

CHAPTER 9

Digital Media and Malaysia's Electoral Reform Movement

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On the sunny afternoon of April 28, 2012, more than 200,000² protesters hit the streets for the largest street demonstration in Malaysia in decades. The protest that day was held under the banner of *Bersih* 3.0, which is the third in a series of rallies that started in 2007 and reoccurred in 2011. *Bersih*, which is what the movement has been popularly called, comes from a Malay word that literally means 'clean'. It is a nickname for the Coalition for Free and Fair Elections attempting to reform the existing electoral system in Malaysia by addressing pervasive electoral misconducts to ensure a free, fair and 'clean' election. The first *Bersih* rally in 2007 was commonly attributed to the shift in political landscapes in the 2008 general election where the ruling coalition Barisan Nasional (BN)³ failed to obtain two-thirds of the super majority for the first time since 1969. The third and the largest rally, *Bersih* 3.0 in 2012, was held a year before the 2013 general election. Accordingly, it can be credited not only for mobilizing the highest voter turnout in the Malaysian history, but also for the relative success of an oppositional coalition Pakatan Rakyat (PR).⁴ Although the ruling

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- 2 The media's estimation of the number of protesters ranges from 150,000 to 250,000 while the organizer claimed up to 300,000. Here, the author chose to use an estimate that was commonly used in media and independent reports.
- 3 Barisan Nasional or BN, which means 'National Front', is the major coalition whose main players are the United Malays National Organization (UMNO), the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) and the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC).
- 4 Pakatan Rakyat or PR (Malay), which means 'People's Pact or People's Alliance', is an informal Malaysian political coalition that was formed by the People's Justice Party (PKR), Democratic Action Party (DAP), and Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS) on April 1, 2008 following the twelfth Malaysian General Election. The Sarawak National Party (SNAP) officially joined the

coalition still secured the majority of seats, the opposition was able to steal 50.87% of the popular vote.

Without offices, remunerated staff, or a bank account, the *Bersih* movement quickly spread all over urban areas of Malaysia. The only headquarters of the movement is its official website, www.bersih.org, and since its launch in 2006 *Bersih* has incorporated digital media as a backbone of its operation. Blogging and YouTube were two dominant digital platforms used during the 2007 rally. In the 2011 *Bersih* 2.0 rally, Facebook and Twitter were added to the repertoire and these two social media platforms continued to be predominantly used in 2012. More than 58,000 tweets under the #bersih hashtag were circulated within six hours of *Bersih* protest on 28 April 2012.⁵ Another 300,000 tweets, 2,000 YouTube videos and nearly 300 relevant blogposts were posted online within 24 hours after the protest began.⁶ *Bersih* 3.0 is possibly one of the most recorded protest movements in the history of Malaysia. However, despite its impressive use of social media, the *Bersih* movement is hardly taken into account when discussing the role of networked technologies in social protests that are predominantly centred in the Middle East, Europe, and North America. This chapter is meant to fill the gap in the study of digital media and political protests not only in Malaysia and Southeast Asia but also Asia in general.

In recent years, mainly triggered by the 2011 Arab 'Spring' and the 2012 Occupy Movement, there has been an upsurge of academic literature devoted to studying the role of digital media in popular uprisings. Generally speaking, the debates have revolved around two opposing arguments, namely, those who strongly emphasize the role of the internet and social media behind the people's uprisings in Egypt, Tunisia, the United States and other countries (see Harb 2011; Howard and Hussain 2012; Joseph 2011; Rane and Salem 2012), and those who dismissed the role of social media technologies claiming its incidental role and argue that these mass protests would have happened without the technologies (see Gladwell 2010; York 2011; Morozov 2013). Combining

coalition on April 20, 2010 after being expelled from BN but only to quit a year later on May 6, 2011. The coalition currently controls three state governments while in opposition to the ruling coalition, BN, at the federal level.

5 Based on the author's research. These tweets also include those with #bersih3, #bersihpic, #bersihreport and #bersihstories hashtags.

6 Based on the author's research.

computational mapping⁷ and online as well as offline ethnography,⁸ this chapter offers a different perspective. Rather than emphasizing the revolutionary role of digital media or underestimating it, here the author chooses to examine and contextualize the role(s) of the internet and social media as being embedded into the contour of societal changes and transformations.

Social movements and activists have always appropriated media technologies and utilized them as part of their resistance. In the early twentieth century, anarchist movements in the United States appropriated print technologies. By 1979, Iranian revolutionaries made use of audiocassettes to mobilize popular movements against the Shah (Sreberny and Mohammadi 1994) and in 1984, an independent radio was utilized to counter the government narrative of propaganda in the first People Power in the Philippines (Brisbin 1988). Similarly, the Xerox-ed copies of controversial websites were utilized to disseminate an anti-Suharto sentiment in the 1998 student movement in Indonesia (Lim 2003, 2008). Insurgent movements would naturally embrace the medium that suits the people most. Historically, every single major wave of protests in Malaysia, too, is associated with lively alternative media. In early twentieth-century Malaysia, Malay journalists, poets and essayists played important roles in radicalizing the Malay majority and developing an anti-colonial sentiment against the British Empire. In the 1998 Malaysian *Reformasi*,⁹ the opposition group made intensive use of online alternative news to contest the ruling regime. In twenty-first-century urban dissident such as the *Bersih* movement, digital media is just that.

In Malaysia, public demonstrations were rare. Not only were they not tolerated by the authorities, public displays of resistance such as marching on

7 The author's research took advantage of the availability of computational tools that allow the automatic analysis of online content by using software for automated content analysis (using and creating programmes that can monitor multiple digital sources, process massive amount of text, and identify and display patterns, the author could measure the popularity and concentration of various topics on Facebook, Twitter, and blogging data related to the *Bersih* movement) and spatial sensitive analysis (that is the author analysed discourses around *Bersih* 3.0 rally by geotagging the tweets collected during the time of protests).

8 This methodology involves 'hanging out' in both geographical and non-geographical spaces through participant observation in both online and offline settings and interviews.

9 *Reformasi* is a Malay word meaning 'reform' in English. Malaysian *Reformasi* movement refers to the movement that began in the wake of former Prime Minister Mahathir bin Mohammad's controversial dismissal of his deputy, Anwar Ibrahim, in September 1998. This movement called for social and political reforms that opposed Mahathir's 'cronyistic' responses to the financial crisis (O'Shannassy 2009).

the streets, protesting and calling for reform, were also not acknowledged as a characteristic of the multi-ethnic, allegedly politically passive society. Did digital media alter these conditions? Has digital media transformed the Malaysians to be politically active? Has digital media influenced the notion of participation and citizenship among urban Malaysians, especially the youth? These questions are at the heart of this chapter.

