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Debating the Conduct and Nature of Malaysian Politics: Communalism and New Media Post-March 2008

Joseph Chinyong Liow and Afif Pasuni

Abstract: The results of Malaysia's general election held on 8 March 2008 was nothing short of monumental. By winning five state legislatures and denying the incumbent governing coalition its hitherto routine two-thirds parliamentary majority, the performance of the opposition, swayed by the contribution of the new media, raised hopes that Malaysian politics had turned a corner. Following the elections, the popular discursive terrain in Malaysia was awash with talk of a "new politics" that had emerged, and that transcended the traditional narratives of race, religion, and communalism. The purpose of this paper is to examine the veracity of these claims in relation to the nature and conduct of politics in Malaysia. It argues that, three years after the 2008 elections, the communal narrative remains as forceful a factor in Malaysian politics despite the presence of a multi-ethnic opposition coalition and the hope engendered by the emergence of the new media as an equalizing factor that has eroded the incumbent's traditional hegemonic control over information.

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Introduction

There is no gainsaying the fact that the performance of Malaysia's opposition parties at the 2008 general elections was a resounding success. While the ruling National Front coalition (also known as *Barisan Nasional*) retained power nationally, it lost five state legislatures to the opposition Peoples' Alliance coalition (PR or *Pakatan Rakyat*) as well as its hitherto customary two-thirds parliamentary majority – the first time the ruling coalition had been denied this majority since independence in 1957. The fact that until the last decade general elections in Malaysia were very much seen as a formality, where opposition parties could do little more than chip away at the National Front's power, lent further to the air of expectation that Malaysian politics was on the precipice of change. Fought in no small part on the media terrain, the success of Malaysia's multi-ethnic opposition coalition campaign immediately raised hopes that Malaysian politics was witnessing a new dawn defined by a departure from the familiar themes of communalism, ethnic polarisation, patronage and money politics, and emphasis on justice, accountability, and egalitarian democracy. Of particular interest is the fact that the election outcome inspired numerous scholars and pundits to consider the realistic possibility that Malaysia had turned the page on racial and communal politics, and was finally prepared to embrace a pluralist and inclusivist conception of society (Beng, Saravanamuttu, and Lee 2008; Mohamad 2008; Singh 2009; Pepinsky 2009).

The objective of this paper is to evaluate the post-March 2008 political terrain in Malaysia in order to answer several fundamental questions that arise as a consequence of the election: Has the nature and conduct of Malaysian politics changed fundamentally since March 2008? Did the March 2008 elections mark as big a break with communal politics, as some have suggested? Indeed, what does the outcome of the 2008 elections portend for the seemingly entrenched communal nature of Malaysian politics? In answering these questions based on an analysis of key developments in relation to the theme of communalism that have taken shape since March 2008, this paper cautions against excessive optimism that Malaysian politics has turned the page on communal politics and ethnic polarisation, and has entered into an era of “new politics.” By focusing attention in particular on the debates over *Ketuanan Melayu* (Malay supremacy), which was and remains a subtext of the UMNO-PAS unity talks, and the “Allah” controversy of early 2010 – two debates that speak to the centrality of touchstone issues of ethnic identity and religion in Malaysian society – the paper contends that Malaysian politics remains very much rooted in familiar racial and commu-

nal narratives that have cast a long shadow over all aspects of Malaysian politics.¹ In addition to that, given the hope inspired by opposition narratives of multiculturalism as well as the role of the new media after March 2008, the point will also be made that the primacy of communal narratives remains despite the labours of a seemingly multi-ethnic opposition and the advent of new media that has admittedly provided the opposition coalition an important vehicle through which to perpetuate its narrative and agenda of democracy, justice, and pluralism.

