

Malaysia's 13th General Election: Social Media and its Political Impact

James Gomez

Abstract

Malaysia's Prime Minister and Barisan Nasional (BN) leader Najib Razak in February 2013 was quoted widely in the media as saying that the general elections (GE) in 2013 will be the country's first "social media election". This paper examines the role of social media in Malaysia's 2013 general elections and its political impact. Previously, in the 2008 general election, it was widely accepted that alternative online content determined the result. The country's opposition coalition was credited in using new media to overcome a hostile mainstream media owned by establishment political interests to secure a much improved showing at the polls. Back in GE 2008, the new media electoral landscape was comprised of blogs, party websites and alternative news portals and not really social media as we know it today. In 2008, BN was the clear social media outsider. In fact, BN literally had limited online presence and was said to have underestimated the impact of new media altogether on the electorate's voting behavior. Fast forward to April 2013, the landscape is very different. BN had made strong inroads onto social media and has carved itself a competitive position. What then has been social media's political impact on voter behaviour during Malaysia's 13th general elections?

Key words: general elections, Malaysia, political parties, social media, voter behaviour

Introduction

In February 2013, two-and-half months before Malaysia's 13th general elections (GE13), Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak was quoted widely in the media that the country will experience its first "social media election" (Zahid, 2013). The significance of his remarks lies in the exponential growth of social media users in Malaysia over the preceding five years. During the previous election in 2008, there were 800,000 Facebook and 3,429 Twitter users in Malaysia. However, by 2013 these numbers had increased to 13,220,000 for Facebook and 2,000,000 for Twitter users (Forest-interactive.com, 2013).

Since the last general elections in 2008, Malaysia's internet penetration had consistently risen year by year. Total internet penetration in Malaysia rose from 15,868,000 in 2008 to 17,723,000, while its population had grown from 27,302,348 in 2008 to 29,239,927 in 2012 (World Bank, 2011). The rise in internet penetration also pointed towards how Malaysians were accessing their news. According to the Malaysian Digital Association's (MDA) February 2012 report, websites of the mainstream media, such as thestar.com.my, utusan.com.my and bharian.com.my, collected 2,221,763, 1,171,578 and 769,772 unique browsers respectively. Alternative news websites such as malaysiakini.com and themalaysianinsider.com collected 1,858,649 and 1,117,124 unique browsers respectively in the same period, demonstrating strongly their comparative strength.

Table 1: Malaysian Internet Penetration by Online Media on February 2012

News Online Media	Number of Penetration
thestar.com.my	2,221,763
utusan.com.my	1,171,578
bharian.com.my	769,772
malaysiakini.com	1,858,649
themalaysianinsider.com	1,117,124

Source: Malaysian Digital Association's (MDA)

Meanwhile, Malaysian newspapers, particularly the Malay and English-medium ones that have traditionally reported on local political news saw a drastic drop in circulation since the last general elections held in 2008. The two main Malaya language Bahasa Newspapers, Berita Harian, (weekend edition Berita Minggu) and Utusan Malaysia and (weekend edition Mingguan Malaysia), had suffered a decline from 1,147,126 in 2008 to 890,446 subscribers in 2012. Similarly, English language newspapers such as *The New Straits Times*, *The Star* and *The Edge* saw their combined circulation drop from 936,664 in 2008 to 813,994 in 2012.

Hence, in the run-up to GE13, both media and online data pointed towards social media as the platform where the online communications of the general elections would likely be transmitted. This paper examines the relationship between social media and electoral campaigns of the 13th Malaysian general election. In particular, it seeks to evaluate if the reach of the competing parties over social media during the official campaign period in 2013 determined the electoral result in any significant way.

Social Media and Electoral Campaigns

Social Media refers to a collection of online social interaction tools such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube which are among the most popular ones both globally and in Malaysia. However, the use of social media in general has evolved beyond its initial social purposes to include economic and political functions. For politics, it is often used as an advocacy and campaign tool to mobilize support both on and offline. An oft-cited example in the academic literature is the use of social media in Obama's presidential election campaigns in 2008 and 2012. Beginning with activating volunteer and donor networks via social media in 2008 (Metzgar and Maruggi, 2013) to using social media to connect with audiences who get their political news via social networking sites.

Research on social media and electoral campaigns has since expanded beyond the US presidential elections. In the Asia-Pacific region, studies point towards the use of social media for political purposes during elections, particularly the use of Facebook in President Benigno

“Noynoy” Aquino III’s election in the Philippines to the use of Twitter by the Red Shirts in Thailand (see Behnke 2010).