In one of the earliest studies on the role of the internet in politics, Margolis and Resnick (2000) conclude that political uses of the internet have mirrored existing patterns of politics or 'politics as usual'. About this study, eleven years later, Neuman, Bimber and Hindman (2011:37) commented, 'Perhaps they spoke too soon.' In the last decade, we have witnessed how digital and mobile media have become increasingly integrated into political communication and information and waves of citizen mobilization. Changes in technology have not led to 'dramatic changes in the political psychology of the average citizen, but internet-facilitated changes in citizenship are numerous, subtle, conditional, and still evolving' (Neuman et al., 2011:37). While very little empirical work is available, there are good reasons to think that digital media, especially social media, may implicate broader forms of political participation such as civic engagement, lifestyle politics and citizen-directed advocacy, on a deeper level, especially among younger citizens (Bennett 1998).

When writing about new technologies, it is tempting to focus on the causal relationship between the technologies and the 'change' they cause and, subsequently, focus on the technologies as the pivotal driver of change. In this chapter, however, the author attempts to stay away from a technologically deterministic framework. In answering the central questions posed here, we need to situate the technology in its context. In examining the role(s) of digital media in the *Bersih* movement, it is imperative to consider digital media as societally shaped by social, cultural and political arrangements in which it operates and by the users who are urban middle class Malaysians. Digital media does not have an intrinsic power to change politics. What has changed are the ways in which people are networked and mobilized with and through media. Consequently, how people participate and engage with politics has changed, too. A rapid proliferation of digital media in Malaysia, especially in urban areas, hence, may transform not only ways in which Malaysians interact with each other, but also how they interact with the state and participate in politics.

To help contextualize the political uses of digital media in the *Bersih* movement, the following section offers a brief historical overview of the making of the internet in Malaysia and how the technology became entangled with political activism.

The Internet and Activism in Malaysia

Malaysia gained access to the internet in the mid-1990s and since then, the government invested enormously in the internet infrastructure, predominantly for economic reasons. The former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamed enthusiastically promoted this technology and gave full support to the building of the Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC), a high tech business centre developed to support the country's leap into the information age. As of the beginning of January 2012, months prior to the *Bersih* 3.0 rally, Malaysia's broadband household penetration rate was 62.3% with 17,723,000 internet users representing 61.7% of the population (Internet World Stats 2012), which grew tremendously from only 3.7 million in 2000 (Rahim and Pawanteh 2011:5). The impressive growth of internet users and continued expansion of the technological infrastructure is a testimony of Malaysia's government's serious commitment to advancing an economically prosperous high-tech nation and transforming the country into an information society (Bunnell 2004). The government, however, continues to feel ambivalent about political and social significances of the same technology and has always been torn between the desire to promote the internet and shield its citizens from being exposed to 'unwanted information'.

Dissimilar to traditional and mainstream media outlets, the internet is not scrutinized under official censorship. The Malaysian government was committed to un-censor cyberspace, and this is a pledge that contrasts sharply with the nation's tightly controlled print and broadcast media outlets. The Bill of Guarantees of the MSC in 1997 indeed promises uncensored internet and this is also supported by a provision of the Communication and Media Act (CMA) in 1998 that explicitly states that nothing in the Act 'shall be construed as permitting the censorship of the internet' (Article 3). In practice, however, the internet is not free. The government can always use other media-related and libel laws such as the 1960 Internal Security Act, 1967 Police Act, 1966 Societies Act, 1971 Sedition Act, 1972 Official Secrets Act and 1984 Printing Presses and Publication Act against any parties who have different voices than the authorities. When alternative information sources such as the online news site *Malaysiakini* found a way around the licensing regulations, the government reacted with various political threats such as preventing its journalists from getting official press cards and posing verbal intimidation and harassment against its reporters (Crispin 2013). In 2008, Raja Petra Kamaruddin, blogger and editor of the online news site *Malaysia Today*, was charged under the Sedition Act (Weiss 2014). In March 2009, six bloggers were arrested under the Communication and Media Act for criticizing the Sultan of Perak, one of the nine Malay rulers

(Rahim and Pawenteh 2011:7). In 2012, a blogger by the name of Syed Abdullah Syed Hussein al-Attas was detained under the Official Secrets Act over a series of postings about the sultan of the Johor state (Crispin 2013).

Politics counts as a small portion of information exchanges online. Unsurprisingly, the internet in Malaysia is mostly used for social and personal use. A 2010 survey shows that with an average 233 online friends, Malaysian social media users were among the most social in the world (TNS 2010) and they spent an average of two thousand US dollar per person online each year. More than forty percent of Malaysian internet users access TV and movie content online, eighty percent access online streaming video content, and eighty-six percent download music regularly (SDMA 2012). Having said that, politics has its space in the Malaysian online sphere and online activism has a long history in the Malaysian political landscape.

Online activism in the country can be traced back to the use of the internet in the 1998 *Reformasi* movement. Given the control on mainstream media, in 1998 the internet became the principal means of communication among activists and an alternative source of information and news for Malaysians (Abbott 2004). Although the *Reformasi* movement did not lead to any substantial change in the 1999 elections, it gave birth to the Malaysia's online activism and rejuvenated civil society activism in the country (Abbott 2004; Weiss 2012). One of its legacies is the country's most progressive and powerful alternative online media, the *Malaysiakini*, a news site founded by two former mainstream journalists and closely associated with the *Reformasi*. Founded by writer-activists Pramesh Chandran and Steven Gan in November 1999, it survived the financial struggle and managed to establish a firm base in the Malaysian media landscape. *Malaysiakini* was ranked the fourteenth most visited website in Malaysia in March 2014, while the pro-government *Star Online* ranked fifteenth.¹⁰ Another prominent alternative online media is *Harakah Daily*, an online version of the print *Harakah*, news outlet/tabloid of the oppositional party, Parti Islam seMalaysia (PAS). Also founded during the *Reformasi*, *Harakah Daily* quickly became the most sophisticated and content-rich partisan website and the first to include video (Downing 2010). Other prominent alternative online media include aliran.com, a website of Penang based NGO, suaram.net, belonging to the country's most vigorous human rights NGO, and various websites of Hindraf (Hindu Rights Action Force), a coalition of NGOs who advocate on behalf of Malaysia's (largely Hindu) Indian community (Pandi 2014).