The Nature and Conduct of Politics: Traditional Narratives

Malaysian politics has always been defined by and mobilized along a communal framework. This is evident foremost in how political parties and coalitions have been organized. UMNO – the United Malays National Organization – helms the fourteen-party National Front coalition by virtue of being the largest political party representing the interests of the Malay-Muslim majority in the country. Its key allies are the MCA (Malaysian Chinese Association) and MIC (Malaysian Indian Congress), both of which have historically positioned themselves as the custodians of the interests of Malaysia's minority Chinese and Indian communities. Opposition parties too, are arrayed in a manner consonant with the ethnic underpinnings of Malaysian society. Malay support for the opposition has always mobilized behind PAS (the Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party or *Parti Islam Se-Malaysia*), while Chinese and Indian oppositionists have traditionally backed the DAP (Democratic Action Party). For the most part, Malaysian politics has followed a similar script since independence in 1957 – the UMNO-led National Front claims to be the only viable, all-encompassing coalition that can represent and manage the stable but volatile balance of interests among Malaysia's various ethnic communities (albeit under the umbrella of Malay supremacy), while PAS and the DAP chip away at their legitimacy by championing minority interests.

Since independence in 1957, Malaysia's dominant political narrative has been that of Malay primacy within the context of an inter-communal bargain between the leaderships of essentially the Malay, Chinese, and Indian communities. The Malay vote bank is the largest electoral bloc in Malaysia,

1 While we would readily agree that there is a range of issues that have emerged in Malaysia since March 2008, and that could equally facilitate analysis of communal politics, because of constraints of article length we will confine ourselves to these two critical (and controversial) issues.

and has been the subject of extensive politicking between the ruling UMNO and the opposition PAS (and for a time Semangat '46) since the latter's formation in 1951 (UMNO was formed in 1946). The centrality of the Malay constituency is expressed discursively in the mantra "*ketuanan melayu*" (Malay supremacy) and "*takkan melayu hilang di dunia*" (lit: The Malays will not vanish from earth) as well as institutionally in the form of the affirmative action New Economic Policy that provides for the economic interests of Malays. Prior to 1999, periodic efforts to break from the ethnic parameters of voter mobilization or electoral politics usually met with failure. For example, while opposition parties did attempt a multi-ethnic coalition, the *Gagasan Rakyat*, in the 1990 elections, the tone of electoral politics remained communal, where DAP's "Malaysian Malaysia" and PBS' (*Parti Bersatu Sabah* or Sabah United Party) Christian image enabled UMNO to rally the Malays who gave substantial support to UMNO, and its partners in the Front.

The dominant message of multi-ethnic harmony within the framework of Malay supremacy has been perpetuated and reinforced in electoral politics by the instruments of incumbency that UMNO and the National Front have at their disposal come election time. While the institution of the Electoral Commission provides the laws and legislation that govern the "free and fair" conduct of elections, in practice these regulations tend to favour the incumbent government, which in any event appoints its members. Since the 1960s, the way the Election Commission has carried out its major functions has cast doubts about its impartiality and independence (Lim 2002). Moreover, while justified on the grounds of maintaining security, laws such as the Official Secrets Act, Sedition Act, and Publications Act have in fact been used to impose restrictions on opposition political activity. Other advantages for incumbent mobilization include the lack of campaign funding ceilings for individual candidates (National Front candidates are generally much better financed than their opponents, especially independents and candidates from smaller parties); the Front's use of the government machinery and civil service to assist in campaigning, and regularly alleged abuses of the postal voting system whereby police and military personnel stationed outside their states are allowed to vote via postal votes. Against the powers of incumbency, one of the more effective vehicles for opposition mobilization has been the indoor meeting or *ceramah* (open air campaigning was banned in 1978), a tool used particularly efficiently by PAS and the DAP. Even then, the *ceramah* can reach only a limited audience, and also requires a police permit. Furthermore, legal rules pertaining to *ceramah* are not always equally or evenly applied across parties as opposition parties generally face more obstacles in obtaining permits for holding *ceramah*.

