

SACRED COWS AND CRASHING BOARS

Ethno-Religious Minorities and the Politics of Online Representation in Malaysia

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ABSTRACT:

Starting with the incident now known as the cow's head protest, this article traces and unpacks the events, techniques, and conditions surrounding the representation of ethno-religious minorities in Malaysia. The author suggests that the Malaysian Indians' struggle to correct the dominant reading of their community as an impoverished and humbled underclass is a disruption of the dominant cultural order in Malaysia. The struggle is also among the key events to have set in motion a set of dynamics—the visual turn—introduced by new media into the politics of ethno-communal representation in Malaysia. Believing that this situation requires urgent examination the author attempts to outline the problematics of the task.

What first undermines and then kills political communities is loss of power and final impotence.... Power is actualized only where word and deed have not parted company, where words are not empty and deeds not brutal, where words are not used to veil intentions but to disclose realities, and deeds are not used to violate and destroy but to establish relations and create new realities. — Hannah Arendt, 1958¹

On 28 August 2009 fifty men lugged a severed cow's head to the gates of the State Secretariat building in the city of Shah Alam, Malaysia. Frustrated with being ignored by the authorities, the men had decided to register their objection

to the relocation of the 150-year-old Sri Mahamariamman Hindu Temple to their majority Malay-Muslim neighborhood, known locally as Seksyen (Section) 23, by desecrating an animal revered in Hinduism, the cow. Originally sited in Section 19, the Hindu temple had been scheduled to be moved to Section 22 in order to make way for residential development. Later it was decided to locate the temple in Section 23 in order to improve transport and access for temple devotees. The disgruntled protestors feared the proximity of the relocated temple to their homes would keep their children away from the nearby playground, drive down property prices, and cause undue traffic congestion. Moreover, they claimed that since no one from Section 22 had raised any objections, the temple could quite happily be moved there.² From their point of view, the demolition and relocation of the historic temple was not a concern as long as the rebuilt temple was not situated within Section 23.

In the protestors' Malay-centric view of the world, the Hindu place of worship was an alien intrusion into their environment. Notwithstanding Shah Alam's history of recruiting Hindu labor migrants to tend its rubber and oil palm plantations ever since the latter half of the nineteenth century,³ the protestors were adamant that the principle of Malay special rights (*ketuanan Melayu*, variously translated as Malay special rights or Malay supremacy) be applied in this instance to place the needs of the Malays above those of the Hindus. Malay special rights is an artifact of the Federation of Malaya agreement arrived at between the member parties of *Barisan Nasional* (BN)—the United Malays National Organisation, the then Malayan Chinese Association, and the Malayan Indian Congress—in order to allow BN to govern the nation after its independence in 1957. In Malaysia, all Malays are bound by law to be followers of Islam.⁴ *Ketuanan Melayu* accords special rights to the Malays as the sons/daughters of the soil (*Bumiputeras*). The initial inter-ethnic bargain included a “four-to-one ratio of Malays to non-Malays in the Malayan Civil Service, the status of the sultans, and the adoption of Malay as the national language.”⁵ After the race riots of 13 May 1969 in which 196 persons died, 496 were injured, and nearly 6,000 homes and properties in the capital city, Kuala Lumpur, were destroyed, these rights were further augmented in 1971 with the New Economic Policy (NEP).⁶

In the general election in 2008 the predominantly Muslim constituency of Shah Alam was, as part of the State of Selangor, wrested away from the stewardship of the ruling BN coalition and placed under opposition rule.⁷ Khalid Abdul Samad—a member of *Parti Islam SeMalaysia* (Pan Malaysian Islamic Party,

1. Arendt 1998 (1958), 200.

2. Sani 2009 (Cow-head).

3. Kaur 2006, 156.

4. Article 160 of the Malaysian Constitution defines a Malay person as one “who professes the religion of Islam, habitually speaks the Malay language, conforms to Malay custom and (a) was before Merdeka Day born in the Federation or in Singapore or born of parents one of whom was born in the Federation or in Singapore, or is on that day domiciled in the Federation or in Singapore; or (b) is the issue of such a person.

5. Andaya and Andaya 2001, 282.

6. *Ibid.*, 298. See www.epu.gov.my/neweconomicpolicy for more details.

7. Moten 2009, 32.



Muslim protesters carry a cow's head during a march on Selangor state offices in Shah Alam, Malaysia, on 28 August 2009. Protestors marched with and later stomped on the cow's head to protest the planned construction of a Hindu temple. (Credit: AP/file photo)

PAS)—became the new representative for Section 23.⁸ Prior to Samad's taking office the Member of Parliament (MP) for Shah Alam was Abdul Asad Sham-suddin from UMNO, a party that prides itself on being the champion of Malays. In contrast, Khalid's party, PAS, is Islamic in outlook but places lesser emphasis on ethnicity and has an agenda that is more inclusive of broader Malaysian society.⁹ As Khalid explains in a posting on his blog, he understood the issue to be the severe congestion caused at the temple's Section 19 site due to a shortage of parking spaces and that the proposed location in Section 23 was aimed at solving the problem.¹⁰ Hence, rather than ethno-religious terms, the incumbent MP, Khalid, saw the issue as one of easing traffic flow in a densely populated residential area. The residents of Section 23 were, however, demanding that the issue be regarded as one of Malay versus Hindu rights and that their interests as Muslims be put ahead of the temple devotees.

Video footage of the so-called cow's head protest is posted on the Malaysia-kini.tv internet site.¹¹ The same footage, complete with commentary, can be viewed on the video-sharing site YouTube.¹² Watch closely and it is apparent

8. A loose opposition coalition formed after the 12th General Election of 2008 known as the Pakatan Rakyat (People's Alliance), consisting of three main parties: the Parti Keadilan Rakyat (People's Justice Party, PKR), the Parti Islam SeMalaysia (Pan Malaysian Islamic Party, PAS), and the Parti Tindakan Demokratik (Democratic Action Party, DAP).

9. See Manifesto of the Islamic Party of Malaysia 2008.

10. Khalid 2009. Although written in Malay, the maps Khalid includes provide a useful visual explanation.

11. Ong 2009.

12. See, for example, www.youtube.com/watch?v=LzZnzgXfyQY; accessed 4 December 2011.

from their general demeanor that the men involved were aware that their every word and deed was being observed and recorded for further dissemination. Keep watching to see several of the protestors holding up their mobile phones to snap amateur photos of themselves stepping on the cow's head—even as journalists rushed up for the headline shot. Despite this, after the event Malaysia's home minister, Hishammuddin Tun Hussein, defended the protestors as being unaware of the cow's head and hence, not to be blamed for any callous or inflammatory behavior.¹³ When reported, this defense was met with derision. Perhaps the most succinct and ultimately telling of the replies was that of a Malaysiakini reader, Netty Komattu, who declared: "Technology does not lie."¹⁴

A multiethnic, multireligious nation-state in the heart of Southeast Asia, Malaysia is frequently held up as an example of a moderate Muslim nation.¹⁵ However, performances like the Section 23 protest threaten this concept.¹⁶ "Performance" is used deliberately here to denote the growing tendency with which Malaysians of various persuasions are purposefully adding media, and in particular "new media," to their arsenal of weapons in intra-national, communal struggles for representation.¹⁷

According to Stuart Hall, the accepted meaning of any visual sign is not a given but is rather assigned through a society's "dominant cultural order."¹⁸ The preferred meaning of any sign, therefore, encapsulates and embodies the social, ideological, and political order of the context within which it is applied. Though polysemic in nature and never entirely predetermined, the dominant meaning of any sign is never easily dislodged.

