

Conceptual barriers to 'e-democracy' in Malaysia

Eric Loo

September 1998 marked a watershed in Malaysian politics with the arrest of the Deputy Prime Minister, Anwar Ibrahim on corruption and sodomy charges. Street protests by Anwar loyalists found their way to the Internet with unexpected proliferation of pro-Anwar reformation (reformasi) sites and online news outlets, such as Malaysiakini and AgendaMalaysia. This article discusses the Internet's influence, or the lack of it, on the democratisation process in Malaysia where its citizens and the mainstream media are fundamentally apprehensive to challenging authority, which is inclined to use its punitive powers to circumscribe what is politically correct discourse in the public sphere.

The functional relationship between the Internet and enhanced information access in developing societies is self-evident. What is less known is whether the Internet has necessarily led to greater democracy in authoritarian states, or widely described as 'e-democracy', the meaning of which varies across cultural, political and economic boundaries. Theoretically, e-democracy begins to evolve only when governments begin to interface proactively online with its citizens. This stems from the provision of efficient online information services to sanctifying a public space for interactive dialogue and debates guided by the values of free expression, transparency and accountability.

Essentially, this article perceives 'democracy' as a form of government that allows space for its citizens regardless of race, class, gender or wealth to engage in public life and be heard, through the aid of communications technology, on important issues which impact on their status in life; where every citizen has equal access to the structures of opportunity to realise their political, economic, cultural and social potential. Discussions on 'e-democracy' in the academe (CID, 2002; NITC 2001; Shariffadeen 1995, 2000) and democracy online sites such as E-Democracy Home Page (www.edemocracy.gov.uk); Democracies Online Newswire (www.publicus.net); and The Commonwealth Centre for Electronic Governance (www.electronicgov.net/) generally take the view that the values to be integrated into a public culture, which includes the conventional media fulfilling its moral role as the people's representative, are:

- Easy affordable community access to government information and the media.
- Online interaction across multiple levels among civil society groups and the State, which effectively means creating a practical and clear structure for the people to access government

web sites to lodge their support or protests on policies that affect their daily lives.

- Online access to Parliamentary Hansard reports to promote transparency in governance where political representatives will be held accountable for their views.
- Politicians actively consulting with their constituents on policy development and recommendations.
- Civic-minded public conscience founded on proactive grassroots participation in dialogues on public issues.
- Community-oriented media mindful of its responsibility to question, analyse and inform on critical public issues.

These communicative values, aside from being practically non-existent in the Malaysian public sphere, are generally considered to be somewhat insignificant to the average Malaysian, whose priorities are defined more by tangible socio-economic imperatives than political and intellectual pursuits on the Internet. MGG Pillai, a veteran journalist, civic advocate, and listowner of Sang Kancil at Malaysia.net says that:

'e-democracy is a non-starter in Malaysia so long as there is disinterest about it amongst the citizenry and, despite its promise to be at the cutting edge of technology, the government. In a society where the citizenry is not interested in making himself heard, when newspapers, radio and television are owned and operated by a member of the governing National Front coalition, and when important public issues are never, as a rule, articulated in public, the coming of the Internet cannot lead to freer and more open critical discussion of public issues,' (Email interview, May 2002).

He added that:

'All the Internet provides is a forum for the disenchanting, the NGOs, the political parties and, after the Anwar Ibrahim affair, the reformasi groups to air their views. They could not before the Internet because the mainstream newspapers, radio and television would not give them the time

of day. Now they can. This does not lead either to freer or more open critical discussion of public issues. It is just another venue for them. Because they now have a voice, the Internet is seen as a saviour. But all it has done is to provide another means to talk to those to whom they already do.'

Pillai's sentiment is shared by Sean Ang, policy technologist from the National IT Council, which advises the government on ICT development policies:

'Sensitive issues especially those related to race could be a hurdle towards open discourse in Malaysia. However, there are no evidence at the moment to suggest that open discussion via the Internet has led to or stirred greater racial conflict. If we assume that most ethnic conflicts occurred within the marginalized groups then it is unlikely that e-democracy will lead to greater conflict given that e-democracy users will come from the lower middle income group and above. The new conflict will be between those who are 'connected' and those who are 'not connected' - hence the digital divide ... e-democracy is viable only when all Malaysians are connected,' (Email interview, May 2002).