Political mobilization for the incumbent National Front has consistently turned on this message of societal harmony and security within the rubric of Malay supremacy, and means defined by machinery, media, money, and where necessary, machination (Loh 2006). So entrenched is this formula that even at the 1999 elections, when the rise of a vocal civil society-based reform movement threatened to undermine the incumbent's political mandate significantly, the National Front mobilized the full extent of the government machinery (the four "M"s) in order to play up the potential destabilizing nature of the opposition's "street politics" as well as PAS's Islamist aspirations. In so doing, the National Front leveraged on existential fears among the non-Malay communities, thereby engineering a massive vote swing in its favour. On the other hand, even PAS, which was the most successful opposition party at that election, made the strategic decision to prioritize the Malay electorate, and admittedly paid little attention apart from rhetoric to non-Malay constituencies, and in so doing failed to counter the communal narrative of the Front.² It is against this backdrop that the March 2008 result – which saw a multi-ethnic opposition coalition jettison communal discourses and campaign on a platform of accountability, transparency, and pluralism, not to mention voting trends whereby Malays voted for the DAP and non-Muslims for PAS – gave rise to expectations that Malaysian politics might finally be turning the page on communalism.

Most analyses of the 2008 elections indicate that the headway made by the opposition was for the most part more a consequence of protest votes against the ruling coalition than a resounding endorsement for "the alternative in a system of checks and balances" (Singh 2009) or "a viable opposition" (Beng 2008: 22). Nevertheless, the remarkable result has also sparked a debate as to whether the outcome of the elections marked a major shift from a politics of communalism to a "new politics" premised on pluralism and inclusivity. The point has been stressed, for instance, that what transpired in March 2008, when voting trends indicated that some individuals broke ranks with ethnic allegiance, demonstrated that race no longer explained voting trends (Beng 2008: 24). Others have concluded likewise, observing that voting trends in 2008 highlighted that multi-ethnic constituencies such as Selangor and Kuala Lumpur have ceased to be potentially easy wins for the National Front after the opposition dominated mixed-race voting (Beng, Saravanamuttu, and Lee 2008: 114). This being the case, the contention has been made that a "new politics" not based on race not only played a major role in 2008 but has in fact been instrumental since the 1999 elections, and that the 2008 outcome has brought Malaysia closer

2 Interview with PAS official, Kuala Lumpur, 16 December 2010.

to “mature democracy and multiculturalism (Beng, Saravanamuttu, and Lee 2008: 72; Moten 2009).

Others have however provided a more cautious reading of the elections’ impact on the communal nature of Malaysian politics, even as they acknowledge the impetus to political reform. For instance, Maznah Mohamad noted that while “ethnic indicators are being uncoupled from the ethnic identity of their advocates”, this was not really about new politics but more a result of a “reconstituted inter-ethnic compact with a fresh air to it” (Mohamad 2008). Similarly, Pepinsky noticed that while the decline of the National Front resulted from Chinese and Indians voters, the Front itself was also more likely to win in a constituency where there were more Malays, and in the peninsula electoral wins seemed to have resulted from non-Malay support for DAP and PKR (as one would predict based on any hypothesis that was informed by the communal nature of Malaysian politics); meanwhile, the Front’s chances of victory were higher when it faced PAS rather than the other two parties. On the basis of these observations, Pepinsky concluded that although Malay support for the National Front may have decreased marginally, the race factor was still fundamental in explaining Malaysian politics (Pepinsky 2009).

Another theme that emerges from these analyses, and that warrants some scrutiny here, is the role of the new media in facilitating this seeming shift away from in communal politics. While most observers, including the present authors, would agree that the new media raised political consciousness and participation in Malaysia to a new plane in 2008, the question is whether the advent of new media politics has sparked a major transformation in one of the most enduring themes that speak to the fundamental nature of Malaysian politics – communalism. To address this question, the rest of this article will discuss communal politics post-March 2008, prefaced with an analysis of the role of the new media at the 2008 elections.

The Phenomenon of New Media

In sociological parlance, new media commonly refers to electronic platforms of information dissemination such as the internet and digital media. This is in contrast to more traditional forms of media such as broadcast television, radio, and print publications (newspapers and magazines). Common internet-based platforms that constitute new media include online news websites, blogs, online forums, and social networking websites such as *Facebook*, *Flickr*, and *Twitter*. A notable characteristic of such new media is the unbridled access it affords to both providers and consumers of news. Moreover, such is the potential of new media that, unlike traditional media, whose reach may

be limited by factors such as logistics, users of digital media can access a host of websites from the same computer, in the same location, at the same time.

