

POLITICAL BLOGGING AND THE PUBLIC SPHERE IN MALAYSIA

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Abstract. In recent years, Malaysian politicians have increasingly turned to the Internet as a method of communication. Several Malaysian politicians are using blogging as a political tool to garner support from the electorate. Focusing on the Prime Minister's blog, '1Malaysia', as a case study, this paper examines political blogging and the role it plays in the public sphere in Malaysia and of deliberative democracy.

Introduction

As several commentators have noted, the Internet played a significant role in the 2008 General Election. For example Rashid (2009) noted that the Internet was used effectively by the opposition parties in the last election as they highlighted the weaknesses and campaigns thus contributed to the factors denied the National Coalition (Barisan Nasional [BN]) two thirds majority in parliament. Since then, it appears that most Malaysian politicians have discovered the Internet's potential to inform and communicate with the public and have begun to make use of it in diverse forms, such as through the construction of personal blogs as well as Facebook. According to Coleman and Wright (2008), blogging is a new form of communication that can revive the relationship between politicians and citizens, making it more informal, more transparent, and more interactive. Through blogging, politicians are able to broadcast a great deal more information about political news, policy interests, voting records and contact details. More importantly, they engage innovatively through direct interaction with voters in order to create a new style of personalised, accessible and ongoing relationship. Moreover, citizens are able to access relevant information which is a central characteristic of a functioning public sphere and, therefore, of deliberative democracy (Coleman and Wright, 2008).

In Malaysia, an alliance was formed in 1952 between the United Malay National Organization (UMNO) and the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) and including

Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC) in 1954, depended on a coalition of ethnically based parties, as did the *Barisan Nasional* ([BN] National Front), its successor, which was established in 1974 and govern Malaysia since then. During this period of continued control, the BN has amended the constitution and increasingly concentrated power in the executive branch and in the office of the Prime Minister in particular. The BN has faced criticism for restricting rights to political freedom and controlling political dissent. Observers have described Malaysia as a soft authoritarian, pseudo democracy, with a synthetic democracy and leading by electoral authoritarianism (Crouch, 1993; Case, 1993; Jesudason, 1995; Schedler, 2002).

Despite the lack of political freedom, the government appears to enjoy widespread support among Malaysian citizens, evidenced in their continuous election victories. Since the 1970s, the BN has won every election at the federal level. The BN won at least 83% of the seats in the national parliament in the elections in 1974, 1978, 1982 and 1986 (Ufen, 2009), while in 1990, 1995 and 1999, the BN maintained a two-thirds majority in Parliament. In 2004, the BN under Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi won almost 95% seats in Parliament. However, in 2008, the BN was unable to maintain its two-thirds majority of seats in Parliament, which was the worst election outcome in Malaysian history for the ruling BN.

Abdullah Badawai was replaced by Najib Razak who has shown himself to be much credible than his predecessor. His “1Malaysia” concept and promises of real economic reforms under his New Economic Model (NEM) and Economic Transformation Plan (ETP) seems to have restored confidence of the people in his government and has garnered popular support for the BN (Chin, 2010). Besides his slogan “People First, Performance Now”, Najib also urged the people to join him to revitalise the country through the concept of 1Malaysia (Azizuddin, 2009). Most importantly, Najib takes a different approach than previous Prime Ministers by using ICT to be close to people. On the official 1Malaysia website, he wrote “1Malaysia is intended to provide a free and open forum to discuss the things that matter deeply to us as a Nation”¹. For example, in a blog posting dated August 23, 2010, Najib asked people to contribute their ideas to the 2011 Budget and promised to incorporate their views in the budget. In fact, this situation is rarely practised in Malaysia as previously the Malaysian government normally exercised state development through a ‘top-down’ approach that excluded the views of the people (Azizuddin, 2009).

This paper examines political blogging and its impact on the public sphere in Malaysia through a case study of Najib’s blog. The focus is on an assessment of the nature of Najib’s blog, by asking questions such as: How does Najib blog? Is Najib’s blog a tool for deliberative democracy and therefore contributing to the public sphere in Malaysia? The time frame of study is from 19 September 2008 when the blog was started to 30 October 2010.

¹ <http://www.1Malaysia.com.my> – retrieved 16 June 2010

Najib Razak's Blog

Najib Razak, Malaysia's Prime Minister, is unique in the Malaysian parliamentary blogosphere in a number of ways. Najib began blogging on 19 September 2008 when he was the Deputy Prime Minister then. His blog is part of the 1Malaysia website which is clearly identified as "The Personal Website of Dato' Sri Najib Razak"². 1Malaysia.com is particularly noteworthy, as it serves as a central communication platform and provides links to the profiles of all other portals. The website is well organised and utilises multimedia tools such as YouTube and a slide-show of pictures from Flickr. See figure 1.