Steven Gan, editor-in-chief of Malaysiakini says:

'The government does not want to encourage e-democracy. E-commerce, yes. E-government - in terms of reducing bureaucracy paperwork, yes. But e-democracy - whether viable or not, the fear factor is there to retard open discussion. The writers normally use pseudonyms. The fear is there. Subscribers (to mailing lists) are also afraid so they use the anonymous email. Fear is there - may slow down the e-democracy project but will not be able to starve out the open discussion,' (Email interview, May 2002).

Integrated community, yet necessarily differentiated

Active engagement between the Malaysian government, the intelligentsia, NGOs and the community is circumscribed by a history of politico-cultural sensitivities, media clampdowns, inter-racial suspicion, which is further exacerbated by religious and cultural differentiations, the latter often politicised by candidates campaigning on racial issues at each state and federal elections.

As of 2000, the Malaysian population of about 23.3 million with a literacy rate of about 84%, comprises three major groups – the Malay 'Bumiputeras', Chinese and Indians. About 43% of the population are rural. Bumiputeras are further segmented into sub-groups such as the Malays predominantly in West Malaysia; and the Melanaus, Bajaus, Kadazans, Ibans and Meruts in

Sabah and Sarawak. The Chinese likewise have their subgroups based on clan identities such as Hokkien, Cantonese, Teochew, Hakka and Hainanese. Subgroups in the Indian community are the Malayalees, Punjabis, Tamils and Bengalis. Other minority groups are the Eurasians and Sinhalese.

The Malays and other indigenous communities account for about half of the population. The Malays are all Muslims, historically agrarian, and, as a result of British colonial distribution of power, have been dominant in state and federal politics. The Chinese constitute 37% of the population and Indians 11%. The Indians are mainly Hindus and speak Tamil. The Chinese are much more diverse in their religion and dialect, arriving from China in the late 19th century to work the tin mines, small cottage industries and restaurants. Chinese currently dominate the business sector. The Indians migrated to Malaya during British rule as indentured labour from South India. They mainly worked in the rubber estates and railways. Pockets of Indian Muslims, locally known as 'mamaks', today dominate the Muslim food outlets. However, today's Indian intelligentsia have carved a niche in public administration and in the professions of medicine, engineering, law and academia.

Differences in religion, ethnicity, language, and structural imbalance remain a divisive force despite the government's attempt at communal integration after the race riots in May 1969. The government instituted a series of affirmative race-based New Economic Policies (NEPs) in 1971 to increase the presence of Bumiputeras in science and information technology, academia and commerce. Over the decades, the NEPs have created a distinctive demographic pattern in the university student population and, thus, simmering disenfranchisement among the non-Bumiputeras. A common sight on Malaysian campuses are students congregating in distinctive racial groups.¹

The government takes the view that Malaysia's fragile racial mix and politics necessitate a form of governance, which is based on restraining critical public discourse on race issues, education, religion, special rights of the Bumiputeras, and the national language. Public debates are curbed by the Internal Security Act and Sedition Act.² Today's mainstream media coverage of critical issues is equally tempered by a history of state clampdowns on critical 'anti-government' media reportage. Fear and apprehension, which leads to intellectual disengagement in the public domain, even extends to the academia. For instance, the University and University Colleges (Amendments) Act, 1995 prohibits academics from making any public statements that may be perceived as being political or critical of the government.

Essentially, self-censorship is built into the Malaysian media process through the lessons of history in which political bureaucrats continue to contain the diversity of public discourse and ideological positions through the invocation of security and libel laws, surreptitiously through their relationships with journalists, and indirectly by politically affiliated media owners. Malaysian newspapers consequently tend to offer their readers a daily diet of mainly business news and social features, while neglecting the core issues of environmental degradation, public corruption, racial discrimination, cronyism, or the activities of opposition political parties and civil society advocacy groups all of which are increasingly being reported by Internet news sites, primarily Malaysiakini.com.³

However, the Internet backbone, JARING (Joint Advanced Research Networking) comes under the jurisdiction of the government agency, Malaysian Institute of Microelectronics Operating System (MIMOS). Thus, the government continues to control the mechanism of commercialisation in cyberspace through its licensing bureaucracies, ownership concentration in Telekom, pricing structures, and application of libel/national security laws through its less-than-independent judiciary. Content regulations currently place the onus on list owners to ensure that what is communicated in bulletin boards do not break the law, thus eventually compelling Internet Service Providers and list owners to become indirect censors to avoid prosecution.

