Is WhatsApp free of the elites: The 2018 General Elections in Malaysia

Kevin Fernandez[1], Marwan Ismail[2], Ravindaran Maraya[3]

[1]Department of Administrative Studies & Politics, Faculty of Business and Economics, UM
[2]Department of Human Sciences, Faculty Of Language Studies And Human Development, UMK
[3]Department of Indian Studies, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, UM

Correspondence: Kevin Fernandez (email: kevin@um.edu.my)

Abstract

2018 was a particularly significant year for Malaysia, as citizens democratically dethroned a 61-year-old regime, Barisan Nasional (BN, the National Front), and replaced it with Pakatan Harapan (PH, the Alliance of Hope) without bloodshed. This article attempts to systematically analyze the evolution of new media from the 2008 election (taking place in the blogging era, which contributed to the "electoral tsunami" in Malaysia that year) to 2018, which saw the rise of encrypted messaging services such as WhatsApp, a formidable point for the dissemination and consumption of political news in Malaysia. Methodologically, the normative method of the shared values theory was adopted to better explain how new media is currently used to shape the political ideas of ordinary Malaysians. The findings suggest that there is a clear attempt by political leaders to coopt opinion leaders at various levels, particularly religious leaders, academicians, think tanks and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), with the intention of influencing and shaping the political leanings of those who are less interested in politics, using a centralized agenda-setting mechanism. The findings also suggest that opinion leaders were purposely selected according to their higher social capital value and social authority, and evidence from the study suggests that instant messaging services are not totally free from the influence of political and economic elites.

Keywords: Collective identity, Malaysian politics, new media, political mobilizations

Introduction

One of the longest-ruling regimes in the world, the 61-year-old Barisan Nasional (BN, National Front) was legitimately and democratically removed from power on 9 May 2018 and replaced by Pakatan Harapan (PH, Alliance of Hope) in Malaysia's 14th general election. The Malaysian legislature is based on the Westminster parliamentary system, an inheritance from its colonial past. The first-past-post system means that candidates with the highest number of votes become Members of Parliament (MP), and the party or coalition with the highest number of MPs has the advantage of suggesting their candidate for prime minister to the King (the Yang di-Pertuan Agong), since the constitutional monarch is responsible for sanctioning the prime minister.

That night before BN lost the election, it was becoming apparent that the regime had a significant influence on mainstream media, as newscasters were trying to place BN in the best possible light even while the coalition's continuous losses was broadcasted live. Understandably, a considerable majority of Malaysians were optimistic about the promise of a new dawn, as they no longer needed to awaken to racially charged headlines such as *Utusan Malaysia*'s "Apa lagi Cina mau" (What else do the Chinese want) the morning after the 2013 general election. *Utusan* was owned by UMNO (United Malays National Organisation), the dominant party in BN.

The PH coalition won a simple majority of 121 parliamentary seats. PH consisted of Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR, the People's Justice Party) – 48 seats; the Democratic Action Party (DAP) – 42 seats; Parti Pribumi Bersatu (Bersatu) – 12 seats; Amanah – 11 seats; and was later joined by Warisan – 8 seats. BN also recorded its lowest share of the popular vote, capturing only 33.8% (a sharp drop of 13.6%. One of the most interesting developments was that Mahathir Mohamad, who held power between 1981 and 2003, became prime minister again. Mahathir initially resigned in 2003 and handed power to Abdullah Badawi, whose "Mr Clean" image helped BN win 64% of the popular vote and a massive 91% parliamentary majority during the 2004 election. This was because Abdullah Badawi's soft demeanor and his public image was in direct contrast with Mahathir's authoritarian image, historically linked to his developmentalist ideals which benefited cronies.

Eventually, abuses of power such as demands for kickbacks in national projects that involved Abdullah's son-in-law, Khairy Jamaluddin, and the rumored "4th Floor Boys", believed to be running the country, led a vast majority of the growing middle class aiming their guns at Abdullah's leadership and management skills (Chin & Huat, 2009). The Malaysian Bar Council and the Coalition for Clean and Fair Elections (Gabungan Pilihanraya Bersih dan Adil, henceforth Bersih), which was formed in 2006, organized a massive rally on 10 November 2007. Subsequently, the Hindu Rights Action Force (HINDRAF) rallied soon after on 25 November, expressing dissent over issues pertaining to conversion to Islam and the demolition of temples. What was commonly referred to as an "electoral tsunami" took place during the 2008 general election, which saw BN hanging on to power by only 30 seats (with a total of 141 out of 222 parliament seats) and a majority vote of 51%. Abdullah Badawi was subsequently replaced by Najib Tun Razak in 2009.