In Malaysia, the cultural order is colored by the notion of *ketuanan Melayu*.¹⁹ The principle of "Malay supremacy" is enacted in myriad ways in daily life, from language policies in education and matters matrimonial to university placement.²⁰ It is also one of the biggest bones of contention among Malaysia's diverse populace. One consequence of the notion of such a systematic, institutionalized form of discrimination at the hands of the State is the inequitable status of non-Malays in comparison to Malays. In other words, the dominant cultural order in Malaysia is Malay and thus, theirs is the preferred reading of most signs. For example, a 2011 survey of ethnic relations carried out by the independent Merdeka Center for Opinion Research, found that racial stereotyping by Malays of Malaysian Indians as "untrustworthy" has changed very little in the five years between 2006 and 2011.²¹

As a group, Indians comprise 7.5 percent of Malaysia's total population.²² Malaysian government statistics place the mean monthly gross household income

13. Sani 2009 (Hisham).

14. Komattu 2009.

15. Karim 2010.

16. Dhume 2009.

17. In this article, "new media" includes the internet as well as mobile telephone short messaging services (SMS) and video captures.

18. Hall 2008 (1980), 240.

19. Ting 2009, 36.

20. For more detail on these enactments, see Goh et al. 2009.

21. Ethnic Relations Survey 2011, 44.

for Malaysian Indians at RM 3,999 in 2009, which, in comparison to RM 3,624 for Bumiputeras, seems to contradict the dominant reading of the Malaysian Indian community as an impoverished and humbled underclass.²³ However, the majority of the Malaysian Indian community are employed in low-paying occupations classed as “elementary occupations” (12 percent) and “plant and machine operators and assemblers” (25.8 percent), while only small numbers are employed as “professionals” (4.5 percent) and “[l]egislators, senior officials and managers” (12.0 percent).²⁴ Hence, it is, in part, the dominant reading of the Malaysian Indian community as an underclass that led the Section 23 protestors to believe that desecrating the cow was an acceptable expression of opposition to the temple’s relocation to their neighborhood.

For this reason I locate the cow’s head protest within the politics of representation and see it as part of the Malaysian Indians’ struggle for the dominant meaning their community holds within Malaysia. In this context, recent efforts by Malaysian Indians to correct the dominant reading of their community as an impoverished and humbled underclass disrupt the dominant cultural order in Malaysia. That Malaysian Indians have used new media in their attempts to upset the status quo is neither incidental nor trivial. As we will see below, new media have played an important role in the politics of representation in Malaysia due to their dominance within the social imaginary. Komattu’s pithy “technology doesn’t lie” comment and the performance of the Section 23 protestors are both cause and symptom of this emergent problematic wherein new media technologies are assumed to possess intrinsic veracity by some even as they are employed by others who seem to pay little heed to their highly replicable, viral nature.

In this article I trace and unpack the events, techniques, and conditions surrounding the contested representations of the Malaysian Indian community and analyze how new media methods are employed in the enactment of these representations. In the process, I will discuss how new media inflect social, political, and cultural interaction in contemporary Malaysia. The objective here is modest: to frame the problematics of the dynamics introduced by new media into the politics of representation in Malaysia.

Coming In from the Edge

Broadly speaking, three overlapping waves of Indian migration into Malaysia took place over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, each facilitated by one of the three British colonial systems of labor migration: indenture, kangani,²⁵ and voluntary. Large numbers of South Indians were brought over from India to work as laborers in plantations, transport systems, and ports of Malaysia under British rule. Though many North Indians also made their way to

22. Saw 2007, 70.

23. Household Income and Poverty (no date given).

24. Saw 2007, 153.

25. Kangani is an assisted form of labor migration based on compatriot recruitment from villages. Kaur 2006, 158.

26. Kaur 2006, 157.

what was to become Malaysia, the British preferred South Indians because they were perceived to be more “malleable” and amenable to management than the northerners.²⁶ This preference so skewed the type of labor migrants allowed into Malaysia that while 118,591 Indian laborers were working on plantations alone in 1935, there were only 20,846 migrants from the North of India in the whole of Malaysia at that time.²⁷ Hence, though a heterogeneous community even then, the majority (80 percent) of Malaysia’s Indian community have South Indian origins and these proportions remain the same today.

Most Malaysian Indians from the subcontinent’s south share certain characteristics. The first is the practice of the Hindu religion; the second is their belonging to the ethno-linguistic community of Tamils. The demographic dominance of Tamil-speaking Hindus is one reason why within Malaysia, there is a slippage when reference is made to the Indian community. While not all Indians are Hindus and not all Tamil speakers are Indian,²⁸ within Malaysia the overlaps and crossovers between these groups are so thickly entwined that the Indian community is largely associated with the Tamil-speaking Hindu community. Nonetheless, internal divisions based on the differences of North and South Indian origin and socioeconomic status and social mobility have been obstacles to the Malaysian Indian community’s ability to harness sufficient political will to action.²⁹

Another reason for the slippage or conflation of the Indian with Hindu and Tamil stems from one of the legacies of British rule, a racialized style of governance that divided Malaysia’s population into four main ethnic communities: Chinese, Malays, Indians, and Others (CMIO).³⁰ Postindependence politics in Malaysia has been organized along similar ethno-religious lines. Each of the three main ethnic communities has been represented in the ruling BN coalition for decades through political parties formed around such differentiations. Within the BN coalition of Barisan Nasional, Malays are represented by UMNO (United Malays National Organisation); Chinese, by MCA (Malaysian Chinese Association); and Indians, by the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC).

Though predominantly North Indian in leadership, the MIC derives its constitutional support from the larger South Indian community.³¹ As such, the Tamil language and Hindu customs have been emphasized in the decades since independence at the expense of the other ethnic and linguistic groups that comprise the Malaysian Indian community. Given that up until 2000, parts of the Malaysian Indian community practice Islam (4.1 percent), Buddhism (1.2 percent), and Christianity (7.8 percent), such a conflation excludes outright those who either do not speak Tamil or practice Hinduism.³² Nonetheless, their prevalence

27. Figures derive from tables provided in *ibid.*, 159, 161.

28. For example, Ananda Krishnan, who is among the richest persons in Malaysia, is of Tamil (Sri Lankan) origin.

29. Tate 2008.

30. A catch-all category that includes any group that does not fit into the other three ethnic communities.

31. Kaur 2006, 165.

32. Saw 2007, 79; Willford 2009, 29.

as the de facto constituency of the MIC has helped to cement the view that in Malaysia Tamil-speaking Hindus are the Indian community.

