



CYBERSPACE AND DEMOCRACY IN MALAYSIA
WITH REFERENCE TO 'BERSIH' 2007-2011

BY

ROHANA BINTI ABDUL HAMID

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the role of the cyberspace in promoting or restricting democracy in Malaysia between 2007 and 2011. It analyses the nature of the cyberspace in Malaysia, the extent to which regulators affect the nature of cyberspace and the role played by cyberspace in promoting or hindering democratic process in terms of electoral contestation, political participation and the practice of civil and political liberties in Malaysia. It also identifies and evaluates the role of political parties, civil society groups, NGOs like Bersih, election candidates, media and socio-political bloggers. This study combines the equalisation and normalisation perspectives and argues that forces of regulators i.e. laws, markets and social norms may serve to either restrict or extend democracy. This thesis is based upon a) documentation and statistical records of various government agencies, other researches and online sites such as blogs and online newspapers; qualitative content analysis of online newspapers, facebook of civil society and blogs. Interviews were carried out with representatives from political party, civil society group (*Bersih 2.0*) and politician. This study found that laws and market constricts cyberspace and this hinder the democratic process. However, these processes are countered by social norms and participant political culture of Malaysians. The cyberspace breaks the monopoly of mainstream media and was used as the platform by opposition parties and civil society to ventilate their grievances and promote their interests.

خلاصة البحث

بينت الدراسة دور الإنترنت أو الفضاء الإلكتروني في تعزيز أو تقييد الديمقراطية في ماليزيا بين عامي ٢٠٠٧م و٢٠١١م. وقد حللت طبيعة الفضاء الإلكتروني في ماليزيا مدى تأثير طبيعة الفضاء الإلكتروني في التنظيم والدور الذي يؤديه الإنترنت في تشجيع أو إعاقة العملية الديمقراطية من حيث الفساد الانتخابي والمشاركة السياسية وممارسة الحريات المدنية والسياسية في ماليزيا. كما أنه يحدد ويقيم دور الأحزاب السياسية وجماعات المجتمع المدني والمنظمات غير الحكومية مثل: برسيه (Bersih) المرشحين للانتخابات، ووسائل الإعلام، والمدونين الاجتماعيين والسياسية. تجمع هذه الدراسة وجهات النظر بين تحقيق التكافؤ والتسوية، ويؤكد أن النظام مثل: القوانين، والأسواق، والمعايير الاجتماعية قد تؤدي إلى إما تقييد أو توسيع الديمقراطية. ويستند هذا البحث على أ. الوثائق والسجلات الإحصائية من مختلف الوكالات الحكومية، وغيرها من البحوث على المواقع الإلكترونية مثل: بلوق، والصحف على الإنترنت، وتحليل المحتوى النوعي للصحف على الإنترنت، والمواقع الاجتماعية المدنية في الفيسبوك، والتغريدات، ويوتيوب، وبلوق. وقد أجريت مقابلات مع ممثلين من الحزب السياسي، وممثلين من المجتمع المدني (برسيه ٢,٠) والسياسيين. وجدت الدراسة أن القوانين، والسوق يضيق الفضاء الإلكتروني، وهذا يعيق العملية الديمقراطية. ومع ذلك، يتم تصدي لهذه العمليات من قبل القواعد الاجتماعية ومن المشاركين الماليزيين في الثقافة السياسية. الفضاء الإلكتروني يوقف احتكار وسائل الإعلام الرئيسة، ويستخدم كمنصة من قبل أحزاب المعارضة، والمجتمع المدني لطرح شكاواهم وتعزيز مصالحها.

APPROVAL PAGE

The thesis of Rohana binti Abdul Hamid has been approved by the following:

Abdul Rashid Moten
Supervisor

Muhammad Fuzi Omar
Internal Examiner

Syed Serajul Islam
External Examiner

Mohd Azizuddin bin Mohd Sani
External Examiner

Saim Kayadibi
Chairman

DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this thesis is the result of my own investigations, except where otherwise stated. I also declare that it has not been previously or concurrently submitted as a whole for any other degrees at IIUM or other institutions.

Rohana binti Abdul Hamid

Signature

Date.....