With the imprisonment of Anwar Ibrahim, the leader of the *Reformasi* movement (who was later released in 2005), the opposition network disappeared

¹⁰ Extracted by the author from alexa.com's data.

from the streets in early 2000. The decline of *Reformasi* as a political force, however, did not coincide with the decline of online activism. By early 2000, *Reformasi* no longer existed as an active movement, but its spirit of reform continued to exist in the online realm. Pro-reform activists continued using the digital media space as their *subaltern counter-public* space, an alternative space to the dominant *bourgeois* public sphere (Lim 2014), to cultivate so-called 'hidden transcripts' to communicate, deliberate, post and spread information online. Borrowed from James Scott (1990), 'hidden transcript' is a term for the critique of power that takes place offstage that cannot be seen or heard by power holders. The early vibrant alternative online media sphere paved the way for the emergence of the blogosphere activism in 2002 (Pandi 2011:77) and provided the basis and ingredients for the making of the *Bersih* movement in 2007 and its remaking in 2010 and 2012. Arguably, two decades of Malaysian online and offline activism since the late 1990s provided an affordance for the relative success of the present-day *Bersih* movement.

***Bersih* Movement**

To understand the *Bersih* movement we need to revisit its background story which is the story of the world's longest ruling coalition, the National Front or Barisan Nasional (BN). The Barisan Nasional is comprised of fourteen political parties led by the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), the world's longest ruling party. The Barisan Nasional bases its political legitimacy on outstanding economic performance and popular sovereignty gained from winning the majority of electoral votes, even though multiparty elections were far from being fully free or fair (Weiss 2012:8). While the Barisan Nasional represents the ruling coalition, UMNO has continually been the ruling party in the country by holding the offices of prime minister and deputy minister since 1957 (Lee 2007). Consequently, the culture of the Barisan Nasional's governance reflects much of UMNO's preferences. As scripted in its constitution, UMNO bases its political ideology on Malay nationalism that guarantees, among others, the position of the Malay language as the sole national language and a Malay culture as a national culture as well as the rights of the Malays or *bumiputra* ('sons of the soil') (Lee 2007). Accordingly, in each and every election, the Barisan Nasional benefited from the demographics as UMNO has been seen as the protector of Malay interests with Malays comprising over half of the total population.

In the 2004 Elections, BN's performance was strong. It gained 64% of the popular votes and won 198 parliamentary seats. Under the Barisan Nasional's leadership, Malaysia's economic development had been outstanding, elevating

the country's status from a developing one to an upper middle-income state (World Bank 2012). The middle-class population is growing rapidly, and economically Malaysia is on track to achieve a 'fully developed nation' status as outlined in the Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamed's Vision 2020 plan. Its economic development, however, is not accompanied by political change. The Malaysian government selectively pushed transparency and 'good governance' to deliver necessary and essential information to be accountable to international capital, but not to its citizens (Rodan 2005).

The *Bersih* movement is meant to push for changes in politics with electoral reform as the first milestone. A more popular name for the Coalition for Clean and Fair Elections, *Bersih* is an alliance of sixty-two non-governmental organizations (NGOs) seeking to reform the national electoral system. It started out as a Join Action Committee for Electoral Reform formed in July 2005 which was officially launched on 23 November 2006 as a joint communication network that comprised of leaders from various political parties, civil society groups and NGOs.

The call of *Bersih* can be summarized in eight points¹¹:

1. Clean the electoral roll from irregularities such as gerrymandering and 'phantom voters';
2. Reform the postal ballot to ensure that all citizens are able to exercise their right to vote;
3. Use of indelible ink;
4. Free and fair access to media;
5. Minimum 21 days campaign period;
6. Strengthen public institutions; they must be reformed to act independently, uphold laws, and protect human rights;
7. Stop corruption;
8. Stop 'dirty' politics.

As clearly expressed in these eight points, from the beginning the movement has had a clear set of targets that were well defined and far from abstraction, especially when compared with most political movements that have emerged globally in recent years. The first five points are translatable into practices. While less practical, the last three nevertheless represent tangible and actionable targets. This is distinctive from other movements calling for 'reform' such as the Occupy Wall Street and Spanish *Indignados* in which the goals were

¹¹ The first four points were put forward in 2007; the others were added in 2011 (see http://www.bersih.org/?page_id=4109).

vaguely defined. Also, unlike recent uprisings in the Arab world, the *Bersih* movement, at least until the third rally, was not about overthrowing a regime.¹² As observed by Weiss (2007), the trajectory of reformism in Malaysia's 'competitive electoral authoritarian' system indeed tends to take an 'electoral route' rather than regime change.

Bersih's journey has been historic. Its first public demonstration was held on 10 November 2007 in Kuala Lumpur and estimated to have drawn 30,000–50,000 supporters. As stated previously, this rally was frequently credited for the shrinking support for the ruling coalition in the 2008 general election where for the first time in nearly four decades the ruling coalition failed to obtain two-thirds of the super majority. In November 2007, the appearance of thousands of ordinary Malaysians rallying on the streets surprised the government. As mentioned earlier, public protests were a rarity in Malaysia. In 1998–1999 there were some sparks of street activism with the emergence of the *Reformasi* movement, but the authorities successfully cracked them down. Since 2000, the Malaysian streets had become sterile, apolitical. Except for the anti-Iraq protests in 2003, there was no major protest that took place in the period 2000 to 2006.

In April 2010, the coalition was relaunched as an entirely civil society movement unaffiliated with any political party. On 19 June 2011, former president of the Bar Council, Ambiga Sreenevasan, became the chairperson of the coalition. In 2011 and 2012, two more rallies, *Bersih* 2.0 and *Bersih* 3.0, were organized considering that the demand for the electoral reform had not been met by the Electoral Commission in 2008. Despite being considered illegal by the government which combated the protesters with the riot squad, tear gas and street arrests, *Bersih* 2.0 in July 2011 still drew a crowd of about 50,000 protesters. The 2012 *Bersih* 3.0 rally brought together even more supporters. The ban on using the centrally located Dataran Merdeka (Independence Square), road blockages, riot police, tear gas, and water cannons coloured the rally that was estimated to have drawn more than 200,000 supporters.

In the face of the government's persistent crackdown and criminalization, the *Bersih* movement became increasingly popular and a significant social and political force in Malaysia. More than just a movement pushing for electoral reforms, the *Bersih* also contributed to an increased level of political awareness among urban Malaysians, especially the youth. Consequently, with more than

12 This chapter was written before the fourth rally, *Bersih* 4.0., took place in August 2015 and, therefore, this rally does not form part of the study. It is important to note, however, that *Bersih* 4.0 indicated a significant change, as it demanded the resignation of the prime minister, Najib Razak.

ten million casting their ballots, voter turnout in the 2013 General Election was at an all-time high. But what was more important was that Barisan Nasional, while having secured a majority of seats of 60% and thus the chosen agent to form the federal government, only gained a mere 47.38% of the popular vote. In contrast, the oppositional coalition, Pakatan Rakyat, won with 50.87%. For Barisan Nasional, this was the worst election result since 1969.