In addition to its ethnically stratified political system, Malaysia is also unusual in that it has a dual legal system. Sharia (Syariah) laws govern all Muslims on personal matters such as “marriage, divorce, guardianship, maintenance, adoption, legitimacy, family law, gifts or succession, testate and intestate.” Non-Malays, in contrast, are subject to the secular criminal and civil law system of the land.³³ Also written into Malaysia’s constitution is the recognition that the secular court has “no jurisdiction in respect of any matter within the jurisdiction of the Syariah courts.”³⁴ In Malaysian society, therefore, clear ethno-religious demarcations separate Malays from non-Malays.

In recent years Malaysian citizens have become less acquiescent with the perceived unequal treatment meted out to non-Muslims. While non-Malays have been dissatisfied with the New Economic Policy (NEP) since it was implemented in 1971, threats of full-blown dissent have been held in check by the heavy hand of Malaysia’s authoritarian governments and by memories of the trauma suffered during the violent racial riots of 13 May 1969.³⁵ However, as a 2007 poll by the Merdeka Center for Opinion Research shows, Chinese and Indian Malaysians have placed corruption and the “rights of [one’s] own race” and “protecting freedom of religion” as among the issues that are most important to them, but with which they are least satisfied regarding the government’s performance.³⁶

Poignant proof of such anxiety can be found in the example of Gilbert Freeman, who applied before the Sharia court to recognize the change of his name from Mohammad Shah. Although the son of a Muslim man, Freeman was raised a Christian after his father left the family when he was a child. Yet at sixty-one years of age he had to take the extraordinary step of appealing to the religious court of a faith he never subscribed to in order to ensure he would be buried as a Christian rather than as a Muslim.³⁷

Deemed constitutionally to be without jurisdiction over the Sharia court, the civil courts of Malaysia cannot ensure justice for all. In 2007, for example, Malaysia’s federal court of Malaysia was unable to rule in the case of Lina Joy, who wanted to convert from Islam to Christianity.³⁸ Matters were left similarly unresolved in 2009 when Hindu Shamala Sathiyaseelan appealed to the legal system to rule on the forced conversion of her two children to Islam after she and her husband, Jeyaganesh C. Mogarajah (now Muhammad Ridzua), divorced and he converted to Islam. Even though the Cabinet has banned the conversion of minors,³⁹ the State’s stance on individuals caught between the two jurisdictions in

33. Constitution of Malaysia. Part I: The States, Religion and Law of the Federation 1957, Ninth Schedule, List 1, Federal List, Part 4 (ii).

34. Article 121 (1A), Constitution of Malaysia. Part I: The States, Religion and Law of the Federation 1957.

35. Heng 1997.

36. 12th General Elections 2008, charts 12, 13.

37. Malaysian Wins Court Battle to Become Christian 2009.

38. Hamid and Azman 2007.

39. Ahmad 2009.



In 2005, the formation of Hindraf, an alliance of over thirty associations, brought disparate Hindu organizations together into a community united by a keenly felt historical sense of being discriminated against. (Courtesy: Hindraf)

matters of religious conversion, marriage, and burial remains unclear under the terms of the Federal Constitution.⁴⁰ Though discrimination against non-Malays has been tolerated in the name of racial harmony and peaceful coexistence, the Malaysian State's discriminatory policies may be overstepping the limits of the non-Malay communities' abilities to accept the inequitable exchange.

In recent years, among the injustices most acutely suffered by the Hindu community has been the demolition of temples as illegal structures erected without permits—sometimes with the prospect of relocation, but often without even that recourse.⁴¹ In 2005, the formation of Hindraf, an alliance of over thirty associations, brought disparate organizations together into a community united by a keenly felt historical sense of being discriminated against. Yet, the establishment of Hindraf itself did not grow out of a single grievance or even a set of grievances but rather from a cumulative sense of having been thoroughly marginalized within Malaysian society since independence.

As a former British settlement, Malaysia's constitution was devised and hammered out by the departing British in conjunction with the local elite (a group still dominated by Malay-Muslims) in the process of retrocession. The considerations the constitution extends to the welfare of Malay-Muslims and the alleged neglect for the plight of Indians embodied in the constitution emboldens Hindraf and its constituents to seek redress for perceived injustices.⁴² So much so that in the lead-up to the Hindraf Rally of November 2007, Hindraf added

40. Conversion Case Puts Govt's Promise to Test 2009.

41. Pressure on multi-faith Malaysia 2006; Lee 2009, 190.

42. Footage of the rally is available via Channel News Asia, a regional English television channel based in neighboring Singapore at www.youtube.com/watch?v=JU8ZsNYSGbQ (accessed 5 December 2007). Pay attention to the impassioned plea of a member of the community starting about fifty-two seconds into the footage. The depth of feeling is obvious.

their own interpretations to the footage of temple demolitions (used with the permission of its originators, Malaysiakini.tv) to construct a new media narrative of the religious oppression suffered by Hindus in Malaysia.⁴³ The resultant video, “The Malaysian Indian Dilemma,” was replicated in the then popular VCD format and distributed to temple devotees in the earlier part of 2007.⁴⁴ The same footage was later uploaded and disseminated globally via the internet and can still be viewed on blogs⁴⁵ and YouTube today.⁴⁶ In spite of the government’s attempts to abort the 2007 Hindraf Rally, the accumulation of grievances was sufficient for Hindraf to follow up on 25 November 2007 with a protest event that drew a surprise turnout of around 10,000. This event, the Hindraf Rally, and more importantly the Malaysian state’s authoritarian, unyielding, and ruthless response to its staging—from a court order and the use of a cannon that sprayed chemical-laced water to the subsequent arrests of Hindraf’s leaders—was again captured on video and in photographs. Crucially, these graphic and emotionally charged images were swiftly and assiduously uploaded by bloggers, websites, and online news broadcasts to be witnessed by the thousands not present on the occasion.⁴⁷

The viral replicability, speed, and hyperlinked spread of new media enabled Hindraf’s organizers to engage with multiple interested parties and utilize the tropes of religious freedom, postcolonialism, constitutional rights, diaspora, and transnationalism.⁴⁸ These last two, diaspora and transnationalism, are powerful forces in the context of contemporary India’s large, mobile, and influential middle class. With a substantial proportion of its population living outside India, Non-Resident Indians (NRIs) are increasingly conscious of, sensitive to, and vocal about the mistreatment of fellow Indians abroad. At least some of this awareness is fueled by the accessibility of media coverage through the internet of events and issues concerning Indians abroad. One effect of the coverage the Hindraf Rally received online was to focus much needed attention by overseas governments and the broader international community on the Malaysian government’s destruction of temples and the continued poverty of Malaysian Indians. The notoriety of the treatment meted out to the protestors was sufficient to move the Indian national government to express its “deeply solicitous” concerns for the “people of Indian origin living abroad” and prompted nineteen British parliamentarians to urge the British government in parliament to intervene and halt the demolition of Hindu temples in Malaysia.⁴⁹

On 13 December 2007, about two weeks after the Rally, the five leaders of Hindraf, legal advisers P. Uthayakumar, M. Manoharan, R. Kenghadharan, and V.