The 2013 general election saw 51% of the popular vote gained by the opposition, but it only secured 40% of parliamentary representation. While Najib's populist BR1M (Financial Aid 1 Malaysia) policy to distribute money to the lower income groups may have gained him brownie points among the general public, he also made a few grave mistakes (Fernandez & Sivamurugan, 2016). First, he jailed de facto opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim, again over fresh, sensationalized sodomy charges (see below). This irked many of the elites and civil society actors, who felt frustrated by what was observed to be a violation of basic human rights. Although Najib was able to win over its rival, Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS) in 2015, after supporting the implementation of *hudud* criminal law in Kelantan, it was already too late because he was already losing in psychological terms, as the national discourse and popular culture concentrated on him being regarded as corrupt (the 1Malaysia Development Berhad [1MDB] scandal), criminal (supposedly linked to the killing of Altantuya Shaariibuu) and caring little for the *rakyat* (via the implementation of the Goods and Services Tax, popularly regarded as a way to feed his wife's unsurmountable appetite for luxury goods) (Chin & Huat, 2009).

In 2014, Mahathir and his son Mukhriz formed Bersatu, which was later joined by Muhyiddin Yassin (the former deputy prime minister of Malaysia) in 2016, having been sacked by Najib after voicing his thoughts about the infamous global financial scandal involving the state investment arm, 1MDB. According to the independent approval ratings research center,

the Merdeka Survey, the "Mahathir factor" had a multiracial effect, giving his camp an approval rating of 83% (Merdeka Survey, 2019). The general will of Malaysians seemed certain, and the popular perception manifested in confidence in the new PH government under Mahathir.

It was only as recently as September 2016 that Mahathir reconciled with his former protégé, Anwar Ibrahim, initially sent to jail for sodomy and corruption charges in 1998. This sparked the *Reformasi* (Reform) movement in Malaysia and the subsequent formation of PKR, which gained traction over perceived injustices that were institutionalized by Mahathir himself. PKR would go on to play an integral role of bringing the Islamist right-wing party PAS and the predominantly Chinese-based DAP into an opposition political bloc. PAS exited the coalition in 2015 due to differences of views over the handling of state matters, especially regarding the separation of state and religion, being adamant about the implementation of *hudud* law in Malaysia.

This popular culture of resentment against the Najib administration was made possible through the spread of new media (Fernandez & Sivamurugan, 2016; Chin, 2018). Unlike past studies, this exercise attempts to provide an explanation of the evolution of new media, from the 2008 blogging era right up to the 2018 "WhatsApp era", where encrypted messaging tools played a key role. Most importantly, its significance as "liberation tool" will be discussed from a theoretical lens, and the methodology will enable future comparative studies to be done in other states. The paper also provides an idea of the existing power relationships, manifested in how charismatic leaders manipulate new media tools to create a "Politically Driven Networked Society" for the purposes of disseminating targeted information to intended communities – thus creating a new imagined community: a networked society of dissenters. This is one of the only papers that scientifically analyzes and argues how opinion leaders are selected and coopted into particular WhatsApp groups based on their high social capital and social authority in the Malaysian context, through whom the dissemination of political information occurs, to be circulated in turn to other WhatsApp groups, entrenching the influence of political leaders or their designated communications attachés.

In Malaysia, academic discourse on new media and its impact, as well as the politics of change, is focused on structural-agency arguments, with new media (and social media) being lauded as invigorating democratic ideals in the public sphere (Khoo, 2016; Fernandez, 2010). This academic exercise attempts to provide an alternative view of that discourse, where we argue that social, political and intellectual elites have the ability to create substantial influence through WhatsApp, which Malaysians are growing increasingly reliant upon for news.

Literature review

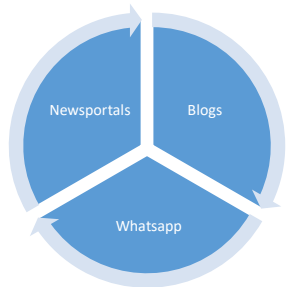*The Whatsapp phenomenon – Causes and effects*