In Malaysia, the popularity of new media has grown in tandem with the development of the Malaysian economy, which has afforded access and led to the proliferation of computer usage and advancements in broadband networks across the country. Indeed, high-speed internet penetration rate is anticipated to cover 50% of households at the end of 2010 (*People's Daily Online* 2010). The increasing popularity of the internet as an alternative source of news has been complemented by the rising sophistication and function of increasingly affordable hand-held devices, such as mobile phones, which enable end-users to easily bypass connectivity limitations. In addition, specific websites such as micro-blogging site *Twitter* have enabled direct content posting via mobile devices, thus facilitating steady flows of “real time” updates of information onto new media platforms.

It is clear from the above that given the ubiquity of internet-enabled devices and their ease of use, the new media cannot be neglected as a medium of information dissemination. Such is the potential that new media has for mobilisation, while governments have traditionally relied on traditional media, new media is increasingly gaining acceptance as evident in the efforts of many governments to connect with the citizens. Not surprisingly, new media is gaining more attention from the ruling government in Malaysia. This is especially so in the wake of the 2008 general election, where online alternative news websites and blogs of prominent government critics and opposition members provided the electorate with real-time, unfiltered updates on a host of campaign issues, and in so doing undermined the government's traditional monopoly over information through its control of strategic communications. While it can be argued that new media undoubtedly made its mark on Malaysian politics much earlier – at the 1999 elections when it facilitated the emergence of a nationwide reform movement known as *Reformasi*, it was in 2008 that it arguably came of age.

By 2008, online news sites such as *Malaysiakini* had sprung to the foreground of news reporting, with a record readership of up to 160,000 hits per day (*Malaysiakini* 2007), or an estimated average of two million hits a month (Beh 2009; Media Specialists Association 2008). Currently they are one of the top online news portals in Malaysia, constantly competing with the leading pro-government English newspaper – *The Star Online* – that boasts both online and print circulation (*Alexa* 2010). Aside from *Malaysiakini*, other news portals such as *Nutgraph*, *Malaysian Insider*, and *Malaysia Today* have also emerged as popular sources of alternative news reportage and analysis. This ascendancy of new media has undoubtedly affected the popularity of tradi-

tional media. For the year ending June 2008 average daily newspaper circulation decreased to 2.5 million copies, compared to 2.54 million copies in the previous year (Beh 2009; Media Specialists Association 2008: 2). Despite the traditional media's entrenched status as the main source of news in Malaysia, government officials have conceded that the 2008 election campaign "clearly showed that the public were greatly influenced by what they read on blogs" (Nielsen 2008). This correlates with a Merdeka Centre's report that traditional media itself is increasingly being perceived as a non-credible news source (Kala and Siew 2008), thereby suggesting disconnect between these vehicles and their readers and viewers over its content (Loh and Bedi 2008). Furthermore, it has been estimated that 35% of all internet-related activities in Malaysia involved visits to online news portals and magazines (Nielsen 2008). Through the audiences' comparison of reporting in blogs and the mainstream news, apparent disparity further amplify disenchantments with the traditional media. Merdeka Centre's Ibrahim Suffian posited that although "about 90% of the people got their political information from the traditional media," election results revealed that the National Front obtained "slightly more than half of the popular vote," thereby indicating the possibility that many people "did not believe what they had read" (Kala and Siew 2008).

Moreover, as new media is primarily an urban phenomenon, penetration of rural constituencies was less effective (Chandranayagam 2008). These logistical obstacles were however surmounted by civil society groups and the opposition's party machinery that ensured information obtained from blogs and alternative news websites were reproduced and disseminated in rural areas, particularly during opposition *ceramah* (political campaign talks and rallies) (Chandranayagam 2008). In this manner, the reach of new media was extended to some degree into hitherto unreachable rural areas. In point of fact, the massive number of hits on alternative media websites seemed to indicate that in 2008 Malaysians were turning *en masse* to alternative sources of political news, even if, as Suffian noted, they may not ultimately believe the information they obtain there. News portal *Malaysiakini* was so overwhelmed by visits on polling day that the site broke down. At its peaks, the site was receiving some 500,000 hits an hour, as compared to 100,000 to 200,000 hits a day previously. Similarly, *Malaysia Today* had to cope with "15 million hits the day after results were announced, a more than three-fold increase. That works out to about 625,000 visitors an hour" (Yong 2008).