Figure 1



Najib's Postings

Generally, Najib's blog is used as a tool to disseminate news about initiatives or policies of the government. Analysis of the content finds that the blog focuses on explaining the government's actions and decisions, which is sometimes already being discussed in the traditional media. There are four types of postings in Najib's 1Malaysia³ blog postings, as explained below.

First, Najib addresses a number of issues related to government policy. For example, he wrote blogs on the national budget and the National Key Economic Area.

² <http://www.1malaysia.com.my/category/blog/>, retrieved 17 September 2010

³ On the 1Malaysia blog, the postings are organised in 13 categories; 1Malaysia Interactive, 1Malaysia Values, Community, Culture, Economy, Economy/Trade, Event, Government/Policy, Interactive, News/Updates, Personal and Unity. As there are redundancies in these categories, I have combined them under four categories.

It is noted that there is little information regarding his constituency, Pekan, Pahang. Only two postings relate to his constituency.

Second, Najib emphasises the 1Malaysia Values. He uses the blog to inform the readers about the 1Malaysia concept and its eight values which include values such as acceptance and perseverance. From 5 April 2009 until 6 May 2009, the blog postings focus on explaining the concept of 1Malaysia. Najib also announced new programs under 1Malaysia such as the 1Malaysia Maintenance Fund, 1Malaysia Clinic, 1Malaysia retirement Saving Scheme and the 1Malaysia Student Discount Card.

Third, not all of Najib's postings are elicited by developments outside the blog; in many cases he explicitly addresses readers' comments to earlier posts and gives his opinions or answers to questions raised in those comments. Interestingly, Najib also uses video to record some answers and posts these in the blog. He sometimes refers to the names of people who posted the questions.

Fourth, Najib blogs about episodes in his daily life that do not have any direct political component. For instance, in one entry, Najib writes that he bought a new Persian kitten. He even welcomed readers to name the cat. He used the blog to thank his former teacher and expressed his love to his mother on Mother's Day. On the occasion of any festival in Malaysia, he used the blog to express his good wishes to all Malaysian citizens.

In general, the blog posts are not focused on sensitive or controversial issues. Rather, the blog focuses fundamentally on government policies. Only rarely do the blogs focus on Najib's personality. The difference here is that, through the blog, the public has a voice to contribute ideas and thoughts about particular government policies.

1Malaysia Comments

Readers of 1Malaysia need to register their name in the 1Malaysia system before they can post any comment on the blog. Najib no doubt is acutely aware of the possibility of offensive comments by readers and that the appearance of such comments would reflect negatively on his position as Prime Minister. Therefore, only comments with the reader's name (either real name or pseudonyms) appear; there are no anonymous comments in Najib's blog. The comments are moderated so that no bad language is used. Most of the discussion and feedback relates to social and economic development issues.

Judging from the number of comments, Najib does very well in reaching an audience. For every posting, the blog has received no less than 45 comments from the audience. Within two years of starting the blog, it received 20,470 comments, which is considerably more than other politicians have received around the world. According to Ward and Franco (2008:34) in their study of British and Canadian parliamentary blogs, "nearly 40 per cent of the blogs received an average of less than two comments

per posting”. Noticeably, after Najib became Prime Minister in April 2009, the comments increased considerably from 468 in March 2009 to 1,553 in April 2009. Then, from April 2009 until September 2010, he received an average of 1,119 comments per month. Arguably, the status of Najib, as Prime Minister, is a likely factor in the increase in his audience and the number of comments in his blog. The 1Malaysia blog apparently satisfies individual users’ desire to talk to the most powerful man in Malaysia.

The National Budget 2011

A post in August 2010 titled “The National Budget 2011” received the highest number of comments by the readers – 2,106. The majority of the comments focused on requests for a betterment of their life. Suggestions by the readers include: a) increments in salary, b) implementation of a minimum wage policy, c) reduced taxes and the provision of subsidies for citizens to help them manage the rising cost of living, d) concerns about the quality of education and rising cost of education, e) the need to upgrade Internet and broadband services, f) controls on the price of consumer goods, g) increased development in rural areas to attract opportunities for youth, h) incentives for green technology development, i) increased allocation for national security, j) programs for illegal immigrants.