Recent scholarship on the impact of the internet on mass mobilization and calls for reform has gained much attention worldwide, in an attempt to assess the "impact information and communication technologies (ICTs) have had on the outcomes of contentious political confrontations"(Lysenko & Desouza, 2011 p. 1). Scholars have been interested in assessing how the internet has enabled the formation of collective identities and the taking of collective action that led to uprisings in Egypt (Attia, Aziz, Friedman, & Elhusseiny, 2011), Moldova (Lysenko & Desouza, 2011), Kyrgyzstan (Kulikova & Perlmutter, 2007), Russia (Lysenko & Desouza, 2010), Burma (Chowdhury, 2008) and Ukraine (Goldstein, 2007), among others. Different aspects of such uprisings are studied through a variety of theories, and frameworks have and are being developed to understand this new phenomenon and its impact on socio-

political landscapes. The pervasiveness of the internet, coupled with the need for agency (i.e. to politically express oneself through various social networking platforms), has led to the development of organizations such as Cambridge Analytica, accused of using advanced algorithm analysis to develop online materials intended to deceive and manipulate mass opinion in a seemingly organic manner. A study by the Reuters Institute in 2020 showed a declining trust in mainstream media, in tandem with an increased reliance on news from social media, particularly Facebook and WhatsApp (Newman, Fletcher, Schulz, Andi, Nielsen, 2020). One major contributing factor to the upsurge of WhatsApp in Malaysia is the import of Chinese-made Android smartphones, which have made such devices more affordable for middle- and lower-class Malaysians (*The Star*, 2017). As such, social media, if used for the purposes for perception-building, can be manipulated into creating a "false consciousness", by building ideas and manipulating unwitting subordinates into acting on these ideas. In practice, this means that ordinary citizens vote for and support elites who may not be truly working for their benefit.

Many scholars have asserted that the internet – as a means of disseminating information to regular Malaysians – can ultimately influence the perception of voters (Katz, 2001; Abbott, 2001; Abbott, 2004; Brown, 2005; Tan & Zawawi, 2008, Steele, 2009; Khoo, 2016). Fernandez (2010), for instance, optimistically attempted to illustrate the two waves of "cyberpolitics" in Malaysia. Most scholars of Malaysian politics do agree that that the start of this wave began during the incarceration of Anwar Ibrahim and the beginning of the *Reformasi* movement. As Brown (2005, p. 46) succinctly puts it, "[i]n the aftermath of Anwar's sacking, the Internet as a political medium and as the medium of reformasi became virtually synonymous". While most studies have concentrated on the democratizing effects of the internet on the Malaysian nation-state in general (Brown, 2005; Khoo, 2016; Chin & Huat, 2009; Fernandez, 2010), little or nothing has been done on the effects of WhatsApp on the Malaysian general election of 2018.

The different outlets for alternative information deserve closer scrutiny and new scholarly contributions to the existing literature. As Brown (2005) suggests, the 1990s and early 2000s were the era of news outlets (or news portals) in Malaysia. The 2008 elections were influenced by the blogging era, where alternative news circulated (Tan & Ibrahim, 2008), while micro-blogging played an important role in the 2013 elections. We argue that the general Malaysian populace were very reliant on WhatsApp during the 2018 election. In table 1, we propose the evolution of local political messaging, based on the literature review conducted.

Table 1. Trajectory of new media and politics in Malaysia.

Types	Years	Target Online Audience	Line of Communication
News Portal Era	1999 – 2007	Urban, educated, male	SMS ⟷ News portals
Blogging Era	2007–2013	Urban, (less) educated, male and female	Blogs ⟷ News portals
WhatsApp Era	2013–2019	Messages curated by politicians or communications operatives for consumption by opinion leaders with high social capital and social authority, to be forwarded to groups which they have influence over.	

Source: Obtained from primary data

WhatsApp chat groups give agents autonomy in terms of the "intervention of selectivity (in exposure, perception, and retention)" (Katz, 2001 p. 270-71), meaning that the participant of a WhatsApp group can opt to continue being part of it, or choose to freely exit. Structurally, WhatsApp groups are run by one or more administrators (henceforth admin[s]), who have the ability to select, control and reinforce narratives that are in line with their specific and intended objectives, while removing dissidents. This embedded autonomy gives a higher agency to participants, leading to several wider social issues. Firstly, the increased echo chambers created by increasingly polarized political views pull people to extreme ends of the political divide. Studies in the United States (US) have indicated that blog readers tend to be more hardline supporters of certain parties, compared to non-blog readers and mass media consumers (Lawrence, Sides, & Farrell, 2010). WhatsApp groups have an even stronger control of group narratives, by extension creating more hardline supporters.