43. Leong 2008, 85–86.

44. Video Compact Disc (VCD) technology preceded compact discs. Though not much used outside of Southeast Asia, the VCD is still common and easily accessible in many Malaysian households. See Steele 2009 (Professionalism), 107.

45. See, for example, Raj 2007 and Manivannan 2007.

46. TruthbetoldSir 2007 (part 1), 2007 (part 2), 2007 (part 3), 2007 (part 4), 2007 (part 5), 2007 (part 6).

47. See, for example, Hindraf Demo in KL 2007.

48. Leong 2009.

49. Banerji 2007; Veelloor 2007.

Ganabathirau, and organizing secretary T. Vasantha Kumar, were detained.⁵⁰ Under the terms allowed by the Internal Security Act, the Hindraf leaders were held without trial for 514 days.⁵¹ On 9 May 2009, the Malaysian government succumbed to the pressure from the British and Indian governments, the local and international community, and activists from across the globe and released the five leaders. Nonetheless, in the interim, the home minister declared Hindraf “a threat to national security,” and the government banned Hindraf as an illegal organization in October 2008.⁵²

One longer term consequence of the Hindraf Rally and the backlash from the cow’s head protest is that issues concerning Hindus in Malaysia are today no longer matters easily swept aside. With the aid of new media, the machinations and strategies of Hindraf have moved their marginalized community closer to, if not into, the center of the Malaysian imaginary. To a lesser degree, these events may also have reinforced a heightened consciousness of the transnational connections and affections that link those who originate from the same nation. Now that they have found a voice and myriad ways of giving vent to their calls for redress, Malaysian Indians are unlikely to ever again suffer in silence.

Netizens, among others, have directed much criticism at Hindraf for positions they describe as “overblown” (especially its charges of genocide) and for being locked in the race-based politics of Malaysia and exclusionary of the other Malaysian Indian constituencies.⁵³ As Vijay Devadas points out, both Hindraf and many of its critics “[work] from and [are] informed by a politics of closure which returns to racial and cultural specificity as the terrain for forging a solidarity.”⁵⁴ Despite this criticism, upon his release from detention on 9 May 2009, P. Uthayakumar, one of the leaders of Hindraf, founded the Human Rights Party (HRP) as the political arm of Hindraf with a view to contesting for “fifteen Parliamentary and thirty-eight Indian majority seats” in the 13th Malaysian General Elections.⁵⁵ The HRP’s entire focus is on issues that concern Malaysian Indians.

The Hindraf Rally is, however, not the only event that has disrupted the status quo in Malaysia in recent years. On 10 November 2007, prior to the Rally, an estimated 40,000 people gathered in support of the call for electoral reforms in what became known as the Bersih (Coalition for Clean and Fair Elections) Rally.⁵⁶ Despite multiple warnings about the illegality of the mass gathering and a show of strength by the police force, Malaysians across all ethno-religious boundaries showed no lack of will toward change.⁵⁷ Would the Malaysian Indian citizenry have been equally bold about their protest over long-held grievances without the earlier Bersih Rally? Perhaps not, but what is clear, as Hannah Arendt argues, is that when deeds and words are used “not to violate and de-

50. Kabilan 2009.

51. Teoh 2009.

52. Lourdes and Sittamparam 2008.

53. Attan 2007; Gunaselan 2007; Sani 2007.

54. Devadas 2009, 95.

55. About us 2011.

56. Ooi 2007; Gatsiounis 2008, 61.

57. Bersih People’s Gathering 2007; Bersih Rally 2007.

stroy but to establish relations and create new realities,” the power of political communities is, indeed, exercised.

Media in Malaysia

Malaysian cyberspace is distinguished by the Mahathir government’s pledge at the launch of the Multimedia Super Corridor Mega Project in 1996 to refrain from censoring internet use in Malaysia.⁵⁸ As the former prime minister explains on his personal blog, the government’s commitment was given at the recommendation of “an International Advisory Panel consisting of prominent IT personalities from around the world.”⁵⁹ The overriding concern was and is with the negative impact internet censorship might have on the international multimedia investors the State still wants to entice to the Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC). The relative laxity of new media regulation in Malaysia is thrown into sharp relief by the contrasting iron grip the State has over mainstream broadcast media of television, film, newspapers, and books. The high level of control is maintained through a complex of conditional, annually renewable licensing schemes, direct or proxy ownership of media corporations by the ruling coalition, and censorship and other severe laws developed during colonial times to counter the communist insurgency (e.g., the Internal Security; Sedition; and Printing Presses and Publications acts).⁶⁰ For a long time, then, mono-vocality has been the norm in mainstream Malaysian media.

In the late 1990s, with the internet much more easily available in Malaysia and the MSC-related cyber laws in place, new voices from the margins began to flourish online. Unfettered by the restraints placed on film, television, and print producers in Malaysia, nongovernmental organizations, bloggers, online news sites, and website producers reinvigorated civil society. The online news site Malaysiakini.com, for example, has since 1999 been able to exploit the uncertain status of online publishing to sidestep many of the operational, legal, and ethical costs and constraints of Malaysian mainstream media production.⁶¹ It is this discrepancy in regulation between new and mainstream media and the gap this discrepancy creates for voices from the fringe that distinguishes the media and representational space of contemporary Malaysia.

Najib Abdul Razak, Malaysia’s current prime minister, has only recently reaffirmed the government’s “no internet censorship” pledge,⁶² but this uncharacteristically liberal loophole is under threat: Home Minister Hishammuddin Tun Hussein has threatened bloggers with arrest under Malaysia’s Sedition Law⁶³ for irresponsible displays of information relating to the monarchy, race, or religion. Despite the prime minister’s reaffirmation of an internet free from censorship, Hishammuddin insists that “[b]loggers who incite hatred or harp on sensitive issues like race and religion in their postings can be prosecuted for se-

58. Cyberlaws and Intellectual Property Laws 2007.

59. Mahathir 2010.

60. Nain 2000.

61. George 2006; Steele 2009 (Professionalism).

62. Dass 2009.

63. Nain 2000.



Addressing the First Malaysian-Asean Regional Bloggers Conference in Kuala Lumpur in April 2011, Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak reaffirmed his government's fifteen-year-old policy that there would be no internet censorship. (Credit: bigdogdotcom.wordpress.com)

dition.”⁶⁴ Hishamuddin has also promised to set up a formal, centralized monitoring mechanism for blogs. At present an uneasy impasse is in place between the need to foster new media industries in Malaysia and the State’s perception of the need for greater control, but the possibility of some form of government censorship is real.⁶⁵ One example of such censorship is the government’s plan to review the Communication and Multimedia Act 1998 in order to bring online sedition under its purview.⁶⁶

New media in Malaysia continue to change, of course, as members of the ruling elite and politicians with deep pockets and better resources begin to involve themselves in the contest for the upper hand online. For example, most major Malaysian newspapers like the New Straits Times, the Star, and the Sun⁶⁷ have an online presence and regularly feature event blogs, online polls, and videos. Politicians and their parties have also set up slick websites and blogs. The establishment is pushing its way into the fringes or perhaps, new media is being pulled into the center from its accustomed position on the edge. Will the maverick character of new media in Malaysia transform into something more closely resembling the mainstream? Time will tell.