However one of the main research foci of academics studying the relationship between social media and electoral campaigns is whether social media can influence voter behavior and impact electoral outcomes. Studies from the U.S. have shown that the number of social media users or supporters online does not translate into electoral success. In the case of the U.S. mid-term elections in 2010, researchers found that that predicting winners based on Twitter requires further investigation (Livne, Simmons, Adar and Adamic, 2011:208). Similarly, findings from the Swedish case demonstrate that the volume of tweets on Twitter do not show a correlation to electoral outcomes (Larsson and Moe, 2010:14). From studies based on examples in Asia, in the case of Facebook, it was noted that popularity on social networking sites such as Facebook do not result in electoral success (Leng Ho 2012:108). While in the case of Twitter, some authors start on the premise that tweets hold predictive power in forecasting election results but conclude that in the case of the 2011 general elections in Singapore, it is not conclusive and recommend further research (Scoric, Poor, Achananuparp, Lim and Jiang 2012:2589-2590). One reason for these inconclusive results is that most countries do have a large digital divide and hence political parties and politicians have to rely on other means of communication for campaigning purposes.

To date, however, research from civil society and voter mobilization research suggest that social media’s best use lies in its capacity to mobilize and politicize the citizenry. Here the term “social media election”, first equated with the 2008 Obama campaign, attributed the large voter turnout to his campaign’s use of social media and new technology. Writing a little later on the South Korean case, authors Chang and Bae argue that social media such as Twitter turn elections into “social elections”. The significant lies in the way social media influence those who traditionally do not vote to turn out during an election (Chang and Bae 2012:36). In Malaysia’s 13th general election, this difference between impact on electoral result and voter mobilization holds explanatory potential to understand the influence of social media on voter behavior during an election.

From New Media in GE12 (2008) to Social Media in GE13 (2013)

In the 2008 general election, it was widely accepted that alternative online content determined the result. A range of scholars writing about the 12th general elections observed that the internet helped the opposition score electoral success (Rajaratnam 2009; MohdSani and Zengeni 2010; Suffian 2010; Ndoma and Tumin 2011; Weiss 2012). The country’s opposition coalition was credited in using new media to overcome a hostile mainstream media owned by establishment political interests to secure a much improved showing at the polls. This prompted the former Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi to admit that his “biggest mistake” was to ignore the cyber-

campaigning over the internet, and this was a “serious misjudgment” that resulted in the loss BN suffered at the 2008 polls(AFP, 25 March 2008).

In the 2008 general election, the new media electoral landscape was comprised of blogs, party websites and alternative news portals and not really “social media” as we know it today. The social media tool that was most effectively used by the opposition in GE2008 was YouTube. The opposition and civil society posted videos on YouTube in their online negative campaign against the ruling coalition’s negative campaigning in the mainstream media. In 2008, BN was the clear outsider in social media terms. In fact, BN literally had limited online presence and was said to have learnt its lesson. They understood the importance of new media as they began preparing for the next general elections.

In the interim year, political parties, their leaders and key members began to slowly sign up to the different social media platforms. In 2008, the only parties who had established a YouTube Channel were BN and a Pakatan Rakyat (PR) coalition member, the Democratic Action Party (DAP). Later, another PR coalition member, the Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS) created its channel in 2009. Some parties such as DAP and BN, a little later, added further new channels to YouTube. In contrast, both BN and PR coalition did not have a Facebook account in 2008, although Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR) established a Facebook page after the 2008 general election. Over the course of the next years, other parties and their leaders established their Facebook accounts. Similarly with regards to Twitter, DAP was the only party that joined Twitter one month after the 2008 general election was over. As for party leader Anwar Ibrahim, he was the only party leader who had a Twitter account before 2008 general election even though Twitter was not used as a political campaign tool in the 2008 Malaysian general election.

By April 2013, the landscape was very different. BN had made strong inroads onto social media and had carved itself a competitive position. Its fan page on Facebook boasted 55,000 likes while supporters of the PR had 92,000. For both coalitions there were also several other fan and supporter pages reflecting smaller numbers. Party leaders’ “like” numbers on Facebook are on the other hand much higher. BN’s Najib has 1,580,000, while PAS’s Nik Aziz has 889,000; Anwar Ibrahim has 480,000 and DAP’s Lim Kit Siang has 120,000. The combined numbers of the three PR leaders are a good 80,000 likes below Najib.