Secondly, WhatsApp groups can be advantageously manipulated as an avenue for the dissemination of immediate information by circumventing laws, especially in authoritarian states. Concomitantly, it is also fertile ground for the transmission of disinformation and fake news. Disinformation, if reinforced over time, can give some members of society a false sense of political realities. The reinforcement of existing opinion is more likely to occur as a result of mass communication rather than conversion to other opinions (Katz, 2001 p. 270-71), facilitated by the admin's control of the narratives of WhatsApp groups, as discussed above.[i]

Thirdly, we argue that by selecting audiences with high social capital and social authority (e.g. religious leaders and community leaders), group admins are able to influence national discourse and build virtual imagined spaces for specific actions (e.g. winning elections). Some scholars also endeavor to understand the usage of the internet in promoting social capital for the building of such imagined communities (Zangana, 2017), which are important for the realization of mass mobilization (Khoo, 2016). The question then arises as to whether or not the global proliferation of alternative news equates to the democratization of nation-states, or further polarizes diverse, multiethnic societies like Malaysia.

It is rather common for cyber-optimists such as Howard Rheingold, who wrote in *The Virtual Community* (1993, p. 114) that "mass media […] have commoditized the public sphere, substituting slick public relations for genuine political debate", while the internet has the potential "to challenge the existing hierarchy's monopoly on powerful communications media, and perhaps thus revitalize citizen-based democracy". Cyber-optimists define "liberation technology" as that which empowers individuals, facilitates independent communication and mobilization, while also strengthening an emergent civil society (Diamond, 2010a). Social networking sites are also used by a growing, internet-reliant society for a variety of reasons including: "classic identity markers of emerging adulthood, such as religion, political ideology, and work, young adults also used media preferences to express their identity … new media is an important element of information dissemination for creating new collective identities and for collective agency purposes" (Pempek, Yermolayeva, & Calvert, 2009, p. 227).

The reinforcement of existing narratives to create new collective identities and collective agency does promote the general good but can sometimes promote negative outcomes through negative reinforcement. The petition demanding that the vulnerable Rohingya refugee community in Malaysia be sent back to Cox's Bazar in Bangladesh and/or the Rakhine state in Myanmar during the COVID-19 outbreak is a case in point.

This study attempts to understand the use of WhatsApp groups in terms of how they affect the "democratic practice of participation, deliberation, mobilization, and collective action aimed at political outcomes [...] and second addresses the degree to which technology shapes knowledge production in a society" (Shaw & Benkler, 2012 p. 460). To the best of the authors' knowledge, this paper is one of the first academic endeavors that specifically analyze the strategies adopted by political parties and politicians in using encrypted messaging group

applications for the dissemination of political propaganda, with a view of shaping minds to influence voting patterns.

Theoretical framework

This paper adopts the structural-agency approach to understanding the reformative or transformative calls for change in order to answer two research questions: (1) whether community leaders were reliant on political news through WhatsApp and (2) if there was a strategic motive behind creating WhatsApp groups, and how echo chambers affirming existing views were purposively crafted. Vilfredo Pareto (1916) notes how elites are not overthrown from below; rather economic, political, and intellectual elites merge, combine and replace each other. We agree with Michels' understanding of "the iron of oligarchy": consisting of the oligarchy that follows its own interest and its members, the majority of whom persevere the oligarchy's decisions (Mariotti, 2020).

The structure is understood from Habermas's (1992) system (eg. the family, judiciary, state and economy), that comes into existence from the lifeworld (culture, society, personality). In his reflections on the public sphere, Habermas makes a distinction between "the communicative generation of legitimate power on the one hand" and "the manipulative deployment of media power to procure mass loyalty, consumer demand, and 'compliance' with systemic imperatives on the other" (Habermas, 1992 p.452). The system reciprocally influences the lifeworld, and the public sphere also playing an integral role in shaping and influencing it. Although the internet has empowered many people who were otherwise historically disenfranchised, allowing them to voice their opinions through blogs, social media and encrypted instant messaging applications, man-hours and machinery are required to develop materials for dissemination as well as the necessary technical hardware and software.