The incongruence in media regulation is only one reason why Malaysian civil

64. Murali 2009.

65. Choo 2011.

66. Rais: Cabinet to Rule on Enforcement of Law against Online Media 2011.

67. See www.nst.com.my/; thestar.com.my/; and www.sun2surf.com/.

society was ripe for invigoration when the internet came along. As Sudipta Kaviraj explains, it is important to understand that unlike Western nations, postcolonial countries like Malaysia and Singapore have not, historically, possessed the push or need for active civil societies.⁶⁸ This is, in part, because after the colonial British withdrew in the late 1950s, the immediate, primary task of national survival outweighed all other considerations for the local elite who came to form governments. Faced with the imperative for rapid economic development, the governments of these brand new states often took on greater responsibility for nation building than was usual for Western governments. Resolute purpose, cohesion, and the “illusion of consensus” were deemed essential for national existence, and, over the decades since independence, this single-minded focus on economic progress has nudged most vestiges of active, adversarial, and dissenting civil society to the fringes of society, away from the center of agency.⁶⁹ This historical dynamic makes the recent growth of civil consciousness in Malaysia all the more remarkable.

The impetus for this emergence of a nascent civil society comes from the collision of several factors, including the readiness of organizations like Hindraf and influential individuals like Anwar Ibrahim, former deputy prime minister, who have the political nous and technological savvy to represent their constituencies. A former acolyte of Malaysia’s longest-serving prime minister, Mahathir Mohamad, Anwar was co-opted into UMNO from Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia (Malaysian Islamic Youth Organisation) in the 1980s. Until he fell out of favor with the ruling elite in June 1998, Anwar served in the Mahathir administration as Malaysia’s deputy prime minister during the 1990s.⁷⁰ Jailed on charges of corruption in 1998 and later again on subsequently overturned charges of sodomy, Anwar returned to Malaysian politics in 2008, providing a much-needed focal point for the opposition in the 2008 general elections.

GE '08 (General Election 2008)

Malaysia’s twelfth general election in early 2008 was a milestone event for a number of reasons. The first was the surprise result: a resounding victory for the heretofore divided and politically puny opposition parties. By reducing BN’s two-thirds majority in government to a simple majority, the opposition ensured that neither “legislation passed by the state” nor the constitution could any longer be amended “at will.”⁷¹ The second was the pivotal role attributed to new media after the results were announced. The importance of new media was given prominence when then prime minister Abdullah Badawi and his deputy, Najib Razak, publicly admitted that they had underestimated the value of the internet in engaging the citizenry. This, they said, was one of the main reasons for the election results.⁷²

68. Kaviraj 2009, 314–15.

69. Ibid.

70. Andaya and Andaya 2001, 329; Noor 2005, 212.

71. Moten 2009, 32.

72. Habib 2008; Govt to Focus on Internet Media 2008.

The election itself, which took place on 8 March 2008, was hotly contested by both minor and major parties. With the advantage of greater financial resources, the ruling BN Party turned as usual to Malaysia's mainstream media. All in all, BN splashed an estimated 4,500 billboards across Malaysia in the lead-up to the election and placed close to 1,100 full-color advertisements in local newspapers.⁷³

Minor parties, with their modest budgets, campaigned door-to-door, mounted posters, and distributed leaflets. At the same time, videos not unlike Hindraf's "The Malaysian Indian Dilemma" were screened repeatedly at the start of ceramahs (small-group discussions) and rallies to remind Malaysian Indian voters of their grievances.⁷⁴ SMSs (short message services), which had already been used prior to and during the Hindraf Rally by those in as well as outside of the organization to inform and misinform, were again employed by both minor and major parties as part of their campaign efforts. Additionally, theme songs were widely disseminated; some were even made available for download to be used as mobile phone ring tones.⁷⁵ With 23.34 million mobile phones shared among a population of 24.3 million in 2007, the spread of coverage for political campaigners deploying mobile phone technology in Malaysia was considerable.⁷⁶ In what was widely seen to be a "too little / too late" gesture, BN launched its campaign website only two weeks prior to the election.⁷⁷

The election results saw the BN coalition lose its parliamentary majority, held since 1969, and cede control of five out of thirteen states to the opposition parties, who won 140 out of 220 seats.⁷⁸ Compared to its landslide victory of 2004, BN's returns in 2008 were dismally poor.⁷⁹ That no less than four seats were also fought for and won by "bona-fide bloggers"⁸⁰ was a fact not lost on many.⁸¹ Some commentators argued that the election results were achieved on the back of the internet and attributed BN's losses in the twelfth general election to its "apathy towards the use of the internet."⁸²

The power of the internet must be acknowledged, but the election results clearly owed more to the influence of renowned figures like Anwar Ibrahim⁸³ and events like the Bersih and Hindraf Rallies around which public anger and

73. Moten 2009, 26–27.

74. I am indebted to Steven Gan, editor of Malaysiakini, for permission to use this information, which he shared with me in conversation at the Anzca (Australia New Zealand Communication Association) 2009 conference in Brisbane, 8–10 July 2009.

75. Moten 2009, 28.

76. Saw 2007; Cell Phone Usage Worldwide: By Country 2009.

77. The Barisan Nasional website is at bn2008.org.my.

78. Moten 2009, 32, 40.

79. Ibid., 21.

80. Jeff Ooi won the seat of Jelutong in Penang; Tony Pua won the Petaling Jaya Utara; Nik Nazmi won the seat of Seri Setia; and Elizabeth Wong for Bukit Lanjang in Selangor. Moten 2009, 39.

81. Ibid.

82. Koh 2008; How BN Lost the Media War 2008.

83. Although not eligible to stand for office during the election because of his conviction for corruption in 1999, Anwar Ibrahim emerged as a well-known figure around whom the opposition parties could form alliances. Anwar's status enabled the parties to set aside distinctly different agendas to negotiate and work with the common desire to respond to the widespread dissatisfaction of their constituencies. See Moten 2009, 37–38.