INTERNATIONAL ISLAMIC UNIVERSITY MALAYSIA

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**CYBERSPACE AND DEMOCRACY IN MALAYSIA WITH
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*This thesis is dedicated to my husband, Mohd Adlizan Mohd Noor and my children,
Aleeya Nafeesa and Aideel Fahmee*

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ABIM	Muslim Youth Movement of Malaysia
ACA	Anti-corruption Agency
ANFREL	Asian Networks for Free Elections
APU	Angkatan Perpaduan Ummah
Bersih	Coalition for Clean and Fair Elections
BH	Berita Harian
BN	Barisan Nasional
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
CMCF	Communications and Multimedia Content Forum of Malaysia
DAP	Democratic Action Party
Gerakan	Malaysian People's Movement party
Hindraf	Hindu Rights Action Force
HRW	Human Rights Watch
HUIS	Household Use of the Internet Survey
IASP	Internet Access Service Provider
ICT	Information Communication Technology
IMP	Independence Malaya Party
ISA	Internal Security Act
ITU	International Telecommunication Union
Jakim	Department of Islamic Development Malaysia
Kbps	Kilobits per second
Mbps	Megabits per second
MCMC	Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission
NGOs	Non-governmental organisations
NITA	National IT Agenda
NOC	National Operations Council
NST	New Straits Times
OSA	Official Secrets Act
PAP	People Action's Party
PAS	Parti Islam Se-Malaysia
PKN	Parti KeAdilan Nasional
PKR	Parti Keadilan Rakyat
PPA	Printing Presses and Publications Act
PPP	People's Progressive Party
PR	Pakatan Rakyat
RTM	Radio Television Malaysia
SF	Socialists Front
SMS	Short Message Service
SUARAM	Suara Rakyat Malaysia / Malaysian People's Voice
SUPP	Sarawak United People's Party
UM	Utusan Malaysia
UMNO	United Malays National Organisation
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme

CHAPTER ONE

**CYBERSPACE AND DEMOCRACY IN MALAYSIA:
A FRAMEWORK FOR ANALYSIS**

1.0. INTRODUCTION

Cyberspace is a place that permits the application of Internet communication technologies such as e-mail, discussion board, Facebook, You Tube, web blogs or websites. Cyberspace is used interchangeably with the World Wide Web (WWW), online, internet and information super highway. The early internet users described cyberspace as a physical place, which is free from government control. The free flow of communication poses challenges for regimes that rely on centralised political control.

The Internet was designed in the 1960s to allow for the exchange of packet of bits between computers in a secured environment. The number of internet users worldwide increased from 250 million in 2000 to 2.08 billion in 2011. With the world's population exceeding 6.8 billion, nearly one in three people surfed online (AFP, 2011). Although the Internet had its origin in 1969, it became public only in the 1990s when the WorldwideWide Web was developed. Moreover, in 1995, Windows 95 accelerated the Internet diffusion (Bigdoli, 2004).Some scholars contend that cyberspace is likely to promote democratic practices or democratisation (Grossman, 1995; Ferdinand, 2000).

1.1. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

In Malaysia, cyberspace emerged as the political platform in the 1999 general elections. Given the strict press and media legislation, it has become an ideal tool for

political actors associated with opposition parties and civil societies. In the early years of its use in Malaysia, the Internet functioned as a medium to employ negative advertising when numerous slander-based messages against the ruling parties were distributed by the opposition groups via political websites (Weiss, 2000). In the 1999 general elections, the Malaysian Islamic party, *Partai Islam Se Malaysia* (PAS) was found to be among the most technology savvy in adapting to the online form of communication to reach voters (Mohd Faisal, Mersat and Sarok, 2002).

The cyberspace also received much attention in the 2004 general election in Malaysia. Both opposition and ruling parties used cyberspace as a political communication tool to reach a wider audience (Moten and Mokhtar, 2006). It was used as a platform to advertise party programmes, deliver political news and engage in political debates. It gave political leverage to the opposition parties to compete with the ruling parties in election campaigns. The use of the cyberspace in election campaigns increased tremendously in the 2008 general election. In that election, the ruling party failed to obtain a two-thirds majority in the parliament which it habitually enjoyed. Maznah Mohamad (2008), Pandian (2010) and Moten (2011) acknowledge the use of cyberspace as a significant political platform in the 2008 general election.

Given the salience of cyberspace, this study attempts to analyse its role in Malaysian politics before and after the 2008 election and to examine its impact on democracy. In particular, this study attempts to answer the following questions:

RQ1: What was the nature of cyberspace in Malaysia before and after the general elections of 2008?

RQ2: How did the regulators (laws, market and political culture) affect the nature of democracy in Malaysia?

RQ3: What role did the cyberspace play in promoting or hindering the democratic process in Malaysia between 2007 and 2011 in electoral contestation, political participation and civil and political liberties in Malaysia?

1.2. JUSTIFICATION OF THE RESEARCH

This study is justified on the following grounds:

First, the scope of cyberspace studies is very wide. The topics range from national security to democracy/human rights. However, research that examines the use of cyberspace for political purposes in a systematic way in developing countries are few. Studies in the Malaysian context are even fewer. According to Kluver and Yang (2005), most of the research, in this area, examine the Internet in China. Therefore, this thesis adds to the existing literature.

