SOCIO-POLITICAL BLOGS IN MALAYSIA: CHALLENGES TO REGIME SECURITY

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ABSTRACT

There are substantive scholarly works on blogs and its correlation to democratization using Jurgen Habermas public sphere concept, yet few ventures deep into the polity of Malaysia as multi-cultural, multi-ethnic nation. March 2008 general elections, marks the tipping point in Malaysia when it sees a steady rise of internet usage that have successfully denied the BN government for the first time its two-third majority. This research attempts to answer the reasons why socio-political blogs becomes the weapon of choice for public deliberations. The key issues explored are related to the four elements in the Constitution pertaining to the Malay supremacy which is the Malay rights, the monarchy, the Malay language and Islam as the official religion. The findings show that the regime does use these elements, in parts, to justify the suppression of political information and criticism, for maintaining national security and racial harmony while at the same time showcases digital acceptance to appease the demands of the public for a more democratic government.

Keywords: Blogs, socio-political, elections

1. INTRODUCTION

Blogs, as it is known in the world today started off as merely an online expression, daily scribbling of people. It was not until late 1990s, that these personal diaries entered into mainstream consciousness and became known as "weblogs" or blogs (Drezner & Farrrell, 2004). Socio-political blogs have become not only a popular tool but a significant one in affecting a nation's socio-politics. The numbers of blogs have risen over the past 10 years in the United States and similarly Malaysia has not fall behind in this fascination with blogs. Socio-political issues do have mass interest and may have more impact to people's lives. For example, in Techorati's report of the States of Blogosphere 2011 showed the majority of bloggers surveyed felt the Arab Spring topic had the most positive impact, while the topics most read are Tsunami/ Japan Earthquake, London Riots, Death of Osama Bin Laden, Nuclear Crisis in Japan and the Arab Spring rates top five (Technorati, 2012).

2. PROBLEM STATEMENT AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Taking into account the diverse socio-political ecosystem in Malaysia, this research will examine on the impact of socio-political blogs' to the stability of the regime. In what way does the regime feels challenged with these socio-political blogs? The questions are better outlined as follows:

1. Why does blogs matter as the new reliable tool for socio-political change in Malaysia?
2. What are the effects of socio-political blogs to the regime security in Malaysia?

3. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The study will look into the factors of socio-political blogs' prevalence, the effects it has on the regime and the actions taken by the government. More specifically, the main objectives are as follows:

1. To analyse the values of socio-political blogs in providing alternative political news source and co-exist with the mainstream media.
2. To examine the impacts of these socio-political blogs in challenging the regime security.

4. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The prominence of blogosphere as pioneer in shaping new thoughts and ideas, particularly in socio-political issues often associated to the fights for freedom. Freedom of speech, freedom of expression and civil liberties are amongst the many components that are often debated with regards to exercising the new media. But how far is freedom of speech or expression can be tolerated between elites and cadres? It would be improper or rather inefficient to even begin delving into the matters of blogosphere if Jurgen Habermas' conception of public sphere is not being discussed. Habermas (as cited in M.Sani & Zengeni, 2010) describes the democratic ideal of public sphere as "a space that permits citizens to interact, study and debate on the public issues of the day without fear of immediate reprisal from the political and economic powers." These traits seem befitting of what the new media has to offer to the public. For Habermas, human beings are defined as democratic being or *homo democraticus* (Flyvberg, 1998).

This conception of democracy is the core value in Habermas' view of public sphere in that citizen needs to be allowed for free participation in discovering the truths. For this to foster, there should be free media practices - a total press freedom. The correlation between free media and democracy has been the main drives for many proponents of socio-political blogs. The most critical aspect of a public sphere concept is the connections between citizens to engage in "public discourse and communication" (Flyvberg, 1998).

In principal, Habermasian idea is to promote critical thinking using an unrestricted public sphere to find truths. A "healthy communication" realm is called for if this utopian theme was to be achieved. This ability to reason and debate depends much on the issues of intellectuality. Could this 'public sphere' allow for every citizen to debate their way out of societal and political problems?