Table 2: Fans Page on Facebook of Political and Leader Parties in Malaysia on April 2013

Political Party	“Like” Fans Page	Party Leader	“Like” Fans Page
Barisan Nasional (BN)	55,000	Najib (BN)	1,580,00
Pakatan Rakyat	92,000	PR Leaders	80,000
Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR)	29,177	Anwar Ibrahim (PKR)	480,000
Pan- Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS)	138,317	Nik Aziz (PAS)	889,000

Democratic Action Party (DAP)	510,230	Lim Kit Siang (DAP)	120,000
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Source: www.facebook.com (17 April 2013)

Meanwhile on the Twitter front, the number of followers was: BN 24,000, PKR 27,000; DAP 27,000 PAS 1200 and PR supporters 1,900. Individual twitter followers for Najib stood at 1,460,000. For the Pakatan coalition leaders, Anwar Ibrahim has 267,000, NikAziz has 94,000 and Lim Kit Siang has 89,000 followers. Put together, Pakatan leaders combined only muster a third of Najib's followers¹.

Table 3: Twitter Followers of Political and Leader Parties in Malaysia on April 2013

Political Party	Followers	Party Leader	Followers
Barisan Nasional (BN)	24,000	Najib (BN)	1,460,000
Pakatan Rakyat (PR)	1,900	PR Leader	
Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR)	27,000	Anwar Ibrahim (PKR)	267,000
Pan- Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS)	1,200	Nik Aziz (PAS)	94,000
Democratic Action Party (DAP)	27,000	Lim Kit Siang (DAP)	89,000

Source: www.twitter.com (17 April 2013)

When the numbers of BN and Najib were combined with that of PR and its leaders, it put the ruling coalition well ahead in social media numbers on the eve of elections.

Social Media and its Impact on GE13

YouTube was the only Social Media Platform that was used in the 2008 General Election, as both parties and party leaders had YouTube accounts and used them during the 2008 general election. By 2013 the usage of social media was increasing as both parties and party leaders had joined Facebook and Twitter before the 2013 general election was held. In the 2008 general election, PR was one step ahead of BN, both online and in the usage of social media. In 2013, Barisan Nasional finally managed to catch up largely through the dominance of Najib's online presence.

In the 2013 elections, Najib Razak was the most popular political leader based on his Twitter followers and Facebook fans. In terms of images and messages over social media, the content shows that BN is able to project a singular branding with a single image in Najib as the leader. On the other hand, PR was unable to effectively portray a singular coalition branding or a convincing single coalition leadership icon. For instance, in all its posters online and offline, the

¹While these numbers are impressive, it is important to note that there are accounts that can be set up to artificially amplify messages or shore up a party or leader's popularity. Digital News Asia, which reported on the use of an online tool to investigate the veracity of social media networks argued only that only 20 or 40 per cent of a leaders' Facebook followers in Malaysia are genuine (Asohan, 16 April 2013).

opposition coalition featured all three of its leaders and maintained separate social media platforms at the party level. Hence as a coalition, PR remains visually and in terms of messaging as three fairly distinct components over social media.

However, in spite of closing the gap on the social media front, in electoral terms the BN's result slid further in 2013 compared to 2008. In the May 2013 general elections, the ruling BN secured 133 seats compared to 89 by the opposition PR. It was the BN coalition's worst electoral performance since 1969, dropping further from its 140 seats in the 2008 general elections. On the other hand, PR made an improvement of five seats over its 2008 results of 82 seats. For two elections running, the opposition was able to deny the ruling BN a two-thirds majority in Parliament.

In terms of numbers, in Malaysia's 12th General Election in March 2008, the number of people who registered to vote was 10,740,227, but total vote received was only 7,942,803, with 177,256 spoiled votes and 40,980 unreturned ballots. The numbers escalated in the 13th general election to 13,268,002 registered voters with a total of 11,256,545 people casting their votes.

Table 4: Malaysian Voters, 2008 and 2013

Matter	2008	2013
Total Votes	10,740,227	13,268,002
Spoiled Votes	177,256	173,661
Total Votes Received	7,942,803	11,256,545

Source: Spr.gov.my (16 August 2013)

In terms of popular votes, PR overall did better with 53.5 per cent, improving by 6.8 per cent from 46.75 per cent in 2008. Meanwhile BN only secured 45.5 per cent compared to 50.2 per cent in 2008. Hence in terms of net seats and popular vote, the 2013 results showed that BN fared worse than in 2008.