The use of digital media for political activism in the context of Malaysia should also be read vis-à-vis the government's control over public gathering in physical spaces. While the constitution granted freedom of assembly and association, it also allowed restrictions deemed necessary in the interest of security, public order, or morality, particularly through the use of the Public Order Ordinance and the Police Act (until 2013). This act defined a public assembly as a gathering of five or more persons. The decision to grant or deny a permit came from the district police chief. However, senior police officials and political leaders influenced the granting or denial of some permits. Police granted permits routinely to government and ruling coalition supporters but used a more restrictive approach with government critics, opposition parties, NGOs and human rights activists (BDHRL 2011). With such restrictions, mobilizing public protest was extremely discouraged. In 2013, Section 27 of this act was replaced by the new act, the 2012 Peaceful Assembly Act (PAA), which voids the police permits for mass assemblies. The PAA, however, comes with 'new' restrictions and is perceived by its critics as actually more restrictive than the previous act. The old-style method used by the opposition to mobilize its supporters was the organization of the ubiquitous indoor meeting or *ceramah* (Lee 2007:41). But besides having limited reach, *ceramah* required a police permit. It was due to the difficulties of finding a suitable physical space to gather and organize themselves that *Bersih* activists turned to digital space. There, they mobilized their supporters and prepared the rallies, thereby expanding and sustaining the movement.

Bersih's Usages of Digital Media

To understand the various roles of the so-called 'new media' or 'digital media' in the *Bersih* movement it is necessary to look beyond these umbrella terms. Instead of treating 'digital media', 'the internet' and or 'social media' as monolithic, I here examine the usage of three dominant platforms individually: blogging, Facebook and Twitter.¹³ By doing so, I attempt to understand the actual

13 While they are not discussed here individually, the author does recognize the importance of YouTube and Flickr. In *Bersih*-related activities, however, these platforms were

practices rather than the assumed practices of media and technology as socio-material artefacts.

Blogging plays an important part in the history of *Bersih*, especially in its early establishment. The 2007 *Bersih* rally was largely socialized and mobilized online, by using websites and blogs. This coincided with the peak of the blogging popularity in Malaysia.¹⁴ From 2002 to 2007, the blogosphere was both a vital space for online dissidents as well as the place where the Malaysian government exercised hegemonic power. Despite the government's crackdown and arrest of blogger activists, the Malaysian blogosphere continued to be politically vibrant. By 2007, the Malaysian blogosphere had developed, presenting new opportunities for citizen activism. The blogosphere facilitated activists to discuss and identify the 'repertoire of contention' (Tilly 2003), which refers to the set of various protest-related tools and actions available to a movement, and to identify issues that were important to the public.

The *Bersih* movement itself was partially born out of social interaction within the Malaysian political blogosphere. Years of political conversations in the blogosphere – by posting, reading and commenting – had enabled a 'brokerage' (McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly 2001) that allowed people to organize and assimilate their experiences, and deliberate across existing political boundaries. Blogging arguably brought together otherwise disconnected Malaysian activists and concerned individuals with different ideologies (Islamist, secular, liberal, et cetera) and backgrounds (Malay, Chinese, Tamil/Indian, et cetera), thus contributing to the expansion of the network of activists who believed in political reform.

The *Bersih* movement made use of blogs before, during and after the protests. An official website and blogs were used in particular to amplify and extend traditional communication efforts in a conventional mode of action (such as press releases). Blogs were used to mobilize campaigns and to provide reports from the streets countering state-controlled media interpretations of the protests and capitalizing on any conflicts or incidents that occurred in the protests (such as arrests or abuse). One such instance happened days after the *Bersih* 2.0 rally in July 2011 when Datuk Seri Hishammuddin Hussein, the home

generally used as placeholders, though most popular YouTube videos could generate voluminous comments on videos and photos, some of which were subsequently disseminated through blogs, Facebook and Twitter.

- 14 Most Malaysian blogs were not political, but many top bloggers were. A 2007 survey by *sabahan.com* (2007) identified eight out of Malaysia's top fifty bloggers as political bloggers. 'Screenshots', the blog by Jeff Ooi (an independent journalist who was also associated with the *Malaysiakini* daily and who ranked fourth on the above mentioned list) was the most popular among the political blogs, followed by media activist Ahirudin Attan's 'Rocky's Bru' and DAP leader Lim Kit Siang's blogs.

minister, released a statement that there was no incident of 'police brutality' and that action would be taken against online media and bloggers if they posted false reports. Despite the threat, numerous bloggers responded to this statement by contemporaneously posting photos and YouTube videos displaying the 'brutality' of riot police. By doing so, they successfully countered the government's narrative as reflected in the coverage of the *Bersih* 2.0 rally by the mainstream media who described the *Bersih* movement as 'illegal' and its protesters as 'rioters'. And they were triumphant in generating public sympathy and support.

Blogs enabled the inner-circle of blogger-activists, a closely-knit cluster of activists, to deliberate on important issues that went beyond mere mobilization. The emerging blogosphere presented oppositional activists with a space where they could construct meaning for the movements' participants. The symbiosis between activists and the blogosphere resulted in a new form of engagement in an online civic space that was both subversive and empowering to the reformist activists.

Bridging Diverse Publics through Facebook

With the popularity of social media in 2008, the *Bersih* movement started incorporating YouTube and Facebook into its communication and mobilization strategy. In the blogosphere, social-political bloggers in Malaysia connected mostly with each other. Blogging is useful for nurturing intimate relationships within certain social circles, but it is limited in its capacity to diffuse information and grow networks. Facebook, however, allowed them to simultaneously connect with their large social networks. Facebook's infrastructure, on the other hand, revolves around 'involuntary and radical transparency' allowing conversations to happen on one-to-one, one-to-many, and many-to-many levels, making it easy to diffuse information in multiple overlapping networks and to mobilize across diverse publics (Lim 2013:642).¹⁵ Such 'forced transparency easily leads to forced conformity as it generates peer pressure among interconnected users' (Lim 2013:642).

Facebook's infrastructure encourages effortless sharing, joining and interacting. For typical Malaysian users who, on average, have more than two hundred 'friends' in her/his network (TNS 2010), Facebook enables the rise and expansion of weak-tie networks to 'unlock and expose interpersonal networks to external influences [from] individuals in distant networks' (Goldenberg, Libai and Muller 2001:21), thus facilitating the spread of information to the

15 In contrast to what it promotes, Facebook as a company is far from being transparent, especially in its treatment of individual data and users' privacy.

masses. The combination of forced transparency and conformity, highly accessible participation and interaction, and easy expansion of weak-tie networks often leads to the superficiality of Facebook-based collective actions, leading to the emergence of online activism that usually is 'too thin, too fast, too many' (Lim 2013:653). In the *Bersih* case, however, this combination turned out to be a valuable resource as it facilitates the linking of individuals from different social groups, bridging the diverse public in interconnected conversations. This can potentially facilitate the emergence of communities that transcend boundaries of ethnicity and religion, opening possibilities for 'bridging socio-political cleavages' (Weiss 2012:26). Indeed, both *Bersih* 2.0 and *Bersih* 3.0 rallies exemplify a successful mobilization across such cleavages. Relying heavily on Facebook for its mobilization, the 2012 *Bersih* rally brought a diverse mix of about 200,000 Malaysians to the streets of Kuala Lumpur.