The public sphere in this context is understood as an arena, independent of government (even if in receipt of state funds) and also enjoying autonomy from partisan economic forces, which is dedicated to rational debate (i.e. to debate and discussion which is not "interested", "disguised" or "manipulated") and which is both accessible to entry and open to inspection by the citizenry. It is here, in this public sphere, that public opinion is formed. (Holub, 1991:2–8). It is argued that capitalist ideas of material acquisition have enabled the economic and political elites to have more control of the public sphere.
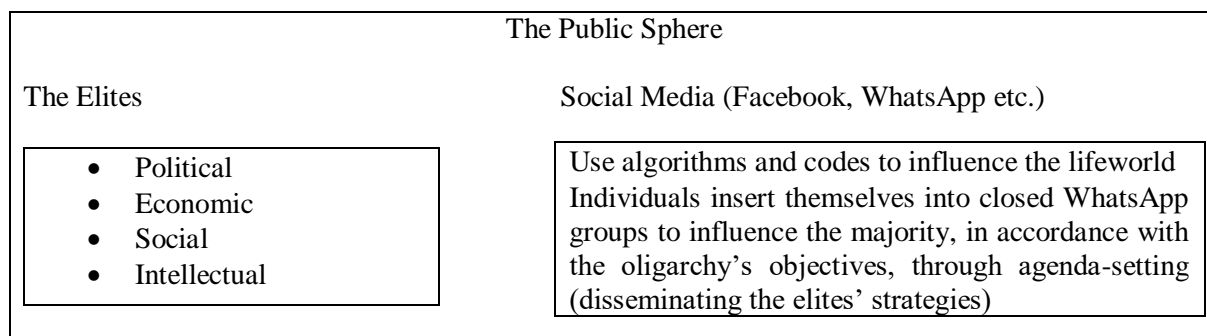
As capitalism grew in strength and influence, its proponents, especially the economic and political elites, have moved from instigating calls for reform towards capturing the state instead, intending to influence state policies in favor of the power elite. In short, the capitalist state came into being: its adherents increasingly turned their backs on agitation and argumentation and used the state — now dominated by capital — to further their own ends. In Malaysia, the result is the expansion of MPs' private directorships, the business financing of political parties and think tanks as well as the systematic lobbying of parliament and public opinion by organized interests, thus seeing a reduction in the autonomy of the public sphere. The bourgeoisie dominates the public sphere, serving as the elites or the more politically dominant class, maintaining their power by inspiring the masses toward a particular ideology. Antonio Gramsci (as cited in Flilipini, 2016) suggests that the masses require a revolutionary ideology inspired by intellectuals, which in turn is to be extended to the masses and to be put into practice by them, proposing to interpret society based on the Marxist collective identity perspective. Although Gramsci (as citied in Filipini, 2016) stressed the importance of structure, he placed minimal importance in the economy. Gustafsson's (2009) definition of temporal elites – "a group of individuals, well-connected, well-educated and motivated to take an active part in politics, but not necessarily through joining political parties or even interest groups" –

was applied in this research (p. 16). We can assume that these new ideological calls become embedded in popular culture, which Fiske (1989, p. 3) interprets as "…always in process; its meanings can never be identified in a text, for texts are activated, or made meaningful, only in social relations and in intersexual relations. This activation of the meaning potential of a text can occur only in the social and cultural relationships into which it enters. The social relationships of texts occur at their moment of reading as they are inserted into the everyday lives of the readers".

He attempts to argue that what "has blinkered Marxist theory to the notion of popular pleasure, and particularly to the idea that popular pleasure must necessarily contain traces of resistance: there is no popular pleasure in being ideologically duped or hegemonically victimized" (p. 183). "Popular pleasure" is important since it ultimately becomes popular culture. Indulging in attempts to understand the discursive apparatus of power would provide us with some explanations, but not full comprehension of, popular culture in Malaysia.

In an attempt to understand local politically motivated popular culture, this paper adopts Fiske's theorization that "popular pleasure as occurring at that interface between the power-bearing apparatuses and the intransigent social experiences of the subordinated groups" (p. 183). Most importantly, we attempt to provide an explanation of how WhatsApp was able to contribute to turning the national narrative or popular culture against the ruling regime (BN) in favour of the future PH government.

Figure 1. The public sphere, containing the elites and social media.

The Public Sphere	
The Elites	**Social Media (Facebook, WhatsApp etc.)**
• Political • Economic • Social • Intellectual	Use algorithms and codes to influence the lifeworld Individuals insert themselves into closed WhatsApp groups to influence the majority, in accordance with the oligarchy's objectives, through agenda-setting (disseminating the elites' strategies)

Method and scope of study

Methodology

Methodologically, this study assumes the normative method. Taking the typical Hommes and Hume understanding, this study assumes that people naturally pursue self-interested objectives (Box-Steffensmeier, Brady, & Collier, 2008), as supported by John Rawls's theory of justice which assumes that citizens are mutually disinterested and the benefits gained from social order do not depend on "your benefits" (p. 37). In other words, Rawls argues that individuals, from all spectra of society, are in pursuit of a "common good" that basically benefits themselves and/or people of interest. Nevertheless, people can have shared values in pursuit of such a common good. The shared-values theories forwarded by John Locke, Ibn Khaldun and Talcott Parsons understand that public spirit, altruism or duty may motivate CSOs, opposition politicians and religious leaders to promote change using WhatsApp.

