

How did the BN suffer such a huge setback when it controlled the mainstream media? Clearly, it seriously underestimated the reach that the internet made possible, says **Wong Kok Keong**.

The winds of change that blew out of GE2008 appears to indicate a willingness on the part of the rakyat to take a giant step forward, away from race-based politics. The peaceful political transition so far also signals the end of politics of fear based on the events of 13 May 1969. This watershed election caught the opposition by surprise and stunned the BN.

As the BN engages in some soul searching, it would do well for them to evaluate their media policy for the country since it is still in control of the federal government and eight states in the federation.

It is also an opportunity for mainstream journalists not happy with media restriction to step up and demand changes that will help make them more respected in the future as professionals interested in presenting news and views more objectively and fairly as opposed to acting merely as mouthpieces of the BN government.

Serious underestimation

So, what went wrong with the BN and the mainstream media? Quite clearly the BN seriously underestimated the alternative media of netizens in cyberspace. They did not have a proactive policy to engage netizens opposed to them. Instead, some BN leaders ridiculed, vilified, threatened and tried to create trouble for netizens. Information Minister Zainuddin Maidin referred to them as goblok (or morons) and Umno youth leader Khairy Jamaluddin called them monkeys in the jungle that needed to be tamed.

Umno also apparently made use of "cybertroopers", BN supporters who wrote to blogs inciting racially incendiary commentaries in order to get them into trouble with the law. A couple of days before nomination day on 24 February, Youth and Sports Minister Azalina Othman called bloggers cowards and warned that the BN government was monitoring them. All these BN attempts only backfired as netizens grew even more fed up with the BN's arrogance. They became more entrenched or determined in slamming the BN or some of their leaders every chance they got.

The BN and their mainstream media were confident of massive support from the Malaysian hinterland, where internet penetration is still low. But that has proved to be a shaky idea. While Trengganu and Pahang still largely support the BN, Kelantan continues to elude them, suffering a bigger loss this time than in GE2004. And Kedah has fallen to Pas this time around. The low internet penetration in Kedah and Kelantan did not work to the advantage of BN. Some suggested that many Kelantanese working in the Klang Valley were exposed to Pas message online and passed on the message to friends and relatives back in Kelantan via SMS. Many

who returned to Kelantan to cast their votes must have also helped Pas secure a larger win this time around than in GE2004.

It was rather cynical of the BN to rely on the lack of internet penetration to win votes in the hinterland. Even the mainstream media were in tacit agreement with the mentality. It was as though the BN was happy to win votes from Malaysians kept in the dark by being fed only their propaganda through the mainstream media. But that has been shown to work only up to a point.

The BN largely ignored issues raised by the opposition online, leaving them unchallenged in the minds of many Malaysians. The BN also overlooked human creativity and the newer technologies of communication. Malaysians unhappy with mainstream media sought out information from the alternative media and used other channels to pass it on to others without access to the internet.

The BN's underestimation of cyberspace was based on their belief that they could still count on the mainstream media to generate voter support. In their coverage of the run-up leading to polling day on 8 March, the mainstream media, as they had done in the past, were mainly focused or positive on BN while they marginalised or slammed the opposition.

And so, they omitted coverage of huge crowds turning up for ceramah held by DAP candidates in the Klang Valley and in Penang, and by Anwar Ibrahim almost all over Peninsular Malaysia. The crowd size for opposition ceramahs often dwarfed those for BN coalition parties. The mainstream media pushed the idea for the first time that large turnouts for ceramah did not translate into votes. But was that good justification for ignoring opposition ceramah?

A few days before polling day, the mainstream media gave the BN the full throttle in their criticism of Anwar. But that appeared to have backfired. The criticisms did not stop large crowds from turning up to his ceramahs. As many who showed up were Malays, there was speculation of a late swing of Malay votes for the opposition. All said, mainstream media coverage could be seen to have given BN a false sense of complacency or security.

Election night frustration

Public anger or frustration with the mainstream media probably peaked on the night of election returns. Although the mainstream media have a lot more resources and a much larger staff than Malaysiakini (which reportedly had only 35 staff), their election returns updates online and on radio and TV moved at a snail's pace.