The official Facebook page of *Bersih* 2.0 titled '*Bersih* 2.0 [Official]'¹⁶ was created only seventeen days before the rally day on 22 June 2011. It functioned as central news desk where *Bersih* supporters posted, and checked for updates, announcements, photos and videos. Facebook continued to be one of the organizing and mobilizing tools in the *Bersih* 3.0 movement. Unlike blogging, Facebook is not a suitable platform for rigorous conversations and in-depth deliberations, but it does allow for a quick deliberation on simple issues. For example, when the *Bersih* activists' requested to use Merdeka Stadium for the rally, it was rejected by the Merdeka Heritage Trust (a trust set up by the Malaysian government to manage two stadiums, Merdeka Stadium and Stadium Negara, as national real estate heritage). The rejection letter was posted on Facebook to solicit quick comments. It quickly generated 344 'likes' and 221 comments nearly all suggesting to take the *Bersih* rally to the streets and stick with the original plan. *Bersih* organizers responded to this request by creating a simple poll with the question: 'Do you think a *Bersih* 2.0 public assembly should be organized?' More than half of the voters answered affirmatively (101,345 versus 89,040). This kind of public decision-making process through Facebook did occur quite frequently. Further, Facebook is particularly useful for discussions and preparations ahead of the rally. On Facebook, *Bersih* users discussed protest sites and locations for gathering prior to marching to the protest site. They shared maps, directions and other information about the locations.

¹⁶ After the *Bersih* 2.0 rally, the *Bersih* movement maintains its existence on Facebook by establishing *Bersih* 3.0 as well as *Bersih* 4.0 pages. The latter was meant to support the future, fourth *Bersih* rally. The first and 'official' *Bersih* 2.0 Facebook page, though, remains the most popular one.

Twitter: Seamless Linking of Digital and Urban Spaces

Twitter started to be utilized in the *Bersih* 2.0 rally and its usage was highly intensified in *Bersih* 3.0. Unlike Facebook, which was mostly used before and after the protest, Twitter was especially used during the protest largely to provide on-the-ground updates (see Figure 9.1). Protesters and organizers sent tweets on where to go, where to avoid riot police, places where tear gas and water cannon were deployed and incidents of arrest. Many tweets came with links to images and YouTube videos taken on the streets. During the *Bersih* 2.0 rally, over 19,000 Twitter users tweeted about the rally that day (Sheriff 2011), in the *Bersih* 3.0 rally the number increased to over 300,000. Within six hours alone, from one p.m. to seven p.m. on the rally day, 28 April 2012, there were over 58,000 tweets using *#Bersih*-related hashtags transmitted online.

Twitter, to a certain degree, helped to globalize the movement. The pattern of Twitter usage shows that *Bersih*-related tweets came from all over the world (see Figure 9.2). However, unlike the Arab Spring, when the majority of tweets came from a global, mostly Western, audience,¹⁷ in the *Bersih* 3.0 case, the majority of tweets – sixty-seven percent of the geotagged tweets – come from Malaysia, with a high concentration of tweets in Kuala Lumpur, Johor Baru and Penang (see Figure 9.3). A closer look at the geotagging map shows that

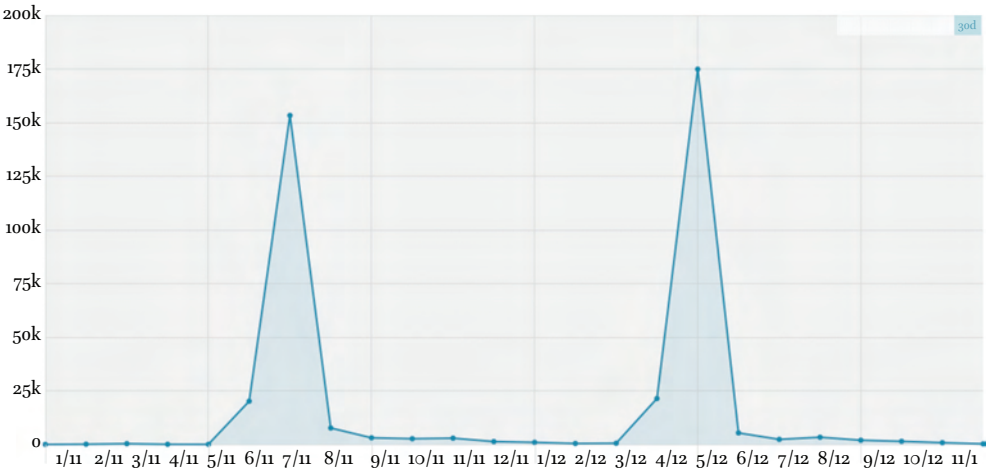


FIGURE 9.1 *Number of tweets #Bersih 1 Jan 2011–30 November 2012, monthly*
SOURCE: COMPILED BY THE AUTHOR.

17 Out of fifty-two million Twitter users who tweeted on Arab Spring from January to March 2011, only 0.027% of Twitter users identified their location as Egypt, Yemen or Tunisia (Sysomos 2011). Howard and Hussain's study (2012:49–50) shows that throughout 'the study period of January 14 to March 16, 18% of the tweets about the Tunisian uprising came from inside Tunisia, 8% from neighbouring countries, and 32% from outside the region'.



FIGURE 9.2 *Global map of Bersih tweets, 28 April 2012, 01:00–7:00 P.M.*

SOURCE: COMPILED BY THE AUTHOR.

central Kuala Lumpur generated the highest number of tweets, especially in areas where the supporters gathered and protested, such as around Merdeka Square, the Jamek mosque, the Sultan Abdul Samad building, the Strait Trading building, Pasar Seni, Jalan Raja and Jalan Tun Perak (see Figure 9.4).

Twitter was heavily used during the protest to exchange information about locations. Among the most frequently used words are names of locations such as Merdeka Square and the Jamek mosque, and references to place-based activities and atmospheres/situations such as walk to, escape, run from, turn right or turn around. *Bersih* protesters can easily use Twitter on their smart phones, and it is through this medium that digital and physical activism and urban spaces have begun to interlock.