5. LITERATURE REVIEW

4.1   The Issues of Internet or the Blogosphere

According to Drezner and Farrell (2004), to analyse the influence of blogs in shaping public opinions within the global audience in the light of international conflicts, such as war, one must look at the notion of bloggers being the "fifth estate" who watches over the mainstream media but at the same time causing the bloggers to become directly integrated into politics as usual. Drezner and Farrell further their investigations by delving into two key factors of the "unequal distribution of readers across weblogs, and the relatively high readership of blogs among journalists and other political elites" (Drezner & Farrell, 2008). They used power law distribution models to analyse how the skewedness affects politics. On the study of 4,543 blogs in October 2003, these authors found that while rich sites (the popular sites) are likely to get richer, the poor sites (less popular) stand a chance to be among the top.

Meanwhile Indrajit Banerjee (2006) challenged the weakness in theoretical and methodological literature on the internet's democratic potential, arguing that many of the prevalent studies were having one major deficiency - making generalisations on the political impact of the internet based on technical and architectural features alone, without venturing into the aspects of national and political contexts. His argument carries some weight with what this research is trying to delve into. Given the context related variables such as multi-ethnicity such as Malaysia, Banarjee reiterates that it is a naive assumption to regard blogs to enhance political motivations.

4.2   Malaysia in Context

Mohd Azizuddin (2008) explored in-depth the aspects of freedom of political speech from the liberal theory point of view. His analyses were broken into several major blocs such as the freedom of speech in Malaysia, the liberal theory driving those values of speech, and social responsibility. Some of his main arguments were that responsibilities should be anchored in communal values and government should be more liberal in exercising democracy – allowing for freer access of information both old and new media. Although he remained optimistic, he emphasizes that there should be equally role playing by the practitioners. This aspiration is somewhat a foreign term if compared with the previous literatures discussed so far. Not to mentioned something that he did not delve into in his previous writing.

Jun-E Tan and Zawawi Ibrahim (2008) found blogging activity is true to the keepings of liberalism- blogging can be the democratic tool in any authoritarian regime. Their research undoubtedly offer a very critical view of the government with interviews of selective few of cyber-rights advocates – mostly either openly critical or seemingly neutral. Finally, Singh (2004) delved into the aspects of security in Malaysia, particularly the dimensions of national security and its implications with the socio-political development. He contended while the concept of security if often ambiguous, the idea of national security is inconceivable without the inclusion of the interests of the political regime – a concept familiar with the Third World countries. It is on this virtue that the regime security is reinforced which encompasses other domestic security variables that are mainly non-traditional threats. However, Singh suggested that one cannot easily demarcate the lines between the interests of the state and that of the political regime.

In view of the literatures reviewed in this section, it is quite obvious that the most recurring themes resonate with Habermas' public sphere theory is in referent to the usage of blogs and internet in a democratic nation. This research aims to provide a fair view on the challenges faced by the regime in Malaysia and its responses to the blogs based on selected theories, observations, news, texts, and echo chambers effects on the blogs. It is an attempt to provide a better understanding of Malaysia as the regime that seemingly oppose to the ideas of universal freedom reflected by the usage of internet and blogs, yet at the same time aspires to have these democratic tools to enhance the system of governance and subsequently stands equal with the rest of democratic nations.

6. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research starts by referring to blogroll from Ahiruddin Attan's Rockybru.com.my, and Jeff Ooi's Screenshots.com. These two bloggers were chosen because both of them are inarguably the most prominent bloggers in the country who have started blogging socio-political issues very early in this country. It would be fair to say that these two bloggers helped instil the seeds of 'blogging' as both the cultures and new tool for political freedom.

From these blogrolls, the researcher cross-checks any names that appeared on both bloggers' blogroll to help determine which of the fifteen blogs that would bear importance to look into. However, this research had to dismissed blogroll from Screenshots.com because of several reasons including most in the lists are in Mandarin language and that he has stopped actively blogging the Screenshots.com since May 31, 2004 which means that the blogrolls' data are no longer valid.