Malaysia's opposition People's Justice Party candidate Nurul Izzah, center, and her father, former deputy prime minister Anwar Ibrahim, right, during a rally on nomination day in Kuala Lumpur, 24 February 2008, at the start of the national elections. (Credit: APPhoto)

determination to act coalesced. Nonetheless, political campaigning for the twelfth general election was a leap forward in the Malaysian public's understanding and usage of the internet. For example, rallies were recorded and uploaded on audio-video repositories like Flickr and YouTube and were written about on countless blogs and social networking sites, including Facebook, MySpace, Friendster, and HiFive. Importantly, information on campaign developments and events obtained via the internet were disseminated as well by other means such as word-of-mouth and SMS.

Aside from new media, other factors that account for the election successes of the opposition include an understanding of the differences between and within constituencies and the provision of multiple sources and access of campaign information to socioeconomically plural audiences. Another crucial factor was the approach and subsequent efforts that Hindraf leaders developed and deployed successfully in the cause of their marginalized community during the latter half of 2007. And although blogs, along with many of the technologies Hindraf used, predated the group's existence, it was largely their opportunistic appropriation of techniques like the transfer of video clips from VCDs to online repositories and blogs that demonstrated the possibilities to broader Malaysian civil society. In a sense, then, Hindraf, its constituency, and its methods were the testing ground for many of the new media techniques employed by lesser-resourced minor opposition parties in the twelfth general elections. Kaviraj

argues that postcolonial societies like Singapore and Malaysia typically allow the State a greater level of domination over their citizenry.⁸⁴ In light of the public (online) space for dialogue and dissent beginning to open up in Malaysia and the 2008 election results, the State's domination is being challenged. For Malaysians, the experience of "citizenship-as-legal status" has now been replaced by "citizenship-as-desirable-activity."⁸⁵ No longer content to leave the rule of the nation to their political masters, the people of Malaysia have started to call their representatives to account, individually and collectively, voicing dissent, gathering en masse to seek redress for past wrongs through protests like the Hindraf Rally in 2007, the Bersih protests in 2007 as well as 2011, and, finally, voting new political representatives into office at the 2008 general election.⁸⁶

Malaysia Truly Visual?

During the run-up to election the subscription online news site Malaysiakini played a major role in providing up-to-date and diverse information by allowing the electorate free access to its contents for ten days.⁸⁷ A post-election poll conducted by the Merdeka Center for Opinion Research showed that of those who obtained their news on the election through the internet (12.9 percent) a third (4.3 percent) were found to have done so through Malaysiakini.⁸⁸ During the campaign period, true to its editor Steven Gan's determination to "stand with the underdogs, no matter who they are," Malaysiakini endeavored to "be as balanced and as objective as possible," providing coverage of the less-represented parties alongside the better represented ones.⁸⁹ According to Steele, "[d]espite the popular belief that it is the Internet that challenges the Barisan Nasional's stranglehold on power, it is actually the norms and values of independent journalism that have made Malaysiakini such a threat to government authorities."⁹⁰ It is important to note that in the case of the cow's head protest and the Hindraf Rally, it is the emphasis on visual evidence, what I call the "visual turn" of the content, produced by Malaysiakini, that has proven to be crucial to how support and interest from the Malaysian and international communities were subsequently gained. As Barbie Zelizer argues, "How we might remember through images remains powerfully different from how we might remember the same event were images not involved."⁹¹ Interestingly, it was Malaysiakini's recognition that "the Tamil community would be better served by video than text" that prompted the news site to start its very own video portal, Malaysiakini.tv.⁹² The visual turn in Malaysian politics, therefore, owes something to the awareness that media practitioners and producers have had of the Tamil community's

84. Kaviraj 2009, 314–15.

85. Kymlicka and Norman 1994, 353.

86. ChannelNewsAsia 2007; McGarmott 2011; Jha 2009.

87. Steele 2009 (Professionalism), 108.

88. Peninsula Malaysia Voter Opinion Poll 2008, 21.

89. Kee and Gan 2010, 214–15.

90. Steele 2009 (Professionalism), 108.

91. Zelizer 2004, 158.

92. Steele 2009 (Called).

needs as an audience. The visual image of a man as powerful as Anwar Ibrahim entering the courtroom in 1998 with bruises around his eyes and arms and in a neck brace was a shock that Malaysians still recall.⁹³ On further investigation, Anwar's injuries were revealed to be the result of police assault during Anwar's detention—and not self-inflicted as then prime minister Mahathir had claimed.⁹⁴ According to Barbara Andaya and Leonard Andaya, Anwar's "arrest, beating and incarceration shocked Malaysians and the outside world, accustomed to perceiving Malaysia as a stable parliamentary democracy."⁹⁵ In 2009, Anwar Ibrahim released to the media video footage he had obtained showing senior lawyer V.K. Lingam in conversation with the then chief judge of Malaya, discussing the promotion of judges within the Malaysian judiciary system.⁹⁶ Thereafter known as the "Lingam Tape," this incident along with the unsuccessful attempt at hiding the origins of Anwar's injuries in 1998, have reinforced the overall conviction that the best way to assess the veracity of any event is through visual evidence.

Today, Malaysiakini.tv viewers see the words "Small Lens, Wide Views, No Lies" in the top right-hand corner of every Malaysiakini.tv video. The tag line speaks of the ethos of independent journalism that guides the work that Malaysiakini produces on a daily basis. It speaks even more to the belief in the power of the visual via the act of witnessing. Zelizer writes that "images help us remember the past by freezing its representation at a powerful moment already known to us."⁹⁷ Though video footage involves motion, it captures the past in a similar fashion, allowing repeated playback to aid recollection and thus shape collective memory. The same holds true of public understanding. At work are two sets of forces: denotative and connotative.⁹⁸ The denotative force of images draws on the basic idea of capturing, freezing an event or a moment; the images rely on the pre-digital understanding that photographic images cannot lie.⁹⁹ Documentaries and other nonfictional accounts of events rely on the idea that they are what John Grierson calls the "raw material of actuality" and therefore, "factual and truthful" depictions of the "socio-historical world."¹⁰⁰ That this is the dominant understanding of the visual in Malaysia is evidenced by Netty Komattu's "technology does not lie" retort.

There is, however, as Hindraf's "The Malaysian Indian Dilemma" video itself demonstrates, a difference between raw, unadorned, and untouched footage and that which is used to persuade, argue, and change opinion. This latter usage relies on what Beattie calls "expositional realism."¹⁰¹ Sound and image, in these instances, are organized and arranged into a coherent narrative that aims to drive home a specific point of view. Those who claim the witnessing power of

93. Anwar in Court Again 1998.

94. Anwar's Injuries Investigated 1998.

95. Andaya and Andaya 2001, 329; Fuller 1998.

96. Lee 2009, 194; Lingam Tape 2009.

97. Zelizer 2004, 158.

98. Ibid., 159.

99. Ibid.

100. Cited in Beattie 2004, 10.

101. Beattie 2004, 16; original emphasis.

audiovisual media to challenge the status quo in Malaysia often mistake the moral authority that witnessing lends them for the representative voice that expositional realism allows.