In the posting “A Budget from *Rakyat*” on October, 14, 2010, Najib praises the citizens’ ideas for the 2011 National Budget. He also states that he and his office have studied all the suggestions given in his blog:

My office and I have studied these ideas and intend to explore the viable ones for implementation, whether or not they are incorporated into the Budget. Some of you who have contributed comments to my blog will be able to recognise your ideas, or a hybrid of those ideas in the Budget. Simply by participating in the exercise, you have contributed to the process of transforming our nation. Thank you for your input and support for the sake of our nation, and let’s keep this up.⁴

The “The National Budget 2011” post prompted reactions to the post itself and also triggered a lively exchange among readers themselves. When one reader put forward a suggestion for the budget, other readers would sometimes second it. Some readers responded with different views but with little debate. For example, the suggestion of ‘School Facilitators’ created lively and long discussion among the users⁵.

Interactivity in the 1Malaysia Blog

Through the blog, Najib interacts with his audience. Even though he does not respond to the comments regularly, he appears to try his best to respond to different issues

⁴ See <http://www.1malaysia.com.my/blog/a-budget-by-the-rakyat/>, retrieved November 27, 2010

⁵ See <http://www.1malaysia.com.my/blog/governmentpolicy/national-budget-2011-ideas-from-the-rakyat/?replytocom=23279#respond>, retrieved November 27, 2010

when he has the opportunity. According to Amhari Effendy, a special officer-in-charge of the Najib blog, “the Prime Minister, at his own time does read his comments via his mobile phone or computers such as I-Pad. Prime Minister also tweets himself personally” (Amhari, 2011). The 1Malaysia team also browses all the comments and sends a report to Najib on a weekly basis (Amhari, 2011).

Based on the analysis of two years of content, it is apparent that Najib picks up a thought or question by the readers in the comment section and replies to these in the form of a new blog entry. He also mentions the reader’s name when answering them. In almost every response, Najib finishes by thanking the reader for the questions and explicitly invites all readers to share their thoughts and interact with him in his blog. It is also apparent that Najib has developed his own way to create the sense of interaction with readers. One noticeable strategy in Najib’s blog is using a video recording to reply to comments by the readers. This makes it obvious that it is Najib who replies to the comments on his blog, countering the claims of some people that Najib does not do so. For example, Bakri Musa (2009: 1), who analysed political blogs, complained that Najib’s blog “is written from a third person perspective instead being personal”.

As well as continually asking readers to contact him, Najib organised an event to meet his online friends. The event was called ‘Tea Time 1Malaysia’ or ‘Tea with Me’, and was particularly aimed at Najib interacting face-to-face with the readers and connecting with them more closely⁶.

Discussion

Deliberative democracy is understood to be a rational discourse in which a certain political position is debated and clarified. Through the arena of the public sphere, people freely come together and discuss political issues and influence political action. The public sphere is important for the exercise of deliberative democracy, and is characterised by two distinctive features. The first is the citizens’ general access to information, opinion and institutions, and the second is the enhanced political participation through discussion and debate on certain issues that would influence the political action (Wilhelm, 2000; Fishkin, 1991). Thus, the Internet is credited with the potential to contribute to the public sphere and, therefore, to deliberative democracy.

Access to information

An important aspect of democracy is access to information. Many political theorists argue that the role of information has led to electronic democracy because the Internet can influence the distribution and flow of information throughout society. Doctor (1992) noted that information can empower people by “ensuring that people have the

⁶ See <http://www.1malaysia.com.my/blog/a-successful-saturday/>, retrieved October, 28, 2010

tools they need to participate in the decision making structures that affect their daily life” (p.44).

In light of this possibility, the 1Malaysia blog shows that the willingness of the government to publish information related to policy would be one element of deliberative democracy. Through this method, the citizens can easily inform themselves on political issues (Jansen and Koop, 2005). Citizens are also likely to be better informed prior to making a decision. However, the information on the 1Malaysia blog focuses on certain policies, some of which are already being discussed in the traditional mass media. Obviously, the 1Malaysia blog only emphasises on that matter.

Najib does not provide any feedback to comments critical of certain aspects of his administration. These are ignored. Indeed, it must be assumed that many comments are not published as the 1Malaysia team reserves the right to not publish comments that they ‘think’ would affect political stability⁷. Moreover, readers need to register themselves in the system by providing their names as well as their email address. This step would make readers aware that their identity could be tracked if they are critical towards the government. This is in contrast to the criterion of deliberative democracy, as, according to Chambers (2003), deliberation is “debate and discussion aimed at producing reasonable well-informed opinions in which participants are willing to revise preferences in light of discussion, new information and claims made by fellow participants” (p.309).