Hence, this research only focused on Rockybru.com.my blogroll for its initial selection of blogs. Some of the factors considered in choosing the blogs for this research are the blogs should not be run by politician bloggers, bloggers turned politician or holding any political top membership (E.g. Jeff Ooi or Nathaniel Tan). The highly controversial ones, such as Raja Petra Kamarudin who uses his blog or news portal Malaysia Today's column as blog (his blog or column titled No Holds Barred) were also ruled out including 'So-Po Anonymous bloggers' for concealing identity thus deem less credible and untrustworthy.

Other factors considered which blogs to choose are their respective hits, site traffics. Agarwal, Liu and Tang (2008) suggested to identify influential bloggers at a blog site requires an integrated use of the information specific to a blog site. As such the risk of excluding influential blogs is possible albeit not with intention. The study also focuses the blogs' political stance only after the 2008 general elections particularly since April 2009 – a month where there was a power transition from the fifth Prime Minister Datuk Seri (now Tun) Abdullah Ahmad Badawi to the current sixth premier Datuk Seri Mohd Najib Tun Razak. This was the first critical years and some dubbed as the 'honeymoon' year of the premiership hence attracted many buzz in the socio-political blogosphere.

7. ANALYSIS

The idea that socio-political blog does nothing more than merely 'echoing' messages that is put forth by political elites is define by Wallsten (2005) as containing three ideas which are, mimicking issues discussed in the mainstream media, the position taken on those issues reflects the bloggers' own, and framing and justification on the issues are the same as political elites. More than echoing those messages, this research contends that some messages, particularly those containing the four bedrocks of national stability, does more than echoes – it formulates opinions, reinforces political campaigns that will in turn aggravates the State into imposing more control of the medium.

By using keyword searches "*Sultan*", "*Derhaka*" (disloyalty to the Sultan), "NEP" (or its Malay language equivalent '*Dasar Ekonomi Baru*' or DEB), "social contract" (or its Malay language equivalent '*kontrak sosial*'), "Allah", "*Hudud*", "Malay language" and "PPSMI" on the fifteen socio-political blogs chosen for this research, the results are filtered and checked for relevance to the four aspects discussed earlier and examined. The keyword is clustered into four columns representing the four elements, and the results are as follows:

Table 1: Socio-Political Blogs and Keyword Search

Blogger	Keywords			
	Sultan / Derhaka	NEP / Social Contract	Allah / Hudud	Malay Language/ PPSMI
Ahiruddin Attan	22	13	20	7
Syed Azidi	-	-	1	-
Firdaus Abdullah	5	1	5	-
Tony Yew	4	5	14	2
Ibrahim Yahya	16	7	6	8
Haris Ibrahim	5	10	16	4
Hishamudin Rais	13	29	45	30
Stephen Francis	-	4	20	-
Patrick Teoh	1	9	18	4
Mohd Arshad Raji	5	8	9	2
Nuraina Samad	5	-	3	2
Kadir Jasin	7	18	5	4
Marina Mahathir	1	2	11	5
Dave Avran	-	-	7	-
Jailani Harun	24	6	12	6
TOTAL	**108**	**274**	**198**	**74**

Note: The search based on postings from April 2009 (which marks the helm of Najib Razak and new administration). Some of the keyword search ends with same posting results (redundant).

Based on Table 1, the issue concerning the NEP or social contract receives most attention. This has got much to do with the introduction of the New Economic Model (NEM) in 2010 that was said to be a slow steps in diluting the 'affirmative actions' enjoyed through NEP (Teoh, 2011). It is interesting to see that a seemingly 'critical' or 'anti-government' blogger like Hishamudin Rais (2009) had the most postings on NEP and or social contract. He called the replacement of NEP as the ultimate relinquishment of the Malays and Bumiputra rights. The second blogger who wrote about NEP was Kadir Jasin (2010) with mostly sympathetic views on the replacement of the policy. He strongly feels that there should be a respect to the Article 153 of the Constitution which states to safeguard the interests of the Malays and the Bumiputera. This one particular posting receives 104 comments that mostly agree with the blogger's view.