The Section 23 protestors are a case in point. Their objective was obviously to have their opinion heard loud and clear. Toward that end they desired to create noise and produce media-worthy sound bites and photographs. Hence their use of the gory cow's head as a prop in their protest to demonstrate their hostility toward a marginal community who practiced what to their minds was an alien religion made a twisted kind of sense to them. Their further acts of contempt—stomping and spitting on the cow's head—could simply have been a result of being egged on by the surrounding mob.

What seems to have happened is this: Section 23 residents performed for the benefit of the media entourage that accompanied their protest in August 2009. In their haste to create a media-worthy spectacle, however, they overlooked a key facet of new media understanding in Malaysia: that given the truth-speaking role that visual evidence has had in Malaysian controversies, like the matter of Anwar's injuries in 1998 and the Lingam Tape in 2009, viewers are now more disposed to trust the testimony of the raw video footage than any verbal assertions of truth. The undoing of the Section 23 protestors, it would seem, lay in their actions being captured on video and their obvious playing up to the camera. Rather than lending authority to their protest, once uploaded onto Malaysiakini.tv for public viewing, the footage exposed their insensitive glee in crudity and laid bare their incomplete understanding and perversion of the power of protest, voice, and media.

While protests are not remarkable in any nation that declares itself a democracy, the manner in which individuals and groups express their dissatisfaction can be counterproductive to their cause. As Perera reminds us, “[m]ultiethnic, multiracial societies are not geared towards unavoidable conflict. For that to happen active choices must be made; one set of options adopted over another; certain things said or not said; positions actively staked out; exclusions and inclusions clearly demarcated.”¹⁰² Actions, decisions, exclusions, and choices such as those the Section 23 protestors engaged in can precipitate quarrels and heighten tension. The same refusal to engage in discussion was exhibited at a follow-up public dialogue the Shah Alam City Council convened to clear the air after the protest, with one protestor declaring, “[w]e are not here to talk. Only protest,” even as other protestors reportedly “refuse[d] to sit and walked around the hall, shouting.”¹⁰³ While seeking to voice their own dissent, the Section 23 protestors failed to allow anyone else to speak theirs.

In their eagerness to have their grievances aired, the Section 23 protestors neglected to listen. The politics of voice have to be tempered with attention to listening. The shift from the egotism of speaking to the openness and receptivity

102. Perera 2006, 19; original emphasis.

103. Ganesh 2009; Malaysia: Public Dialogue on Hindu Temple Relocation after Cow Head Protest Disrupted 2009.

of listening is deliberate and crucial.¹⁰⁴ This is all the more so when deeply entrenched differences divide communities and marginalize some as they do in Malaysia.

The Malaysian government was initially reluctant to take any action over the cow's head protest—even when confronted with complaints about inconsistencies in how they applied the anti-Sedition laws. For example, when a group of forty Hindu protestors tried to hold a candlelight vigil on 6 September as counter-protest to the cow's head incident, the police did not hesitate to arrest them, thereby accentuating the inconsistency.¹⁰⁵ That same day, the Malaysian Communication and Multimedia Commission (MCMC) questioned Malaysiakini's editor-in-chief, Steven Gan, over the release of the video. The MCMC declared the cow's head protest video to be provocative and offensive under the Communication and Multimedia Act 1998. Despite the MCMC's stated position, Gan refused to remove the video from the Malaysiakini site.¹⁰⁶

The protest video's continued accessibility via the internet illustrates the Malaysian government's dilemma: the government is caught between its 1996 pledge not to censor the internet and the boldly critical coverage of the government's actions, decisions, and omissions reported on by online news sites like Malaysiakini, The Malaysian Insider, and The Nut Graph. In any event attempts to censor at this late stage would be futile: once data is uploaded online, whether in the form of audio, visual, text, or graphics, replication is easy. Even if Gan were to withdraw the video from the Malaysiakini news site, it already sits on many other online video repositories like YouTube and is embedded in dozens of blogs.

On 10 September, after almost two weeks of prevarications, the police succumbed to public pressure and arrested twelve of the fifty or so people who took part in the cow's head protest.¹⁰⁷ All twelve individuals were charged with illegal assembly. Initially all twelve pleaded not guilty to the charges but close to a year later changed their plea the day before trial.¹⁰⁸ Eventually only six were charged with sedition in 2010 over their actions and “the intent to wound religious feelings of any persons.”¹⁰⁹

The visual turn and the belief in the power of the visual it seems to inspire is not entirely a salubrious turn of events for politics in Malaysia. While the truth-telling claims of visual evidence have been used to pressure members of parliament like the MCA's Chua Soi Lek out of office,¹¹⁰ the public screening of

104. Dreher 2009.

105. Even before this incident, many were arrested under the charge of illegal assembly. See, for example, the appeal for the release of twenty arrested during a candlelight vigil in May 2009. Zahlid 2009.

106. Gan Sticks to His Guns over Malaysiakini Video of Protests 2009.

107. Yeng 2009; Malaysia: Public Dialogue on Hindu Temple Relocation after Cow Head Protest Disrupted 2009.

108. Jong 2010.

109. Ibid.

110. A married man with three children, Chua was filmed having sex with an unnamed female. He resigned as health minister after the video was uploaded onto the internet and embarrassed the coalition government. Malaysian Minister Chua Soi Lek Resigns over Sex Tape 2008.

expositional videos has also given rise to a somewhat hysterical sensationalism. The same mixed bag of moral outrage and poor media literacy, for example, was evinced in the furore over seemingly revealing photos of Elizabeth (Eli) Wong, MP for Bukit Lanjang, in Selangor during the earlier part of 2009. Private photos of the minister were released without permission by an ex-partner and published by the Malay Mail, a Malay-language newspaper. However, unlike Kartika Sari Dewi Shukarno, a Muslim subject to Sharia law, who was once caught drinking beer and sentenced to six strokes of the cane,¹¹¹ Wong was innocent of any crime under Malaysian law. Yet the publication of the photos and the ensuing media sensationalism led Wong to tender her resignation from public office in February 2009.¹¹² The unresolved complexities surrounding the dual legal systems of Malaysia were once again exposed to scrutiny and found wanting in its basic premise that only Malays need abide by Sharia law. Although not a Malay and therefore, not subject to Sharia laws, Wong was sufficiently pressured by the dominant cultural order's preferred reading of her pictures to relinquish office.¹¹³