The dissemination of alternative reportage and news through the new media and the concomitant availability of hitherto curtailed critical perspectives on developments in the country eroded the legitimacy of the National Front even as they provided critical advantages to the opposition. Previously, the ability of the government to control, police, and suppress information

had proven to be one of the most important factors that accounted for the incumbent coalition's hold on power. What the *Reformasi* movement did, in effect, was to foment a crisis in confidence towards the traditional media, which for the most part was government-controlled, and to bring about a situation where

more and more people have evidently chosen to ignore the mainstream media and have developed the habit of picking up information from alternative news sources on the internet (Saravanamuttu 2009).

Through the strategic deployment of new media, hitherto controlled news and information on controversial issues as diverse in range as corruption and legal cases such as those involving V. K. Lingam and the murdered Mongolian model Altanhuuya Shariibuu, rising consumer costs, the government's plan to reduce petrol subsidies, and instances of contested religious conversions were brought to the fore by the political opposition.

At the same time, the opposition used new media to cultivate a number of bloggers sympathetic to their agenda for change and reform, used their respective websites to raise funds, and in some cases, even persuaded them to run as opposition candidates.³ Members of the opposition also assiduously used the new media to increase their profile and reach. For instance, DAP Chairman Lim Kit Siang ran three blogs that were regularly updated with multiple posts on a daily basis. Likewise, Anwar Ibrahim also used his blogsite to propagate his opinion pieces and update information on his party's activities. Meanwhile, PAS ran its own online journal, *Harakah Daily.net*, which featured six different online television channels and provided original reporting on the election.

Perhaps most instructive of the impact that alternative media had on the electoral results were statements by incumbent politicians and government leaders themselves, made in the course of election post-mortems. Then Prime Minister and UMNO President Abdullah Badawi admitted that underestimating the power of the alternative media contributed to his ruling coalition's worst results ever in the March 2008 elections. He noted that:

we certainly lost the Internet war, the cyber war. It was a serious misjudgement. We thought that the newspapers, the print media and the television were supposed to be important, but the young people were looking at SMSes and blogs (*Asian Pacific Post* 2008).

3 For instance, Jeff Ooi won in Penang's Jelutong seat, while in Selangor Tony Pua won in PJ Utara, Nik Nazmi in Seri Setia and Elizabeth Wong in Bukit Lanjang.

His deputy and successor, Najib Razak, was equally candid in his observation, conceding that the government's failure to take into account the potential of the internet

was one of the factors that led to us having a worse than expected performance. But we live and learn. Being silent is not an option anymore and we have to address the issues raised (*New Straits Times* 2008).

Similarly, Information Minister Ahmad Shabery weighed in to the debate by suggesting that

they (bloggers) played a role in the just-ended general election. Many middle-class voters wishing to convey a message to the government turned to the alternative media to source for information. They surfed the Internet and I feel we need to know the role played by the bloggers (*Bernama Daily Malaysian News* 2008).

Reflective of demographic trends, it was also likely that the ruling coalition may have lost significant support from the younger, more internet-savvy, generation of voters. The fact that "between 25 and 30 percent" of the electorate are expected to be below 35 years old by the next general election is further indicative of the potential importance of the new media in shaping the country's future political landscape (*Bernama Daily Malaysian News* 2008; *Malaysiakini* 2010).

Not surprisingly, the furore over the new media has created an impression that it had proffered definite advantages to anti-status quo forces, not least oppositional political parties who have long been disadvantaged by the incumbent government's monopoly over information. To some extent, this is true. After all, new media has provided vital avenues through which the message of the opposition was perpetuated. As the above discussion has shown, the opposition's clarion call for democracy, accountability, and pluralism had profited from copious amounts of airtime over the internet. This however, belies the fact that while the media can undoubtedly have an "equalizing effect" in politics, on its own it is in fact a normative, value neutral, non-partisan platform. This is significant to our study in at least two respects.