The second cluster of topic most debated in the blogs is issue on "Allah" and "*Hudud*". Again, Hishamudin Rais hits the highest entries, followed by both Ahiruddin Attan and Stephen Francis. This cluster of topic also trended in all the blogs – particularly since the erupted controversy on the usage of "Allah" to non-Muslims and the much politicised "*Hudud*" implementation. There bloggers however are mostly 'echoing' the message by the political parties they follow with in their writings. For example all the critical bloggers stand united to allow usage of Allah by non-Muslims while the pro-government bloggers are against the usage of Allah. Hishamudin Rais and Haris Ibrahim, for example, actively propagates that it is permissible for everyone to use Allah in reference of God regardless of their faiths. The pros such as Ahiruddin Attan and Tony Yew, for example, opine there should not be provocation with regards to the usage of Allah. On the other hand, the common views found among the seemingly 'neutral' bloggers such as Kadir and Nuraina in light of the Allah controversies, for example, is taking the middle-stand–resolve with meticulousness.

The third most debated topic is concerning "*Sultan*" or "*Derhaka*" with blogger Jailani Harun (2010) trended most postings. Jailani's trending on the issues is mostly about the royal tussle in the Kelantan monarchy. Another reason for the high interest on Sultans in the blogs is due to the Perak's Constitutional crisis that saw the Sultan's intervention in the State's affairs. On the other hand, pro-government blogger Ibrahim Yahya (2010) wrote the need to uphold the monarchy and how the monarchy is the final bastion for the preservation of the Malays and Islam in this country. In another perspective, blogger Hishamuddin Rais had numerous postings on the "*sultan*" and the concept of "*derhaka*". As an avid proponent of the need to not continue the monarchy, Hishamudin (2013) not only mocks at the system but he also derides the idea of "*derhaka*". Finally the least talked about is issues regarding the "Malay language" and its education. Apart from again Hishamuddin Rais that actively campaign for the abolishment of PPSMI since its inception. Others have less than 10 threads on the topic with some in support while others disagree and a few is not interested at all in engaging the topic.

Table 2: Anti-government Protests Since 2007

Year	Civil Movements	Demands	Numbers of Protestors
2007	BERSIH	Electoral reform	20,000-60,000
2007	HINDRAF[1]	Greater representation of Indian privileges and socioeconomic opportunities	10,000
2009	GMI[2]	To abolish ISA	50,000-60,000
2011	BERSIH 2.0	Electoral reform	50,000
2011	Himpunan Hijau[3]	Anti-Lynas campaign	7,000
2012	Occupy Dataran[4]	Abolishment of PTPTN and free education	300
2012	Himpunan Hijau 2.0	Anti-Lynas campaign	15,000
2012	BERSIH 3.0	Electoral reform	80,000-300,000

Note: Author's compilation from the various news reports as referred in the endnotes. However, actual numbers are debatable and these were estimates retrieved from seemingly 'critical' news reports in which highly contrasting with reports from the mainstream media.

Table 2 above clearly shows increase of participants albeit the exact numbers could not be verified, but suggests that social movement protest has taken place in Malaysia generally, and Bersih taking root specifically in garnering public participations. With regards to Bersih activities, the blogosphere are used heavily as the medium of disseminating information, campaigns, and any other details of the movements. Within the five bloggers that this study chose to look into and categorised as 'critical of the government', all of them well exploit the medium to engage 'in the public discourse' of Bersih to their readers. However, it is no more explicit and fervour the discourses in Hishamuddin Rais' *Tukar Tiub (tukartiub.blogspot.com)* and Haris Ibrahim's *The People's Parliament (harisibrahim.wordpress.com)*. The two bloggers are stout activist with Rais as one of the steering committee of Bersih thus it is no surprise to see his blog is fully optimized for moving Bersih campaign, updating almost without fail everyday and even up to several entries per day. In contrast, the other five bloggers whom the study categorised as 'pro-government' utilising their space to counter the debates of the logic of Bersih, the same way they act cohesively to challenge other issues with the 'opposite' camps.