The appeal of the visual has not been missed by the mainstream media in Malaysia. Many newspapers now offer video or multimedia content as part of their coverage. The Star, Malaysia's largest English-language daily, for example, now has TheStarOnline.tv. The New Straits Times has a permanent sidebar on its website featuring videos. Accompanying the growth of the visual turn in Malaysian politics is the rise of grassroots journalism. Citizen Journalism Malaysia (CJM), for example, a spin-off from Malaysiakini, lists on its site seventy-two individuals of differing ethnicity, ages, and creeds who have received training in citizen journalism since 2009 and as a group have been responsible for posting 782 videos and 880 blog posts since.¹¹⁴ A glance at the CJM home page reveals the diversity of issues covered, ranging from illegal parking and cooking for the poor to the formation of the first laughter group in the town of Batu Pahat. Again, Malaysiakini has been instrumental in this development—training and empowering individuals throughout Malaysia to report on their local communities and issues.¹¹⁵

Furthermore, Malaysiakini's qualified acceptance of footage and reports produced by citizen journalists also helps to legitimize the notion of citizen journalism, offering hope that the descent into a morass of scandal mongering that threatens Malaysian cyberspace can be arrested through the increased diversity of news sources and the testimony of video footage. It remains to be seen whether the much-anticipated media plurality does indeed translate into an enduring poly-vocal civil society wherein multiple social actors can use multiple

111. The harshness of the sentence earned Malaysia much unwanted international attention. The punishment has since been suspended until after the Muslim fasting month of Ramadan. Ahmad and Cheah 2009; Model to Be Caned for Drinking Beer in Malaysian Bar 2009.

112. See elizabethwong.wordpress.com

113. Wong was eventually persuaded to return in April 2009 after two months on leave. Chong 2009.

114. See cj.my/cj-list/; accessed 24 October 2011.

115. Citizen Journalists in the Making 2009.

forms of media freely to express their opinions and raise issues of concern in Malaysia.

Conclusion

The notion of “people power” received its biggest boost in Asia when Corazon Aquino, with the support of everyday Filipinos and Filipinas, chased President Ferdinand Marcos out of office in 1986.¹¹⁶ Since that time other peoples and other nations have taken up the cudgel of collective power to push the marginalized to the center. The Orange Revolution in Ukraine in 2004¹¹⁷ and the red- and yellow-shirted protestors for and against Thailand’s former prime minister, Thaksin Shinawatra, in 2009 are some examples.¹¹⁸ The symbolic power of color is a thread that runs strong in world politics today.

Perhaps there is reason to think that the historical emphasis on skin color is shifting to an emphasis on color as a symbol of unity, regardless of race, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status. It may be that the era of inter-ethno-religious politics is passing in Malaysia and new media is bringing marginalized communities like the Malaysian Indian in from the edge of Malaysian imaginary. According to Brian Ulciny, Malaysia has an estimated five hundred to one thousand sociopolitically active bloggers; in all probability more are cropping up each day.¹¹⁹ While the government remains true to its promise not to censor the internet, it has, according to its former law minister, Zaid Ibrahim, “been talking of controlling the internet in one form or another since the last [2008] general election” in order to check new media users’ rampant desire to question.¹²⁰ The example of the iron grip that neighboring state Singapore exerts over online discussion through laws that require “private or individual bloggers” who “persistently propagate, promote or circulate political issues relating to Singapore” to register with the Media Development Authority must be equally tempting and galling.¹²¹ Although influential figures like Mahathir have proposed the adoption of a code of ethics for Malaysian bloggers, this suggestion has not been acted upon.¹²²

A diversity of voices, a multiplicity of opinions, a readiness to speak, and an even more vital willingness to listen are objectives to which any society that desires peaceful coexistence must aspire. These are the requisite conditions for the making of space in one’s imaginaries for others within the multiethnic, multireligious societies that are typical of much of Asia. New media has a salience in Malaysian society because it underpins the efficacy of its emergent civil society vis-à-vis the mono-vocality of mainstream media.

Malaysians are showing themselves to be connected by many important commonalities despite seemingly intractable ethno-religious differences. In a

116. Boudreau 2004, 176–89.

117. York et al. 2007.

118. Red-shirt Protest Rally Begins 2009; Thai “Yellow Shirts” Protest Terror Charges: Police 2009.

119. Ulciny 2008.

120. Chance 2009.

121. Registration for Internet Content Providers: Political or Religious Content 2009; Tan 2011.

122. Zalkapli 2009.

collaborative effort involving over 120 individuals, including local Malaysian artists, celebrities, and activists, the “Here in My Home” song and music video featuring local artists and celebrities ranging from activists and sportsmen to corporate figures demonstrated the willingness to work together and overcome difference. Produced on a volunteer basis, “Here in My Home” is dubbed “a gift to the nation.” The video’s producers have asked others to spread the message of sodality by downloading the video or song freely available on the internet, playing the song on radio and television stations, and embedding the video’s content on blogs, banners, and websites. In the music video, artists of various ethnicities use Malaysia’s four official languages—Malay, Chinese, Tamil, and English—to urge viewers to “hold on” against those who “speak falsely” and “push back” for the sake of “one love undivided.”¹²³

Yet, it is important to be reminded that the power of new media must be tempered with the critical understanding that not everything one sees is necessarily true. Contrary to Komattu’s assertion, technology can lie. In order for Malaysians to use new media meaningfully in their efforts to overcome their differences, its citizenry cannot cede the “‘work’ required to enforce, win plausibility for and command as legitimate the new dominant readings”¹²⁴ to those who seek only to maintain the status quo.

That Malaysians can and do perform this work was demonstrated by a failed attempt at mischief-making that took place a few months after the cow’s head protest. On this occasion, the severed heads of another animal were sacrificed to make a point. The heads of wild boars, which are native to Malaysian forests, were left anonymously at two separate mosques in Malaysia. Ironically, both places of Islamic worship were situated in Petaling Jaya, a major city next to Shah Alam within the state of Selangor. Fears of a repeat of the 1969 racial riots resurfaced,¹²⁵ but most Malaysians stayed calm and no violence ensued. This is despite the fact that boars, which belong to the same genus as swine, are considered unclean in Islam, and Muslims are deeply offended by the boar heads being deliberately brought to the mosques. Perhaps it helped that Malaysia-kini’s video footage of the recovery of the boar heads was relatively tame and lacked the dramatic elements present in the cow’s head protest.¹²⁶ In any case, that the footage remains accessible online is testimony that though it may be, as Goh asserts, “fantasy” to wish Malaysia’s race-based system of governance away,¹²⁷ there is reason to hope for and imagine a postcolonial multiculturalism based on “border-crossing politics” in Malaysia.

123. Khoo 2009.

124. Hall 2008, 240.

125. Hookway 2010. The 1969 racial riots of 13 May were a consequence of interethnic communal tensions. However, the event is best and bitterly remembered by Malaysians as the catalyst for the New Economic Policy (NEP) that saw Malays as Bumiputeras (sons of the soil) being granted privileges that, up to present times, still make everyday life as a non-Malay in Malaysia highly inequitable.

126. Wild-boar Heads Found at Two PJ Mosques 2010.

127. Goh et al. 2009, 217.

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