First, it means that advantages proffered by the new media are not exclusive to oppositional forces. To that end, while the National Front failed to anticipate the "equalizing effect" of the new media in March 2008, it has since embraced the phenomenon in a bid to regain support. Prominent UMNO leaders such as Khairy Jamaluddin and former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad were quick to start their own blogs, while Prime Minister Najib Razak has taken to "twittering" with constituents. In a post-March 2008 by-election in Kuala Terengganu, mainstream newspaper *New Straits*

Times attempted to shift the campaigning to cyberspace with its introduction of a multi-author blog titled “Blogging Kuala Terengganu.” At the same time, with huge resources to tap on, the incumbent government continues to deploy the traditional media, albeit in more creative ways, to not only justify and reinforce its policies, but also to attract more supporters. A salient example is a popular animated series “Upin & Ipin,” which had an episode titled “Kami 1 Malaysia” (We’re 1 Malaysia), referring to Prime Minister Najib’s 1 Malaysia campaign to project a more inclusive image of the country. Since then, TV programmes in the traditional media now feature multilingual and multiracial hosts as an effort “to inculcate unity among the people” (*Bernama* 2009a).

The second proposition flows from the first, and speaks to the central argument of this paper. For current purposes, the real impact of new media must also be considered in terms of whether it has transformed the nature of Malaysian politics, or merely provided yet another arena in which political contestations unfold, and where longstanding themes are not only debated, but also perpetuated and reinforced. The point to note here is that anti-pluralist and anti-democratic forces have also employed the new media to advance their own exclusivist agendas. To be sure, communal voices were equally pronounced on the internet. Consider, for instance, Perkasa, an ethno-nationalist Malay group that was formed for the objective of the protection of Malay rights and privileges. Simply put, Perkasa has an equally vocal presence in cyberspace (not least via its sophisticated website, <www.pribumiperkasa.com>) as it has on the streets of Kuala Lumpur. The point is that, as the following discussions will demonstrate, old identities and cleavages exist even in new digital spaces, and from there they will continue to define the parameters of Malaysian politics in the foreseeable future.

Enduring Narratives and Political Continuities

As noted at the beginning of this article, since independence in 1957, political sentiments in Malaysia have for the most part been mobilised along communal lines, as exemplified in the makeup of parties in Malaysia’s political coalitions. The ruling National Front coalition is made up of several ethnic-based parties. The dominant entity in the ruling coalition, UMNO is a political party that primarily serves Malay interests. Within the coalition, UMNO is flanked by several parties that represent other ethnic groups in Malaysia, the largest being the MCA and the MIC.

The ruling coalition is not alone in the manner in which it has mobilised along ethnic lines. Even in the opposition camp, the PR coalition consists of what are essentially ethnic-based political parties. The DAP is the

only ethnic-based party mainly serving Chinese interests, whereas PAS caters to Muslim supporters. However, given that in Malaysia all Malays are constitutionally defined as Muslims, it follows that PAS is therefore representative of the Malay vote bank in the opposition, and portrays itself as the antithesis of UMNO, but with a more explicit Islamic agenda. As for the PKR, while it purports to be a multi-ethnic party, its leadership remains primarily Malay and its membership includes a large number of former UMNO cadre who have tied their political fortunes to Anwar Ibrahim. In this respect, it is very much a party that provides a vehicle for Malay civil society activists as well as Muslims uncomfortable with PAS's conservative Islamist predilections. No doubt the party's reluctance to articulate an overtly pro-Malay position has contributed to its popularity especially among the ethnic Indian minority, but this popularity has dissipated significantly since March 2008.