Enhanced deliberative and interactivity

Cyber optimists consider that the Internet could revolutionise democracy for the expansion of the citizens’ deliberation, thereby leading to the formation of rational public opinion to which official policymakers can be held accountable, and enabling citizens to see the result of their influence on the policy action (Azzizuddin, 2009). In Najib’s blog, as mentioned, he allows readers to contribute ideas. For example, a large number of suggestions were made on the Budget 2011 and that posting received the highest number of comments from readers. This shows that people are eager to voice their opinion. Individual voices which may have not have been heard and not come to public notice previously, can do so through the Internet. It is now possible that the ideas expressed through this medium can gain enough public support urging policymakers to take these opinions into account. It also enables the public to contribute to the process of deliberative democracy in Malaysia. Adding to this optimism is Najib’s explicit statement that he would give consideration to the comments and suggestions made regarding the budget.

When the Budget 2011 was tabled in Parliament on October 15, 2010⁸, most people in Malaysia, from the civil-servant to the business developers, could expect to be affected by the budget allocations. Regarding the suggestions made by readers of

⁷ See <http://www.1malaysia.com.my/misc/faq/>, retrieved 17 September 2010

⁸ See details on the Budget 2011’ in <http://thestar.com.my/budget/-> accessed 4 May 2011

Najib's blog, some assessments of the blog's impact on deliberative democracy can be made. Firstly, the main concern by the majority of readers who commented on the blog was the implementation of a minimum wage policy. In the 2011 budget, there was little reference to any form of minimum wage policy. The few references relate to wage levels for security guards, Imam⁹ and certain religious teachers. It was also announced that female civil servants would have longer paid maternity leave. Education was another main concern expressed in readers' comments. In terms of education, the government allocated a significant amount of money for the operational expenditure and infrastructure such as building schools and upgrading the facilities. The budget also took into consideration the allocation of funds for various programs and training for youth under the 1Malaysia Training Program. As per the suggestions on the blog that the government should increase development in rural areas, the budget also allocated amounts for the purpose of constructing new roads and bridges in rural areas throughout the country and upgrading drainage systems to enhance the quality of the *rakyat's* (the people's) life (New Straits Times, October 16, 2011).

Criticisms were made of the 2011 budget. For example, Lim (2011), director of the Centre for Policy Initiatives, said that the budget is not "the Budget for *Rakyat*" as Najib promised in his blog. The budget did not reflect awareness of the main concerns of the majority of people, namely, the high cost of education and the rising cost of living in larger towns. In fact, the budget allocated huge expenditure on mega projects such as RM5 billion for the 100 storey Warisan Merdeka tower. Some commentators pointed out that this amount should be spent on the expansion of public housing, transport, health and other badly needed services that can truly benefit the ordinary people.

Some online protests were made by people who disagreed with the allocations of the budget. One of these protests was organised through Facebook. It was created anonymously in response to Najib's Budget 2011 speech (MalaysiaToday, October 28, 2010). Over 200,000¹⁰ people showed their protest through the project, by registering on the "1M Malaysians Reject 100-storey Mega Tower" Facebook page. Many analysts warned that if the government ignored these online protesters, it would affect their popularity in the coming election (MalaysiaToday 28 October, 2010).

Conclusion

In sum, Malaysia's government clearly shows an acceptance of the practice of deliberative democracy. This is particularly true of Prime Minister Najib's Razak through his blog, 1Malaysia. Najib uses his blog as a forum for people to contribute their ideas and he also engages by responding to the readers. Compared to other political bloggers, Najib demonstrates a significant commitment to maintaining dialogue with readers.

⁹ Imam in Malaysia often refers to worship leader of a mosque.

¹⁰ During the time of analysis, the number of fan in '1M Malaysians Reject 100-storey Mega Tower' is 294, 684. accessed 21 April 2011

However, deliberative democracy qualitatively requires more than that. The communication tactics by Najib which avoid critical and political debate in his blog show that it is unable to fulfil the process of deliberative democracy. Moreover, through the filter of the 1Malaysia moderating team, Najib selects the comments by readers and only responds to those comments that are not critical. This practice contradicts the principles of deliberative democracy. In addition, even though there were some budget allocations for the people as per their suggestions in Najib's blog, the 2011 budget was similar to the previous budget, making it, as Lim (2011) expressed, 'business as usual'. This lends weight to the warning made by Azzizuddin (2009: 125) that "the BN's government only purpose in accepting deliberative democracy is to maintain its authoritarian agenda". As this study has shown, if the use of the Internet is to contribute to the public sphere and promote the principles of deliberative democracy, political blogging must be substantive – and not, as in the case of Malaysian Prime Minister Najib, merely popular.

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