Twitter was also used to render conflicts visible, thereby globalizing the space of conflict. This visibility of conflicts is archetypal to 'the capacity of social movements to appropriate spaces of hegemonic production of visibility' (Starr, Fernandez and Scholl 2011:27). Through the Royal Malaysia Police (Police Diraja Malaysia) communication channel, the Malaysian government kept trying to portray *Bersih* protesters as 'unclean' rioters and law-breakers, and the movement as illegal. By using Twitter, *Bersih* protesters delivered a counter-narrative, as they uploaded their own images and YouTube videos. Through Twitter, the movement became associated globally with imageries

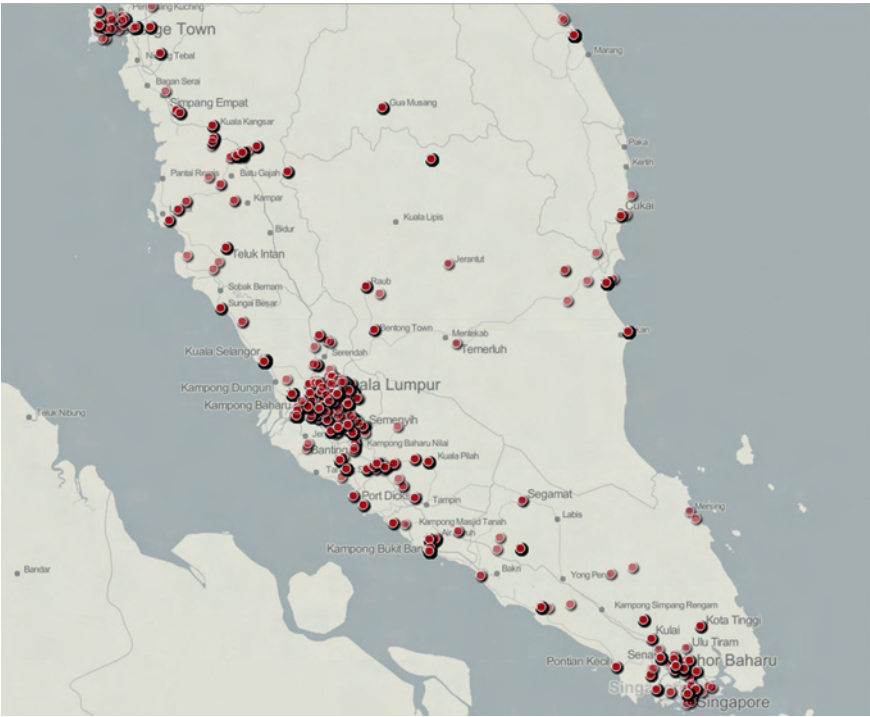


FIGURE 9.3 *Kuala Lumpur, Johor Baru and Penang map of Bersih tweets, 28 April 2012, 01:00–7:00 P.M.*
SOURCE: COMPILED BY THE AUTHOR.

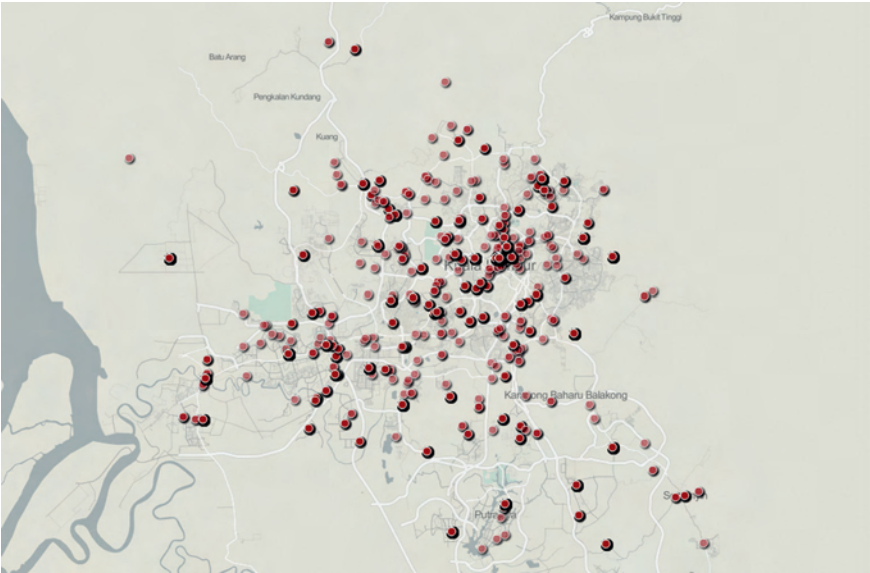


FIGURE 9.4 *Central Kuala Lumpur map of Bersih tweets, 28 April 2012, 01:00–7:00 P.M.*
SOURCE: COMPILED BY THE AUTHOR.

of mass protests in the streets, including blockages, tear gas, skirmishes and police violence. This tactic turned out quite effective. It faced the government with the dilemma of how to control these challenges to its legitimacy without giving the impression of 'un-democratic' governance.

Opposing #Bersih: The State/Ruling Coalition's Usage of Digital Media

The internet and social media are 'convivial' (Lim 2003:274), and as such they provide 'a greater scope for freedom, autonomy, creativity and collaboration' than 'older' media such as telephony and television (Lim and Kann 2008:82). But it is not just the reformists who took advantage of these digital tools; their opponents did too. The state uses blogs and social networking tools for its own purposes.

For instance, Prime Minister Najib Razak runs a popular blog. And his Facebook page, with over 2.2 million fans, is the second most popular politician's page in the country behind the page of former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamed. This is far more than the number of fans garnered by opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim. Despite being rather later in embracing social media, in 2010, the police force, Polis Diraja Malaysia or the Malaysian Royal Police, launched a new media centre and setup Facebook and Twitter accounts to provide updates on policing activities and occasionally respond to public accusations of abuse by police. By March 2014, there were 600,207 and 127,000 followers of the Polis Diraja Malaysia Facebook page and Twitter account (@pdrmsia), respectively.

In 2011, when the *Bersih* 2.0 was deemed illegal, Polis Diraja Malaysia used Facebook to disseminate a video entitled 'Illegal Rally *Bersih* 2.0: A police perspective of 9th July 2011' documenting various activities of *Bersih* protesters that were supposedly 'illegal'. It also released various Twitter statements encouraging citizens to report on protesters so as to be able to charge individuals who made 'false reports against the force' (Jaraparilla 2011). During the *Bersih* 3.0 rally, @pdrmsia delivered 'Live from Polis Diraja Malaysia' tweets every 10–15 minutes with 'live reports' from various locations in Kuala Lumpur where the rally was held. Responding to accusations of street violence and police brutality during the *Bersih* 3.0 rally, Polis Diraja Malaysia actively used @pdrmsia to deliver its side of the story by releasing selected videos showing the acts of 'unlawful rioters'. Additionally, the government also recruited cyber-troopers to post positive tweets about the government and the ruling coalition and simultaneously attack *Bersih* and the opposition with negative tweets.