With government-supported ICT initiatives and capitalisation of the Internet as an information delivery tool, one can be hopeful of an evolving democratic process. While network connectivity has relatively expanded the scope of political expression at the grassroots level, it has not necessarily led to critical democratisation at the governmental level. On the contrary, governments are using the Internet to extend their reach to communicate its political agenda to the people, while at the same time shaping and directing the growth of the Internet within the ambit of national development objectives, such as with the experience of Singapore and China.

Studies to date have yet to establish a causal link between Internet penetration and democratisation in authoritarian states. What is agreed, however, is the Internet's role in mobilising public opinion in challenging authoritarian regimes as evident in the organisation of mass student protests in Indonesia, which led to the resignation of Suharto in 1998 (cf. Kalathil, Shanthi & Boas, 2001 for a detailed study).

Relevant to discussions on e-democracy in Malaysia are the parallel issues of social capital; level of civic and political consciousness; notions of democracy and good governance; and level of community participation in public affairs. To date, Malaysian studies in the latter areas are relatively scarce. Nevertheless, demographic data available provides a basis to speculate on the realities of 'e-democracy' in whatever form it may assume in the context of the Malaysian communication environment.

As of 2001 nearly half (43.3%) of the Malaysian population still live in the rural areas. The labour force continues to be concentrated in the manufacturing sector followed respectively by agriculture, forestry, and fisheries, local trade and tourism, services, government, and construction. Over the years, manufacturing has overtaken agriculture as the main growth sector, but information service and knowledge-based economy, despite the government's much publicised Multimedia Super Corridor initiatives, remains minimal compared to Singapore.

Recent studies have delved into Malaysian students' motives for using the Internet (Musa & Narimah, 2001; Safar Hasim, 2000; Latifah & Samsudin, 2000). To date, apart from media commentaries, there have been no systematic local studies on the scope of 'democratic discourse' on the Internet. Musa and Narimah (2001) noted that the most common Internet activities among Malaysians were chatting, e-mailing and playing games. Some activities cited by

the sample of 2015 users included 'hanging out, surfing to artistes' web sites, pornography and snooker' - a far cry from 'democratic' discourse. In terms of access to Internet connections, the research shows distinct inequity between urban (45.8%) and rural constituents (21.5%).

A parallel study of 800 students in the Klang Valley noted that 76.5% used the computer mainly for playing games; and if they were connected to the Internet, about 88% noted chat mails, or Internet relay chat (IRC) as their main activity. More than half (55.5%) said it was mainly for entertainment and information search. Interestingly, more than half the students felt the 'government should control the Internet' (58%); that 'parents should monitor usage of Internet' (57%); and that 'there should be a code of ethics for Internet usage' (63%) (Safar Hasim & Fatimah Yusoff, 2000).

Need for an intellectual revival

Former Deputy Prime Minister, Anwar Ibrahim (1996) noted in his book *Asian Renaissance* that only when the mind and intellect are freed of internal insecurity and are relatively independent of external constraints can the cultural and intellectual reawakening of Asia (and Malaysians) begin to evolve. Thus, whatever inherent communicative powers of the Internet there are to be exploited will in the meantime be restricted to commercial transactions - as is currently prevalent in Malaysia's attempt to become a regional IT leader over the next 10 years.

Conceptual and attitudinal obstacles continue to retard any prospects of greater democratic practices in Malaysia. As MGG Pillai notes:

'For e-democracy to succeed -- in Malaysia or elsewhere -- there must be a citizenry that wants it. When they look at politics as being of no importance, and have no concept of community living, and keep their counsel when they disagree or not speak out if they have a point of view, how could it translate into this new-fangled thing like e-democracy? Even Internet connections is an urban thing, almost all of it concentrated in the Klang Valley. Despite the government's claim that the Internet is widely available, when many a rural community does not even have electricity, how can they access the Internet there? The government has no clear plan for wider Internet access. It went slow after the plethora of reformasi websites. Instead of confronting them, and replying and arguing with them, they went into rigor mortis. The last thing it wants is to engage with the Opposition, for it believes it can govern without them. So, it would deign to be seen to challenge them' (op.cit., 2002).