Research design

The qualitative method of using in-depth interviews was adopted for the purpose of this study, as it required a small number of key informants who had high social capital and social authority. Five key informants were purposefully selected to explore their perspectives on this idea of what we call the "The Malaysian WhatsApp General Election 2018". For validity, we included informants from both sides of the divide, including civil society actors and a religious authority figure.

Data Collection

Questions were based on themes centered upon the two research questions above. The unit of analysis was selected based on the purposive and convenience sampling method. One criterion for selection informants was that they either worked directly for politicians, political NGOs, journalists or people who had social authority over the grassroots, as we wanted to understand if grassroots leaders (including religious leaders and journalists) were deliberately included into WhatsApp groups with the intent to influence and shape the minds of those with high social capital and social authority. Semi-structured interviews were used as an instrument to collect the data, since "[i]n-depth interviews are useful when you want detailed information about a person's thoughts and behaviors or want to explore new issues in depth" (Boyce & Neale, 2006). A pilot study was conducted among lecturers in University Malaysia Kelantan. Feedback was collected and the questionnaire was refined according to suggestions meant to omit researcher bias and to increase to increase scientific validity.

Facebook messaging used as for data collection purposes, and a verification of each informant's answers was not required. The interviewer transcribed the responses according to the themes and did not seek further exploration, as the informants answered that they were either the administrators who purposefully established WhatsApp groups or understood that such groups were established for political reasons.

Unit of analysis

A description of the five key informants is as shown in table 2.

Table 2. Key Informants.

Informant	Description
A	A non-practicing lawyer turned social activist
B	A renowned Malaysian political commentator
C	Works for a reputable think tank
D	Special advisor to a MP
E	A religious authority in his community

Source: Obtained from primary data

Additionally, one of the researchers used the participatory research method, as the researcher already was part of WhatsApp groups that were politically motivated.
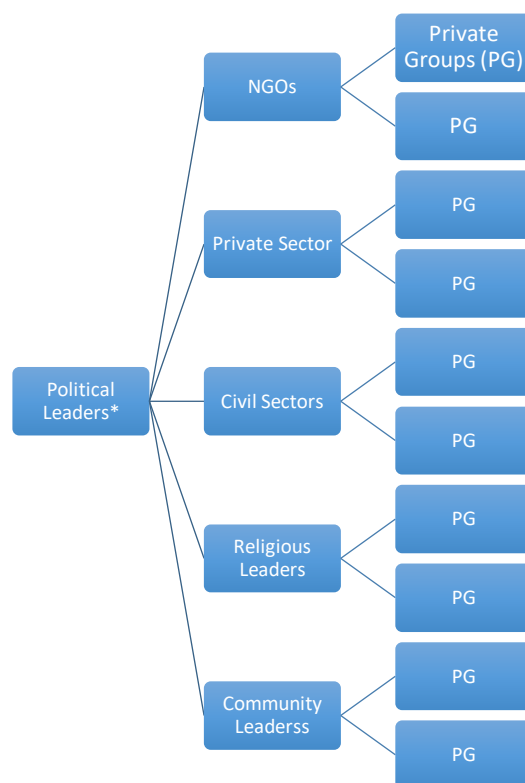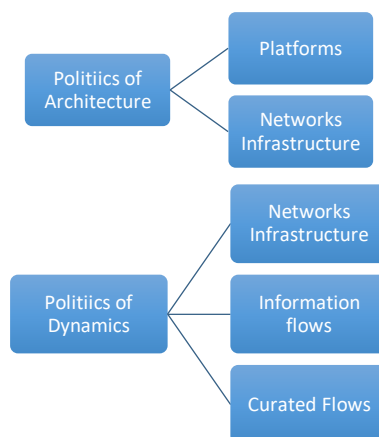
*Note: * The term "political leaders" in this context includes representatives of MPs in charge of communications such as political aides, communications attaches and party social media strategists.*

Source: Obtained from primary data.

Figure 2. Flow of curated WhatsApp discussions

Source: Nahon, K. (2015)

Figure 3. Politics of social media dimensions

Regarding Figure 3, we further discuss (1) the politics of architecture and (2) the politics of dynamics, as described by Nahon (2015). Writing on the politics of architecture, Nahon contends that the architecture of social media is inherently political by nature. There are two inherent qualities: (1) social media platforms have the ability to dictate norms, values and conduct of users in accordance with the service providers and application developers and (2) privacy settings reduce the agency of consumers and increase the arbitrary power of service providers and application developers to dictate the norms, values and conduct of users. We

argue the architecture of WhatsApp made it the favoured choice of political communication in the 2018 election, because it bypasses the censorship rules of other applications such as YouTube, Facebook and Twitter.