The Malaysian government did not directly deter citizens from using digital media for political activism such as *Bersih* but actively used the very same media to campaign against its opponents and to compete with the online dissent. This practice fits the 'networked authoritarianism' practice which occurs when 'an authoritarian regime embraces and adjusts to the evitable changes brought by digital communications' (MacKinnon 2011:33). Also, the government made use of on-the-ground crackdowns and physical threats, and continued to exploit legal apparatus to legitimize its power and control over on- and offline spaces.

Additionally, the government continued to use racial issues to cultivate the culture of fear among Malaysians. The Barisan Nasional government kept on disseminating messages that echoed what Mahathir Mohamed said in 1999, that 'a weak government will bring about chaos and racial rioting.... We did not get two-thirds majority [in 1969] and there were riots' (*Borneo Post*, 11 August 1999). No doubt, the racial riot of May 13, 1969 still haunts the Malaysian psyche and the event has been frequently used in general elections to discourage people from exercising their electoral choice. The *Bersih* movement, however, has always tried to break away from the racial division and, until the third rally, was relatively successful in recruiting a diverse group of Malaysian youths. The *Bersih* 4.0 rally, however, was reported as being dominated by the Malaysian Chinese, prompting observers to point out that the country's politics are indeed divided along ethnic lines. The rally organizers, on the other hand, kept insisting that the *Bersih* movement is not grounded in ethnic or racial politics.

Bersih is for and by (Urban) Malaysians

Who constitute *Bersih*? Where did *Bersih* activists come from? Evidences from the field show that *Bersih* is about, by, and for Malaysians, in Malaysia and abroad, and on- as well as offline. As discussed in the previous section on Twitter, the majority of the supporters came from inside the country. Outside Malaysia, the Malaysian diaspora participated in the Global *Bersih* (2.0 and 3.0) movement by holding rallies in their cities/countries of residence.¹⁸ During the *Bersih* 2.0 rally, there were 4,300 participants who attended protests held in thirty-eight locations in sixteen countries. With the third rally, these numbers increased to eighty-five locations in thirty-five countries. Strikingly, the number of non-Malaysians who supported the movement through Twitter and Facebook is negligible.

¹⁸ See <http://www.globalbersih.org> for more information on Global *Bersih*.

Although *Bersih* activists did attempt to get the rural population involved by organizing various non-digital activities such as traditional *ceramah* in mosques and community centres, the *Bersih* movement is generally an urban phenomenon. It is a predominantly urban, middle-class movement with activities concentrated in urban, well-wired areas such as Greater Kuala Lumpur (Klang Valley), Johor Baru and Penang. Internet access inequality is less pronounced in Malaysia than, for example, in Egypt and Tunisia during the Arab Spring. Over sixty-one percent of Malaysia's total population has access to the internet (ITU 2012), with rural areas having a much lower percentage. In 2012, over eighty-five percent of the Greater Kuala Lumpur population was connected to the internet.¹⁹ This urban tendency was clearly reflected in the result of the 2013 General Election: the votes for Pakatan Rakyat were concentrated in Malaysia's urban areas, while Barisan Nasional won most votes in non-urban and rural areas such as Sabah and Sarawak.

The prominent *Bersih* bloggers who can be considered as the 'leaders' of the movement are generally older political activists, journalists and intellectuals. A good number represent the People's Justice Party, the Democratic Action Party and the Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS), the three parties that made up the oppositional alliance Pakatan Rakyat. Beyond this small circle of 'leaders', the people who participated at *Bersih* rallies, online and on-the-ground, came from a cross section of Malaysia's multicultural society, with the youth as the dominant group. *Bersih* did not successfully transform Malaysia into a post-racial society. However, as vividly depicted in many photographs documenting the rallies (that were proliferating online), *Bersih* visually painted a picture of multicultural Malaysia with relatively equal participation of Chinese, Indians and Malays, and a momentarily rejuvenated hope for Malaysia's non-racialized 'new' politics.

Digital Media, Participation and Citizenship

Having examined the history of the *Bersih* movement and the role of digital media in this movement, it is time to revisit the questions posed at the beginning of this chapter. Did digital media alter Malaysian political passivity, especially the youth's non-participation in politics? Has digital media transformed the Malaysians to be politically active? Has digital media influenced the notion of participation and citizenship among urban Malaysians? These questions

¹⁹ Based on the author's calculation.

will be addressed in the following discussions, to generate a clear understanding of the relationship between digital media, participation and citizenship.

Youth, Digital Culture and Citizenship: Learning and Becoming

Considering that youth is a dominant social group participating in the movement, it is important to understand the relationship between this group and digital media, and how this relationship may or may not alter the notion of citizenship. Unlike what is generally thought about digital activists, young Malaysians who joined *Bersih* are not just geeks and hackers. In fact, the majority of *Bersih* activists are ordinary Malaysian urban youth whose everyday lives are inseparable from digital media. The reason why digital media, especially social networking tools, fits the urban youth has less to do with the inherent emancipatory power of the technology, but more with the embedding of this new technology in the everyday social and cultural life of the members of this generation. Digital media is ubiquitous for the Malaysian youth. A 2008 study by Rahim and Pawanteh (2011:9) reports that ninety-two percent of the young adult Malaysians had access to personal computers and the internet. The so-called 'new technology' is not exogenous to young people's experiences but part of their daily social and cultural constructs. Accordingly, notions such as socializing, communicating, and learning for these young people, too, have changed.

Jenkins et al., (2006:xi) suggests that the digital culture has altered ways in which young people learn. By experimenting with digital media, young people are actively involved in a participatory culture, which is 'a culture with relatively low barriers of artistic expression and civic engagement, strong support for creating and sharing creations, and some type of informal mentorship whereby experienced participants pass along knowledge to novices'. Such a learning style has implications on how they approach, interpret, learn and participate in politics. In other words, digital culture alters the way the younger generation practices citizenship. From the *Bersih* case, we learn that digital media has provided a space for young Malaysians to immerse in the culture that helps establish 'a learning space to express their opinions, to exercise their [social] rights, and to collaborate with each other' (Lim 2013:654). Digital media, however, does not directly empower Malaysians with an agency to exercise their citizenship through their participation in politics and engagement with the state. It is only through their continued involvement in the *Bersih* movement, online and offline, that they recognize and learn about their rights as citizens and by doing so, they claim their agency and create a trajectory for becoming a 'whole' citizen, a new conception of citizenship that is different than what was sanctioned by the state.

