2010.....	33
TABLE 3: SELECTED TV DEBATES IN THE UK BEFORE THE 2010 GENERAL ELECTION.....	80
TABLE 4: OPPOSITION PARTY WEBSITES IN SINGAPORE.....	86
TABLE 5: MEDIA OWNERSHIP IN 2008.....	95
TABLE 6: MALAYSIA'S PRESS FREEDOM INDICATED BY THE INTERNATIONAL MEDIA WATCHERS.....	104
TABLE 7: <i>MALAYSIAKINI.COM</i> 'S STYLE OF GENERATING POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN MALAYSIA.....	125
TABLE 8: GE2013 AND GE2008 POPULAR VOTES.....	126

## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

The following table describes the abbreviations used throughout the thesis.

<b>Abbreviation</b>	
INP	Independent News Portal
BN	Barisan Nasional Party
UMNO	United Malays National Organisation
MIC	Malaysian Indian Congress
MCA	Malaysian Chinese Association
PR	Pakatan Rakyat/People's Alliance Party
DAP	Democratic Action Party
PAS	Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party
PKR	People's Justice Party
GE2013	General Election 2013
GE2008	General Election 2008
GE2004	General Election 2004
GE1999	General Election 1999
PPPA	Printing Presses and Publications Act 1984
ISA	Internal Security Act 1972
OSA	Official Secret Act
CMA 1998	Communication Multimedia Act 1998
MCMC	Malaysian Communication Multimedia Commission
PM	Prime Minister
DPM	Deputy Prime Minister
MDeC	Multimedia Development Corporation

## PREFACE

Having been a broadcast political journalist from 1999 to 2005 in a public broadcast network in Kuala Lumpur, I have been exposed to the challenges of news reporting, be it parliamentary reporting or government news coverage. Practising a journalistic career in Malaysia is often constrained by the censorship policies of the Ministry of Information. The accepted practice for many years has been that news has to be in favour of, or promote, the government's welfare. It was rare that news content served the 'watchdog' aspect of journalism familiar to free press democracies, or focussed on all the problems that ordinary people experience.

I left broadcast journalism in 2005 and became a journalism academic teaching subjects such as 'Issues in Modern Malaysia'. My professional interest in the local political events encouraged me to observe the country's political challenges. I discussed examples of contemporary cases of corruption in lectures.

From 2006 onwards I noted a wide range of commentaries criticising the government on blogs. The government ordered a clampdown on websites posting these commentaries. During this period large rallies and protests (Bersih and Hindraf) occurred in the country, gaining world attention. Online, political disclosures occurred through the INP, *Malaysiakini.com*. Various forms of government anomalies were exposed, such as abuses of power, corruption cases, sex scandals, cronyism, misconduct in the judicial system, and mishandling of religious matters – issues neglected by mainstream media, operating under government influence and tight legal restrictions. Continued disruptions also affected the economy and the cost of living in urban areas increased. Oil prices rose along with unemployment (Asli 2008). As a result of disappointment with the BN government, and frustrations about bread-butter issues, rallies and protests sparked a more varied public agenda.

One of the biggest public rally movements was the Coalition for Clean and Fair Elections (Bersih 1.0), which held its first public protest on November 10, 2007. It was conceived of as a movement for electoral reform and the fair conduct of elections. The government mishandling of this rally, with water cannon and tear gas, was condemned by many Malaysians and the international media.

A similar treatment was later given to another large-scale rally movement, the Hindu Rights Action Force (Hindraf), organised by the Malaysian-Indian ethnic community to pressure for equal rights and opportunities for the minority groups. The rally took place on November 25, 2007, in order to submit a petition to the British High Commission against the ruling government.

Two months later, Malaysia's federal Parliament was dissolved on the 13 February 2008, in accordance with the country's rules on national elections. Thus a campaigning period was declared on the 24 February 2008 and the 8th of March 2008 was set as the 12<sup>th</sup> Malaysia GE2008.

The ruling government experienced an unexpected upset by losing five out of thirteen states to the Opposition, and almost losing its two thirds majority in the Parliament. The GE2008 result was a watershed moment for the country, with increased support for the Opposition parties (DAP, PKR and PAS). A resurgence of PR (Pakatan Rakyat/People's Alliance Party) followed, and Anwar Ibrahim's popularity grew. Civil society and NGOs movements also

grew. These were mostly young and middle class people vocal and active in presenting the people's problems, and networking strongly with *Malaysiakini.com*. Throughout this election, *Malaysiakini.com* gained greatly in popularity when compared to the mainstream media.

After I left Malaysia in 2009 for further study, I read about rallies and protests in Malaysia, from Bersih 1.0 to Bersih 2.0 in 2011, and Bersih 3.0 in 2012. These represented a shock wave of changes illustrating how people's determination to express their political opinions towards the government was gaining momentum. Reports of these events sustained my view that accounting for how the INP, *Malaysiakini.com* had played a part in igniting social and political mobilization in Malaysia was an important task to undertake. The GE2013 result confirms that political events are continuing to demonstrate that what began in GE2008 is still developing.