As for the politics of dynamics, Nahon (2015) states two important effects: (1) mediation – "Network gatekeepers have a tremendous impact on information flows: by choosing which information can or cannot pass, by connecting networks or clusters to one another, or more generally by regulating the movement of information as it flows" (p. 17) and (2) clustering – whereby skewed clustered information flows can occur, creating a number of collective behavior effects, including power-law and follow-the-herd tendencies, homophily and polarization.

Findings and discussions

Agenda-setting through WhatsApp by Central Political Committees

Yeo Bee Yin, then Minister of Energy, Science, Technology, Environment and Climate Change, was in charge of DAP's social media strategies, confirmed that the party acquired phone numbers and associated Facebook account details for political campaigning purposes (Tapsell, 2018). In Tapsell's (2018) interview with Fahmi Fadzil, PKR's social media strategist in 2013 and current Lembah Pantai MP, Fahmi confirmed that there were strategic efforts to insert themselves into WhatsApp groups, with the intention of shaping ideas and influencing voting patterns.

Campaigning on WhatsApp is like white-water rafting, riding a raging torrent. You have neighbourhood groups, work groups, alumni groups, political interest groups. We need to try to make sure that we have someone in each of these groups. We can't create the groups. We instruct all our members to make sure that they have state parliamentary level down to polling district level – various WhatsApp groups, in order to send information down. It's about either inserting yourself into your neighbourhood group [or] your club group. (Tapsell, 2018 p.15).

While PKR's social media strategists assert that there was a coordinated effort to infiltrate themselves into WhatsApp groups, BN adopted a strategic effort to include people with high social capital and social authority in WhatsApp groups, selected to disseminate information to the grassroots. When interviewed by Tapsell (2018), former BN Cybertroopers Club founder, Tun Faisal, said that UMNO IT Bureau chief, Ahmad Maslan, coordinated such information at the central level, before sending it right down to village heads and imams to be disseminated to their grassroot supporters.

We coordinate our messaging through these online platforms. Previously we relied on blogs and Facebook, now the communication infrastructure of WhatsApp is core business. (Tapsell, 2018 p. 16)

Validating Tapsell's findings, three out of our five informants were aware that they were included in WhatsApp groups for the purpose of forwarding such information to community leaders, who would then disseminate it to grassroots groups. Informant D claimed that he had initiated political groups to "inform" certain interest groups about the activities of their local MP, whom he apparently advised. He was not coy in stressing that his main target groups mainly catered to that MP's constituency, and knew that the messages were being forwarded to WhatsApp groups in the community.

Other opinion leaders were less aware that these special WhatsApp groups were formed prior to the general election, or that messages were crafted with the intention of being forwarded to community WhatsApp groups. Informant E claims that groups were formed right before elections "to help people better understand the political landscape". Being a religious

authority, she was included in a group that continuously sent out political information favoring a certain political party, and also disseminated this information to other groups that reached out to the grassroots or communities. Most informants, however, were aware that political parties used WhatsApp as a tool to reach out to the grassroots and some were specifically tasked to do so. Informant D claimed that "every group ha[s] their own agenda, as such [the] administrator's purpose will be depending on what type [of] group [this is]". Informant A said that such groups were initiated to "[f]an support for particular ideology, party, candidate or policy". Similarly, Informant B said that Whatsapp groups were initiated to "advance support for political parties and their candidates".

Whatsapp as a 'Fear Factor' propagator

One study found that Malaysians' use of WhatsApp promoted a culture of "crypto-publics", as people were able to bypass the curtailment laws of the state (John, 2020), suggesting that WhatsApp was a vital instrument in Bersih's organization of street rallies, leading to the creation of what she claims are "counter publics". That study was mainly confined to politically well informed Malaysian Chinese activists. We argue that such optimistic studies do not take into consideration misinformation and disinformation. Disinformation – propaganda spread with the intention of deliberately causing anxiety and fear among voters – functions to swing votes towards either side of the divide. This "fear factor", Chomsky's (Barsamian & Chomsky, 2001) addition to the propaganda model, includes sensationalized news that people are most keen about forwarding and speaking about in public spaces.