Commenting on reportage of election returns in The Star on 14 March, Wong Chun Wai said "the alternative media (like Malaysiakini) scored better as it did not have to worry too much about accuracy." He added: "An example was the newsflash on the purported 14 unopened ballot boxes in Lembah Pantai (after Nurul Izzah was declared to have won over Sharizat), implying there would be rigging. The report turned out to be false."

But then Malaysiakini's report about the 14 unopened boxes was based on information given by a polling agent. And as soon as the polling agent made the correction about half an hour later, Malaysiakini immediately reported it. The polling agent was more to blame here than the online news portal.

The only inaccurate report by Malaysiakini was when it first reported that MIC deputy president Palanivel won the Hulu Selangor parliamentary seat by about 100 votes. It was given at 10:44 p.m. and was not corrected until 2:22 a.m. that PKR's Zainal Abidin Ahmad actually won by 198 votes.

Having only one inaccuracy for the entire night of updates was quite a remarkable performance by Malaysiakini, which was the first to report on several major results such as the fall of Penang, Kedah, Perak and Selangor to the opposition. To top it off, they were the first to report on the BN losing its much coveted two-thirds majority in parliament by nailing down the exact number of parliamentary seats, 82, going to the opposition, a number that held up. The NST and The Star did not have reports on it until about two hours later.

Contrary to Wong Chun Wai's claim, accuracy did not appear to be the only reason for the mainstream media's delay in offering election returns updates. Consider The Star's online treatment of Penang on the one hand and Perlis and Trengganu on the other. After the outgoing Chief Minister Koh Tsu Koon graciously conceded his and the BN's loss of Penang to the Opposition, followed immediately by incoming Chief Minister Lim Guan Eng's news conference, the paper's online update did not have anything on either.

On the other hand, as soon as the BN took Perlis and Trengganu by just a simple majority of one-seat each, The Star online reported it right away. Could it be that Wong's paper, together with the other mainstream media, was more concerned with not upsetting their political paymasters too much – in the same way they did not cover large opposition ceramah in the run-up to polling day?

Time for change

The mainstream media had quite clearly failed the BN because of the kind of media policy for the country that the BN government has had. By acting largely as their mouthpiece, or yes-men, the mainstream media ended up only reporting what the BN wanted to hear, making the ruling coalition lose touch with the grassroots, the rakyat.

It is time the BN government and the mainstream media treated the rakyat with more maturity

and respect. This applies not just to urbanites but also those in the hinterland, given human creativity and the availability of new technologies of communication that are within reach. Challenge bad ideas with good ideas instead of banning them or making threats to people offering those ideas. When leaders in government use reason and persuasion to win arguments instead of resorting to arrogance, emotion and threats of censorship, it will go a long way in establishing credible democratic institutions and strengthening their role in creating a peaceful and stable Malaysia.

It is time the BN government dropped the many laws that have shackled media freedom and creativity to the point that the mainstream media had not really served them well while a ridiculous divide between the mainstream media and the alternative media is created.

Start by getting rid of the ISA, which has been used for punishing people with different or bad ideas, because when people and ideas are suppressed they usually end up festering underground.

End laws requiring licensing permits for the media to operate because they only result in politicising the media to serve ruling political interests at the expense of the rakyat.

On the other hand, have media regulation to ensure diversity in media ownership. This is to prevent monopolistic practices that have the impact of shrinking diversity of viewpoints and, again, ending up as yes-men for the ruling political party - which is what Media Prima is doing right now.

Accuracy, objectivity and fairness are cardinal principles of journalism. If journalists are interested in upholding them, they must be willing to report without fear or favour. And when they do it, they will help institutionalise the principles, which in turn will encourage others to follow, including those that might have been reckless with them in cyberspace.

GE 2008 indicates the rakyat are ready and willing to change, to move out of the usual race-based politics of the past half century. But this is just the beginning as much needs to be done to make it a reality. Everyone needs to play their part.

As the party that still controls the Federal government and most of the states in the federation, the BN has a particularly important role to play. The BN government needs to unshackle the media so that ideas about a new Malaysia can be freely, fairly and accurately made available for the new Malaysia to take root and flower. (*Aliran Monthly*)

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