What is unique about Bersih as the contemporary challenge to the current regime is not solely due to its street protests and large supporters, but the very fact that it did attract supporters in the first place despite being muzzled out in the mainstream media and receiving constant attacks from the government to weaken if not seize in entirety its organization. Undeterred and by learning from the past success of GE12 results that took the government by surprise, the proponents of Bersih cleverly utilised its movement using the internet – from its official websites to other social media platform creating ripples of supporters that are not just confined domestically. And, it has never stopped engaging the masses albeit online, creating a steady pool of supporters while at the same time enticing new ones to join the cause.

8. CONCLUSION

Considering the intricate web of socio-political backgrounds weaving the landscape of Malaysia today, the state continues to safeguards the security of the nation to avoid any racial discords. The phrase in the name of 'national unity' or 'national security' are often thrown in to justify any acts to null the threats, mostly internal than external. Throughout the course of its administration, the BN with its leading party, UMNO, has been in power since independence, giving the party a stable, unchallenged hegemony. Embedded in this central of stability, are the four themes – the religion, the royals, the rights and the language – all geared in guarding the Malay traditions inherited even before the colonial times and constituted for posterity. These elements rendered as 'sensitive' and often not challenged or even discussed for the fear of instigating security problems. The emergence of socio-political blogs, particularly has given an unfettered space for Malaysians a chance to voice out issues that are often 'blackout' or 'taboo' in the mainstream media including those four 'sensitive' Malay traditions.

A look at fifteen socio-political blogs as reference in this study reveals that issues of the Malay rights take most debate, followed by Islam, the royals and the language. The rights enshrine in Article 153 of the Federal Constitution calls for the safeguarding of the 'special position' of Malays and the Bumiputra is the source of the discontent among the Opposition who was largely dominated by non-Malays, except for PAS and before the prominence of the Pakatan Rakyat coalition in 2008.

The fifteen blogs also show that many practices 'responsible blogging' as most of them are ex-journalist, professional lawyers and activist that understand the 'limits' their content. Except for a stout supporter of the Opposition that uses his blog mainly for political campaigns such as Hishamuddin Rais and Haris Ibrahim, the bloggers have not really crossed the line by exposing serious threats of defaming documents that can be seen in the case of blogger Raja Petra Kamaruddin or Syed Hussein Al-Attas. Nonetheless, there have been arrest and legal charges against bloggers, some never heard of such as blogger Chan Lilian for 'inciting' Christians to go against the Federal government (Suaram, 2011) or Khairul Nizam Abd Ghani or blog name 'Aduka Taruna' for insulting Johor royals. (Sarban Singh, 2010).

NOTES

[1] Hindu Rights Action Force (HINDRAF) also hands in a petition to the Queen Elizabeth II of England for reparations from Britain for colonial-era abuses. They seek four trillion dollars' compensation for the estimated two million ethnic Indians whose ancestors were brought here as forced coolies by Britain in the 1800s (Bendeich and Fernandez, 2007).

[2] Gerakan Mansuh ISA (GMI) or Abolish ISA was seen as the first real rally post-*Reformasi* 1998 uniting all opposition parties and NGO activists and drew a bigger turn out than Bersih 1.0 that was primarily attracting more ethnic Malays, while HINDRAF fully supported by ethnic Indians. On the same day, it has also seen a 'counter-protest' organized by a coalition of NGOs *Pewaris*. The 'Pro-ISA' rally as the name implies are equally protesting the opposite and in clear support for the government for ISA implementation that is deemed to be vital for maintaining the *status-quo* (Netto, 2009).

[3] Himpunan Hijau or the "Green Assembly" is a movement to stop the construction of Lynas- Australian's rare earth refinery (Chong, 2012).

[4] Occupy Dataran 'inspired' from the New York's 'Occupy Wall Street', activated by students ' movements in demanding the National Higher Education Fund (PTPTN) to be abolished and free education imposed. Students' protestors camp-out in the surrounding Dataran Merdeka (Freedom Square) in the run-up of Bersih 3.0 since April 14 (Lee and Vinod, 2012).

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