For an instance, the morning after the election, rumors that Najib and wife were trying to flee the country are a point in case. Similarly, Anwar Ibrahim's supposed claims, widely shared through WhatsApp in 2013, that the Najib administration was flying Bangladeshi individuals over to help vote for BN were proven to be falsified. Such fear mongering and disinformation is seen in India too, where WhatsApp increasingly influences the electorate, and in many countries where the battlegrounds have shifted to instant messaging platforms (Farooq, 2017).

After the general election, one major failure of the PH government was its inability to ratify the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD). In November 2018, UMNO and PAS youth wings rallied in defiance of the ratification, claiming that it was in violation of Article 153 of the Federal Constitution, which assigns the responsibility for safeguarding the "special position" of Malays and other natives to the King. The "fear factor" being propagated was that the new government was supposedly in favor of the non-Malays and bent on undermining the special privileges and rights of the former, and can mostly be attributed to material created and distributed through WhatsApp.

Weapons of the weak: Resistance through 4G and WhatsApp

The Malaysian distrust of mainstream media was enhanced by the possibilities provided by smartphones, as an alternative space of information for "words, feints and counterfeints, threats, a skirmish or two, and, above all, propaganda" (Fiske, 1989: 3). Residents of rural and semi-rural areas were able to access information that included gossip, slander, jokes and disagreements shared among the elites, without the need to be in Putrajaya. The real resistance of Malaysians to BN resulted from the struggle over the "rising cost of living, and bread-and-butter issues such as the struggle over the appropriation of work, production, property, and taxes; in GE14's case, the explicit policy platform of the opposition to abolish the GST" (Tapsell, 2018 p.29). The spectre of Najib's wife's purchases went viral over social media applications, particularly WhatsApp, encouraging Malaysians to vote against BN. Even the

BRIM financial aid was not able to assist BN (Kow, 2016), as voters now preferred having an alternative government.

Yet Malaysia proved Pareto's (2016) ideation of the elitist when Najib was replaced by one of their own from within UMNO in the form of a returning Mahathir. The weapons of the weak, to borrow James C. Scott's (2008) phrase, in the form of smartphones, were utilized by the general public, but they were not able to break the "iron of oligarchy", and failed to fulfil a full *Reformasi*.

Conclusion

The elitist theories forwarded by Pareto (1916) led to subsequent counter-arguments by Roberto Michels (as cited in Mariotti, 2020), which stated according to the "iron law of oligarchy", power is concentrated in the hands of a few. The findings suggest that there is a clear attempt by political leaders to coopt various social, economic and intellectual elites within various social structures – including NGOs, the private, civil and religious sectors as well as community leaders.

The optimistic view that new media and social media have liberalizing effects on the public sphere could be revisited (Diamond, 2010a; Diamond, 2010b). Although this study does agree with the assertion that social media, particularly WhatsApp, was a wielded as a "weapon of the weak" (Tapsell, 2018), this exercise suggests that the elites infiltrated existing WhatsApp groups with the purpose of pushing specific ideologues, purposely discussed and agreed upon by the central communication bureaus of political parties from both BN and PH, to shape discussions in favour of the existing elites.

It should also be noted that WhatsApp can be used as weapon for disinformation and misinformation. As Nahon (2015) contends, WhatsApp can dictate the norms, values and conduct of users, but does not have network-wide gatekeeping abilities. The spread of fake news through WhatsApp groups can be used as weapon to dehumanize minority groups while indirectly promoting inflammatory hate speech. Through the spread of fake news, WhatsApp groups can be used as weapon to dehumanize minority groups and while indirectly promoting inflammatory waves of hate speech (Fernandez a, 2020). Nation states like Malaysia should be vigilant of such occurrences as it can be vulnerable to national and transnational non-state security threats, including extremist groups (Fernandez b, 2020). Unregulated access to subscriber identification module (SIM) cards means that there is fertile ground for people to attain and disseminate untraceable information.

The limitations of the study include the need for further exploration of the subject with more communications chiefs of political parties and their staff. We also recommend surveying actual misinformation and disinformation spread by certain political parties through WhatsApp: deliberate attempts to promote certain ideologues with an impact on the ideas of regular people.

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[i] The control of narratives has multiple layers: communal, national, cultural, religious or gender based. For instance, Fiske (1989) offers some explanations of discursive formations that shape national discourse. Such repressed truths indicate that the economic and social contrasts between the West and the Middle East require a far more complex knowledge of the relationships between the regions than those offered by news/history. A singular narrative casting the Middle East as the discursive villain, and the West as hero-victim, is challenged by the refusal of events to submit themselves to the discipline of history (p. 173).