Participatory Culture versus Electoral Politics

It is commonly assumed that young people are not interested in 'old-style' politics and that online participation is not directly related to participation in traditional electoral politics like political campaigns or voting. In fact, scholars generally agree that young people prefer to focus on lifestyle politics, political consumerism, volunteering and social activism, and that they are generally disconnected from traditional electoral politics (Bennett et al., 2009; Levine 2007; Zukin et al., 2006). Palfrey and Gasser (2008) suggest that the so-called 'digital natives' favour more personally expressive politics in digitally mediated environments. They mistrust the media and the government, are less likely to follow politics in the news, and have a weak sense of duty to participate in government (Bennett et al., 2009:107).

The *Bersih* story, however, suggests that these presumptions do not always completely hold. While it is true that for the younger Malaysians and 'digital natives' much of the party politics and government elements of politics are distant and inauthentic, they still see voting – when it is '*bersih*' (clean), free, and fair – as the core democratic act. Many young Malaysians do not consider politics as the problem, but they despise the practice of politics, which they describe as 'dirty, corrupt and hegemonic'.

Further, it is misleading to assume that youth in general are apolitical and disengaged. After all, youth are not monolithic. As exemplified in the *Bersih* case, there are always young people of the activist type who are ready to engage and participate when presented with an opportunity. It is through interactions with the latter that other young people might become involved in participatory politics.

Insurgent Citizenship in Cyber-Urban Space

Admittedly, digital media in Malaysia operate under the logic of capitalism and control of the government. Its function as a civic space is always dependent on socio-political arrangements that are enacted upon it. Nonetheless, in cyberspace, *Bersih* and the reformist activists have the upper hand in defining the meaning of this space. It is a space for multiple alternative spheres, subaltern counter-publics, to exist (Lim 2014). Meanwhile, in the non-digital cityscape, the *Bersih* movement has revived the rights of citizens to have aspirations about what can be changed collectively in the city. It is in cyber-urban space (Lim 2015) – the integrated space of digital and physical urban spaces – that the *Bersih* participants redefined their relationship as citizens with the state.

However, *Bersih* did not structurally change the practices of politics in Malaysia. Neither did it transform the country into a post-racial society. However, cyber-urban activism has recast the landscape of socio-political

engagement in the country, by (re)opening civic spaces for citizens to exercise their freedom of speech and expression and by encouraging citizens to participate in the discussion on their country's future. It is not known if the use of digital media platforms for citizens and oppositional political actors will lead the country to a structural political transformation. What is clear is that *Bersih* activists have appropriated the Malaysian cyber-urban space to mobilize citizens to collectively voice their opinions, claim their rights as citizens in public space in a series of public protests. In turn, cyber-urban activism has meaningfully changed the ways urban citizens perceive their rights to public spheres and spaces, and redefine their relationship with the state. Claims and rights are a defining characteristic of citizenship. The claim of public space is essentially about 'insurgent citizenship' (Holston 1998) and the promotion of 'insurgent practice' that aims to support new citizenship claims (Douglass and Friedmann 1998). The fight of urban, middle-class Malaysians for their right of access to the public sphere and freedom of expression is based on insurgency, a struggle over the meaning and orientation of citizenship. As opposed to a statist citizenship that assumes that the state is 'the only legitimate source of citizenship rights, meanings and practices' (Holston 1998:38), insurgent citizenship entails engages citizenry who actively negotiate 'what it means to be a member in the modern state' (Holston 1998:47).

Conclusion

The *Bersih* story provides a compelling example of how the use of digital media acquires its shape in specific and multifaceted historical conditions. What we call 'impacts' of digital media is not the result of technological processes but rather of historical processes. Accordingly, the role of digital media should be positioned and contextualized within a decade-long complex history of political reform. In this historical context, digital media has been used to profoundly alter strategies and discourses related to political reformism and citizenship, and might contribute to future successes, and ultimate effectiveness of the movement for political reform.

The *Bersih* case also illustrates that as a socio-material artefact, every digital platform (blogging, Facebook and Twitter) has its own socio-political properties that postulate distinctive affordances and limitations for its users. The *Bersih* movement, illustrates that, unlike Facebook which is valuable for expanding and growing networks, blogging proves a suitable medium for establishing the core of the activist network, especially by facilitating the brokerage.

As for Twitter, its portability and swiftness made it suitable for real-time communication and broadcasting during the actual protest event.

Resting at the fact that *Bersih* is largely an urban middle class movement, we also learn that digital media as technology do not operate in a contextual vacuum. While these media may widen and broaden the space for political participation for Malaysians, with a high concentration of internet access in urban areas, *Bersih's* reliance on digital media contributed to the under-representation of rural individuals and groups in the movement.

Digital media do not stand apart as an autonomous force that impacts politics. Digital media is not a magic wand that transforms the so-called political passivity of Malaysians into enthusiastic involvement in participatory politics. By exploring how digital media including blogging, Facebook and Twitter were utilized and appropriated by supporters of the *Bersih* movement, this chapter has argued that digital media is very much a part of the socio-political landscape it attempts to transform. Therefore, the impact of digital media on politics and its role in societal change should be understood as the 'result of the organic interaction between the technology and social, political, and cultural structures and relationship' (Lim 2013:637). Digital media are shaped by the political and cultural arrangement in which they operate and are used. In the Malaysian context, and in relation to *Bersih* in particular, the dominant users are urban middle-class Malays, particularly the youth. With the young generation of 'digital natives', notions of political participation in exercising citizenship are changing. Technology did not transform Malaysians into politically active citizens, but by appropriating digital media in their pursuit of reforming politics, *Bersih* activists offered new possibilities for participation and engagement in politics, especially for young people. They expanded the space for people's agency in shaping the future of politics in the nation.

This chapter shows that in the *Bersih* movement, Malaysians have learned to recognize their rights and claim them through participating in the practices of activism in the cyber-urban space. Such practices embody instances of 'insurgent citizenship' (Holston 1998), which are political practices challenging established notions of citizenship as defined by the state (and the ruling coalition) and claiming new conceptions of citizenship. Through subversive practices of insurgent citizenship, urban middle-class Malaysians have crafted a pathway towards a new type of relationship between the state and its citizen. Also, these practices challenged the existing power balance between the state and civil society, especially in public spheres. The outcome of this continuous contestation between insurgent citizens and the state will be crucial in defining the future of Malaysian democracy (Lim 2008).

While digital media has temporarily steered the country towards the seemingly more desirable trajectory of participatory politics, the future role of digital media in the Malaysians' pursuit for citizen participation and the pathway to citizenship and democratic culture, is neither certain nor predetermined. What is clear is that urban middle-class Malaysians, especially young people, will continue to be part of the contestation for the future of reform, democracy and electoral politics in the country, and that digital media will continue to play a role in the struggle.

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