Second, it has been argued that cyberspace offers opportunities for political participation and discourse among citizens and opposition groups. It has also been pointed out by many writers that the recent general elections laid the foundation for cyberspace studies in Malaysia. Many studies focus on the use of websites (mainly of political parties) during these elections (Ezhar and Govindasamay, 2009) and considered it as one of the factors that contributed to democratisation (Maznah Mohamad, 2008; Moten, 2009; Ufen, 2009). Yet, these studies did not attempt to assess the role that cyberspace played in levelling the political field by extending the access to media and reducing resource disparities. This study adds to the literature by focusing on the use of websites to extend democracy in electoral contestation and by looking at the access to media and resource disparity.

Third, studies that examine the use of cyberspace in Malaysia and its impact on democracy appeared impressionistic and lacked a theoretical framework focusing

on democracy and its operationalisation. Most studies also, did not define democracy rigorously. Some used it to refer to civil liberties only (Tan and Ibrahim, 2009). This study widens the scope of democratic dimensions beyond civil liberties, by adding electoral contestation and inclusive participation as indicators of democracy.

Finally, most studies adopt the “technological determinism perspective” which posits direct impact of the internet technologies on cyberspace and democracy. However, this study examines other factors that are likely to shape cyberspace and its effect on democracy.

1.3. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The objectives of the study are as follows:

1. This study aims to document the extent to which democratic dimensions in Malaysia are extended through cyberspace. The actors involved in the study are political parties, politicians, socio-political bloggers, online media and civil society organisations. It seeks to find out the effect of actors’ participation in cyberspace to democracy in Malaysia. Positive effect to democracy are seen as a result when the cyberspace transform the citizens to producers of content than passive users, empowering the marginalised groups and engaging citizens with political leaders.
2. This study analyses how cyberspace affects the balance of power by levelling the political playing field between the ruling and opposition parties in Malaysia. The ruling party, BN has used state power, resources and channels in political activities. On the other hand, the oppositions and civil society are often shut out of the above mentioned resources to justify their actions. Thus, the cyberspace is studied to find out how does it

(cyberspace) function as a platform to extend democracy in Malaysia by offering more voice and space to the oppositions and civil society groups. Hence, it hopes that this research will assist political parties and civil society groups to employ it as a means to effectively and efficiently organise, communicate and engage their supporters. For the government, the results of this study will help the component parties of the coalition to devise plans and strategies to further engage citizens through Internet communication.

3. By assessing the regulators to cyberspace; regulations, market and social norms, this study informs the concerned public and the government on the democratic potential of Internet technologies so that positive steps could be taken to ameliorate any shortcomings in this respect.
4. This study helps to invigorate political relations by allowing direct citizen participation in governance, by avoiding mediations, optimizing the representative process and by expanding participative democracy.

1.4. LITERATURE REVIEW

The democratizing potential of cyberspace has been studied by many scholars. Some hold the optimistic view that support the democratising role of cyberspace while others, found no evidence supporting the democratising role of the cyberspace. These studies are reviewed under two headings: the equalisation perspective and the normalisation perspective. The literature under the two sections are further subdivided into those that deal with democracies and those that deal with non-democracies. At the end, studies dealing with the role of cyberspace in Malaysia are reviewed drawing pertinent conclusions related to this study.

1.4.1. The Equalisation Perspective

According to Hacker (1996), cyberspace could be seen as a platform to engage citizens in the decision-making process. The author argued that interactive features of the Internet will likely make it possible for citizens to provide feedback to government officials. Stromer-Galley (2000) analysed the democratising characteristics of the Internet in the 1996 and 2000 presidential elections and the 1998 gubernatorial elections in the United States. She found that the Internet had the potential to promote direct democracy through its innate characteristics: lower cost, extensive volume for storage, directionality, speed, targeting and convergence.

Many researchers point to the evidence of cyberspace's democratising effect on democracy particularly on political institutions such as political parties (Gibson, Margolis, Resnick and Ward, 2003; Ward and Gibson, 2003; Jackson, 2007). In their comparative analysis of the use of the cyberspace by political parties in the United Kingdom and the United States in 2001 general and presidential elections, Gibson et al. (2003) observed that despite a strong dominance of major/big parties online, the smaller parties remained somewhat significant. In the United Kingdom, despite being overshadowed by major parties, minor parties performed well in interactive function. Their research also found that a significant level of provision to e-mail function was used for communication (Gibson et al., 2003:66).