Table 5: Popular Votes for Political Parties

Political Party	2008	2013
Barisan Nasional	50.2%	45.5%
Pakatan Rakyat	46.75%	53.5%

Source: spr.gov.my (16 August 2013)

But in terms of state legislatures, in 2013 BN won nine out of the 12 states². Kelantan, Penang and Selangor were won by PR with increased majorities, while it lost Kedah to BN. States such as Perak and Terengganu were won by a narrow majority by BN with three and two seats respectively. In 2008, BN lost five states, namely Kelantan, Penang, Selangor, Perak and Kedah,

² There were legislative assembly elections only for 12 states. The Sarawak State Legislative Assembly was not dissolved as the last election was held in 2011 and its term is due to end only in 2016.

which were won by PR. However, Perak was lost to BN a year later when three PR legislators crossed over to BN.

When evaluating the social media-related outcomes of the 13th Malaysian general elections, it is the net impact of social media's political influence in the last five years and not merely the campaign period that analysts need to consider. Hence, whether or not Najib's proclamation that GE13 would be a "social media election" would ring true was already determined by election day. Malaysia's 13th general election was also not a "social media election", at least not for the ruling BN when we consider the electoral results. If it was, BN certainly lost the "social media election". This result is consistent with the research emerging from studies related to social media and electoral campaigns that conclude tentatively that popularity on social media platforms need not necessarily translate into votes (Leng Ho 2012:108).

Other the other hand, from the context of voter mobilization, social media's impact on GE13 may lie in its ability to have played an important part in encouraging high voter turnout. For instance, compared to the 2008 elections when turnout was only 76 percent of the 10,740,227 eligible voters. In 2013 the voter turnout was highest in Malaysian electoral history where more than 84.8 per cent of 13,268,002 eligible voters cast their ballots. In terms of published research about other countries (Chang and Bae 2012:36), the findings of the Malaysia GE13 suggest that social media does influence more voters to turn out during elections. However, the influence of social media needs to be coupled with the importance of key election issues and corresponding impact of the mainstream media.

Table 6: Voters in Malaysia

Year	Eligible Voters	Actual Turn Out	Percentage
2008	10,740,227	8,161,039	76
2013	13,268,002	11,256,545	84.84

Source: spr.gov.my (16 August 2013)

While the above findings do provide some understanding of Malaysia's 13th general elections, observers need to be aware that the social media campaign can only form one part of the media narrative. There are other narratives being formed by the mainstream print and broadcast media as well as through paid advertising and direct-marketing that researchers also need to consider for a fuller picture of the Malaysian general elections in 2013.

Conclusion: Not a Social Media Election

Social media in Malaysia has been influential in keeping important political issues in the forefront in the last five years prior to the 2013 elections. Thus both sides pushing content through the various Facebook pages, video portals and Twitter, did not significantly alter the

results in BN's favor. On the whole it appears that PR's social media could fend off the BN's media onslaught on social media, but the opposition social media campaign overall was eclipsed by BN's mainstream media presence, paid advertising and direct marketing fueled by large financial resources.

Yet in spite of the time and resources dedicated by both the BN and Najib in improving their online presence in time for the 2013 general election, they still could not arrest the erosion of support from Malaysian voters. It seems that Malaysian voters were keen to hear significant movement in policy areas related to the high cost of living, governmental corruption and equal treatment and opportunities for all Malaysians, regardless of race or ethnicity. Hence, it was the political issues that have been simmering over the past five years that were more important than the medium.

However, the opposition coalition has disputed the election results, in particular in over 30 marginal seats, citing electoral fraud, the presence of phantom voters and problems with the inedible ink. Since 5 May 2013, Pakatan Rakyat has organised 15 public gatherings billed as "Blackout 505" country-wide to voice their dissatisfaction (Malaysiakini, 22 June 2013). A primary demand by PR is that the current heads and commissioners of the Election Commission be replaced by new leadership. These rallies have been labeled illegal by the police, who cite the absence of permits and the use of public spaces for these activities. Instead, the opposition has been asked to file election petitions in court to legally dispute the results. Pakatan had filed 35 elections petition challenging the results in 25 parliamentary and ten state seats. Meanwhile, BN has filed 21 parliamentary seat petitions (PuahWeeTse, 2013). At the time of writing in mid-August 2013, the bulk of the petitions on both sides have been dismissed on technical grounds and with costs to named respondents (*Wall Street Journal*, 16 August 2013).

Depending on how the election result dispute play out, it is likely that social media will continue to be an important tool for the ruling and opposition coalitions in the interim years leading up to the next elections.

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