Kiranjit Kaur, chair of the civic group committee in the Communication and Multimedia Content Forum (www.cmcf.com.my) in Malaysia says: 'Perhaps for the moment, yes (Internet's impact on democracy in Malaysia) may be limited. The current trend of Internet usage is more for

chatting and non-productive use. Also, the infrastructure and access is still limited. However, once the society gets used to taking their discussions on the Internet more seriously, and there is wider usage of it, it may have more effect' (Email interview, 2002).

Conclusion

It was not until the emergence of reformasi groups on the Internet following the arrest of Deputy Prime Minister Anwar in late 1998 on corruption and sodomy charges, which bolstered a new found confidence among activist NGOs and civil society groups, that a structure began to evolve for concerned citizens to engage with public affairs. But whatever optimism there was for a Malaysian-type 'e-democracy' to evolve since the MSC project was launched in 1994, is currently tempered by the urban-rural divide in Internet accessibility; and conceptual barriers created by complacent government bureaucracy, and dominance of the English language on the Internet.

The fundamental barrier to an 'e-democracy' ever evolving remains more attitudinal than infrastructural. That attitude is mirrored in mutual ambivalence towards active online engagement between the state and the people, the latter being shackled to a history of entrenched self-censorship and learned apprehension of open critical debates. One is inclined to wonder if the average Malaysian is sociologically and culturally averse to democratic critical engagement in the public sphere. Thus, the question of how adaptable Malaysians are to capitalising on the presumed 'democratising' influence of the Internet.

The processes of open online discourse in Malaysia, evident in the government's hands-off approach to the Internet so far, may be set in train. But enabling a politically passive citizenry and re-educating a traditionally complacent government bureaucracy to take advantage of the 'democratising' opportunities offered by the Internet remains the greatest challenge. n

Notes

1. UMNO Youth and PAS Youth have been most instrumental in maintaining the quota system in university places for the Bumiputeras, despite the Prime Minister, Dr Mahathir Mohamad's recommendation to the UMNO general assembly in 2001 that the quota system needed a review to be based on merit rather than race. Meritocracy was bluntly rejected by UMNO Youth leader, Datuk Hishamuddin Hussein Onn as being disadvantageous to Bumiputeras whose special rights date back to the time of Independence in 1957 when the British recognised the Malays' rights to land; admission to public services; issuing of permits or licences for operation of certain businesses; scholarships, bursaries or other forms of aid for educational purposes. The Constitutional (Reid) Commission commented in the 1957 Constitution: 'Our recommendations

are made on the footing that the Malays should be assured that the present position will continue for a substantial period, but that in due course the present preferences should be reduced and should ultimately cease so that there should be no discrimination between races or communities.' (Report of the Federation of Malaya Constitutional Commission 1957, Govt Press, para 165, p.72). However, two years after the May 13 race riots in 1969, and with the deposition of the first Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman in 1971, the new Malay ruling elite felt that adequate opportunities had not been made available to Malays, especially in education and that there should be a larger proportion of Malays in the various sectors. In 1971, under Emergency conditions, Article 153 was duly amended to introduce the quota system for Malays in institutions of higher learning. Clause (8A) specifically provided for the reservation of places for Bumiputeras in any university, college and other educational institutions. Moves to amend the clause have been consistently rejected by UMNO since then.

2. For more information on these Acts and other prohibitive laws refer to Wong, Kean. (2000). 'Malaysia: In the grip of the government', in Louise Williams & Roland Riche (eds), *Freedom of the Press in Asia*. Asia Pacific Press. ANU:Canberra; and HM Safar, Asiah Sarji & Gunaratne, S. (2000). 'Malaysia' in *Handbook of the media in Asia*, Gunaratne, S. (ed), (pp. 317-349). Sage: New Delhi; and Zaharom Nain & Mustafa Anuar (1998), 'Ownership and control in the Malaysian media', in *Media Development*, 4/1998, London: WACC.

3. For detailed discussion of media clampdowns in Malaysia, refer to the Aliran website at: www.aliran.com.my

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Eric Loo (PhD) is head of the Graduate School of Journalism, University of Wollongong, NSW in Australia. He has worked as a journalist in Malaysia, the Philippines and Australia. He is founding editor of Asia Pacific Media Educator (www.uow.edu.au/crearts/journalism/APME/edinfo.html). He can be contacted at eloo@uow.edu.au