Ward and Gibson's (2003) analysis of party websites in the 2001 election in the United Kingdom, identified cyberspace as a platform to level the political playing field between major and minor parties. The employment of websites and the extensive use of interactive features by minor parties in the electoral campaign was noted by many scholars. Jackson (2007: 267), in his study, found that "the larger the party, the less likely they were to use interaction with online visitors".

The effect of cyberspace on democracy are also analysed in political discourse. Tsaliki's (2002) content analysis of open public forums in Britain, the Netherlands and Greece suggests the evidence of the enlargement of political sphere in cyberspace. She found a significant level of interactive communication, diversity of opinions, search for information and a moderate degree of substantial argumentation. To reassess the question of whether cyberspace has the potential to make political debate more open to voices that are not normally heard in the political field, Steffen (2006) identified an online political forum in Hamburg in which evidence of controversial ideas was present.

By showing the relevance of democracy and the empowerment of marginalised groups, cyberspace has been hailed as a platform that levels the playing field. In part, the relatively low cost of the Internet and the lack of editorial control give fringe organisations opportunities to voice out their concerns and get their messages across more than they would do in traditional media. Lusoli and Ward's (2006) analysis of the cyberspace by a grassroots organisation in the United Kingdom found a positive association between the Internet and the empowerment of marginalised groups. The Internet's interactive communication features such as the e-mail have also been reported as important, almost every other respondent claimed that it was the information they received on the e-mail which led them to attend mass demonstrations. Analysing the evidence from the 2005 Oxford Internet Survey, DiGennaro and Dutton (2006: 310) suggest that the "Internet appeals to those people who think the government is not responsive to the citizens".

Meanwhile, Vromen's (2008) analysis of three Australian youth NGOs has shown the ability of the cyberspace to provide space for the young to connect and form online and offline communities. Her analysis shows strong support for

democracy when cyberspace had given access to the people to express their needs/interests and enable them to communicate with institutionalised political actors.

Despite strong government control of the cyberspace in China, the platform continues to be significant for democratic expression. A number of studies indicate its potential for democracy in the political process (Bell and Boas, 2003; Yang 2003a, 2003b Zhao, 2003). Shi's (2011) analysis in politics of reproduction in China finds the use of social media to challenge the Chinese authorities by holding them accountable for their actions. According to the author, the success of the open protest lies in the ability of social media to generate collective efforts from the public to disclose the negative information in online groups and blogs.

The series of anti-government protests in the Middle Eastern countries were also associated with the use of social media. According to Harrelson-Stephens and Callaway (2014), social media facilitated civil society groups in MENA countries to challenge the states' repressions by informing, mobilising as well as facilitating the movements' causes to international sphere.

Krasnoboka and Semetko's (2006) analysis of online newspapers in Ukraine, confirms cyberspace's potential as an alternative platform to counter reports of events by traditional media. The research tests the view that the internet can challenge the traditional mass media in a non-democratic state. Their research highlights the opportunities given by the cyberspace to opposition groups and voices to be heard online.

Thus, the literature on non-democracies do not show a strong support for the equalisation thesis. Cyberspace and, particularly, the Internet has widened the public sphere but has not translated the change from non-democratic to a more democratic political system.

1.4.2. The Normalisation Perspective

In assessing how far cyberspace can reinvigorate direct democracy, a few empirically-driven studies in liberal democracies have demonstrated the importance of adaptation and adoption of technologies by mainstream political actors. However, far from levelling the political playing field, cyberspace promoted inequalities in party competition (Gibson, Newell and Ward, 2000; Gibson et al., 2003; Kamarck, 2002; Margolis, Resnick and Levy 2002).

Margolis et al.'s (2002) analysis of political parties in the United States shows the dominance of major parties' websites in cyberspace. According to the research, by the year 2000, nearly every major party candidate in the United States' election cycles had a campaign website. In the United Kingdom, major parties outperformed the minor parties in the 2001 elections. The researchers (Gibson et al., 2003: 57) found that the largest parties – Conservatives, Labour and Liberal Democrats – consistently offered more depth and a greater range of activities.

Therefore, even in democracies, the relationship between cyberspace and its effect on democracy is negative. In non-democracies, using Marxist analysis, scholars argue that the Internet is likely to empower the ruling parties and thus strengthen the authoritarian nature of the political system. Scholars also contend that government's surveillance, regulation, monitoring and censorship are likely to be pervasive barriers to regime change (Abbot, 2001; Kalathil and Boas, 2003) despite the growth in the number of Internet users and the presence of Internet dissidents (Chung, 2008; Huang, 1999; Rodan, 2003; Shie, 2004;). A few studies point to the ability of cyberspace to promote democratic expression but it did not lead to a change in political leadership. Access and political culture were also identified as factors that were likely to inhibit extension of democracy. Kalathil and Boas (2003) and Kluver and Banerjee