

Internet News Boost to Malaysian Political Reforms

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PENANG, MALAYSIA (PANOS) ? When Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad dramatically announced his resignation on 22 June, only to retract it an hour later, many sceptical Malaysians turned to the Internet to try to make sense of the stunning news.

And in the hours leading up to the 25 June official announcement about the future of Mahathir, excitement reached fever pitch. Tens of thousands visited their favourite websites for the latest news.

So heavy was the traffic that Malaysiakini.com (Malaysia Now) sank under the weight, and many users were unable to access the site.

?Our site couldn't handle the traffic ? the server couldn't handle it,? marvels Steven Gan, editor of Malaysiakini which hosts an average 100,000 visitors a day. ?We ourselves couldn't get into our website.?

Historically, the demand for alternative news peaked after the dramatic ouster of former deputy premier Anwar Ibrahim in Sept 1998 ? an event that unleashed reformasi calls for wide-ranging political and social reforms and shook Malaysian society.

The Malay word for reforms is widely used in Indonesia and Malaysia to describe the popular demand for political change and reform. Thousands of reformasi-chanting Malaysians took to the streets to protest the sacking, arrest and beating of Anwar ? once tipped to succeed his mentor Mahathir.

?The Anwar affair was able to have the catalytic effect upon civil society that it did because of the impact of the Internet,? says researcher Jason P Abbott of the department of international studies at Nottingham Trent University in Britain, in his paper Internet and Reformasi in Malaysia.

The Internet, he says, linked activists from all over the world to form ?building blocs? for democratisation processes. ?The more activist-inclined users simply printed materials from the web, photocopied them and then distributed by fax, mail or hand to tens of thousands more.?

Raja Petra Kamarudin, director of the Kuala Lumpur-based Free Anwar Campaign, says: ?People needed the Internet because of reformasi. And the Internet spread the information where normal means were not available.?

Since 1999, most of the anonymous reformasi websites have become dormant, leaving just a handful as flag-bearers. In their place, a band of alternative ? and more credible ? news websites has blossomed, nurturing a more critical political awareness among significant sections of the population.

When United States Secretary of State Colin Powell visited Malaysia on 30 July this year, he said that Anwar was wrongly convicted of corruption and sodomy. While Malaysiakini.com reported his statement, the website of the major national daily, New Straits Times, was strangely silent on the issue.?The Internet has, to some extent, provided some democratic space for concerned Malaysian citizens ? although they are largely confined to the urban middle class,? says Mustafa Anuar, a Penang-based lecturer in mass communications.

?The many websites that blossomed, particularly news portals such as Malaysiakini, have put

mainstream newspapers on their toes. The cover-ups of certain incidents or issues in the newspapers are exposed by these websites, Anuar points out.

Mainstream newspapers, mostly owned by vested political and business interests, have to apply for a new publishing licence from the Home Affairs Ministry every year. As a result most exercise self-censorship.

Opposition newspapers are only allowed to be published once a fortnight and in theory can only be sold to party members.

When Harakah, the newspaper of the opposition Parti Islam SeMalaysia (PAS), was forced to scale down its frequency from twice a week to once a fortnight, its publishers turned to the Internet.

‘Especially after the [July 2001] ban on political gatherings, the only hope is the Internet,’ says Harakah editor Zulkifli Sulong. ‘It can be updated at any time.’

Sulong is not too concerned about the low access to the Internet among poorer and rural communities.

‘Television [used to be] limited in the rural areas, but now you can see it in almost every house,’ he argues. ‘In the same way, more people will have access to the Internet in rural areas as time passes.’

Some people wonder if official guarantees on non-censorship of the Internet will continue into the post-Mahathir era.

Kamarulzaman Zainal, press secretary to deputy premier Abdullah Badawi, who is slated to succeed Mahathir, told Panos Features that there are no plans to introduce laws restricting Internet websites at the moment. ‘This is the cyber world. You cannot curtail them. If you curtail them, the borderless world doesn’t mean anything,’ he says.

But he adds: ‘They must be very objective and not slander [others].’

Although 10 per cent of Malaysia’s population had access to the Internet in 2001, and the Energy, Communications and Multimedia Ministry expects it to rise to 25 per cent by 2005, the Internet has its limitations in creating political awareness. Most people in Malaysia use it as a form of entertainment.

At an Internet café near the Science University of Malaysia in Penang, a few customers try to outclass each other in a computer football game. ‘I would say just two to three per cent of our customers look up news websites unless there is hot news like Mahathir’s resignation,’ says the café’s manager, Rosli. The vast majority, he says, use it for chatting, games, emailing and word-processing.

But as Malaysiakini’s Gan says, ‘Though we may reach only a relatively small number of people, our reports are being discussed by decision-makers and the people who matter, and that gives us a bit of influence in the political debate.’

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