The ethnic configuration of Malaysian politics rests on the notion of Malay supremacy. The issue of Malay supremacy is perhaps rooted to Malaysia's history of being a predominantly Malay region and the existence of Malay sultanates in the nation-state since circa eleventh century. As the Malays of Malaysia view themselves as natives of the country, the insistence of rights as the *bumiputra* or "sons of the land" evolved into a political agenda, popularized by the term *Ketuanan Melayu* or Malay Supremacy and to some extent implied in Article 153 the 1957 Constitution (Chin and Wong 2009). The quid pro quo deriving from this Constitution then, is one where the non-Malay population has acknowledged and accepted Malay supremacy, which implies the consent of "special Malay privileges in education and government services, and 'Malay' royalty as their rulers, Islam as the official religion, and the 'Malay' language as the official language of the new nation-state," in return for citizenship (Shamsul A. B. 2001).

The case for *Ketuanan Melayu* was most profoundly expressed in the New Economic Policy (NEP) initiated in 1971, which sanctions advantages for the *bumiputra* – Malays as well as non-Malay natives of Sabah and Sarawak – in the allocation of business contracts and other economic benefits towards the end of securing a thirty percent benchmark share of economic ownership in the country. While the NEP expired in 1991, the principle of prioritising *bumiputra* interests has been retained even as debates rage over the issue of whether the thirty percent benchmark has been reached, or the wisdom of such a policy in the age of global commercial competition.

In order to assuage non-*bumiputra* misgivings towards the policy, Prime Minister Najib Razak announced in April 2010 a more inclusive economic policy with the phased rollout of the New Economic Model (NEM), slated to replace the controversial NEP. Predictably, the announcement drew a

chorus of objections from sections within the conservative Malay population, namely *Pertubuhan Pribumi Perkasa Malaysia* (Perkasa), an organisation that mobilised in the wake of the 2008 elections to defend the perceived erosion of Malay rights in Malaysia and that enjoys sympathy within large segments of UMNO. Advocates of *Ketuanan Melayu* claim legitimacy based on the quid pro quo agreement during independence in addition to the “special position held by the Malay rulers, and it is a response to various historical, cultural and political circumstances,” (Shah 2009) in which the separation of Singapore from Malaysia was seen as a failure of *Ketuanan Melayu* as a piece of “Malay land” had to be “set aside” in order to “maintain the overall harmony and security of Malaysia” (Salleh and Mohd. Zahari 2008).

Insofar as the new media is concerned, communal politics has also been played out on that terrain, oftentimes drowning out voices (or blogs) calling for a more pluralist and inclusive brand of politics. Indeed, communal fault lines remain sharp despite laments by bloggers and contributors to independent online news portals against the racial undercurrents of Malaysian society. This becomes abundantly evident when one scrutinises new media reportage and discussions on two specific developments since March 2008 that speak to the defining features of Malaysian politics sketched above.

UMNO-PAS Unity Talks

Immediately after the 2008 elections, Abdullah Badawi and then Selangor Menteri Besar Mohammad Khir Toyo established contact with senior PAS leaders Nasharuddin Mat Isa, Mustafa Ali, and Hassan Ali and suggested the possibility of a *modus vivendi* in the form of an UMNO-PAS alliance in the state of Selangor, Malaysia’s most developed state that was lost to the opposition at the 2008 polls, and which could possibly be extended beyond the state to federal levels of cooperation.⁴ This overture sparked off a flurry of back-channel activities within PAS, and between PAS and UMNO, even as respective party leaders played down the issue publicly with statements of denial and nonchalance.⁵ Meanwhile, conflicting signals were also being sent

4 Details of the talks between UMNO and PAS were made known to me over the course of several interviews with PAS leaders conducted since April 2008.

5 The issue of collusion between UMNO and PAS is by no means novel. PAS itself was an offshoot of UMNO, coming into being when disenchanted ulama from the latter party branched out in 1951 to form their own political organisation. Then in 1973, PAS and several other parties joined UMNO in the *Parti Perikatan* alliance, which was subsequently replaced by the national Front the following year. The alliance was short lived and 1977, PAS reverted back to being the opposition and lost the state of Kelantan, which it controlled since 1959, a year later. Since then,

out by PAS leaders. For instance, in 2009 PAS President Abdul Hadi Awang alluded to the “inevitability” of “unity” between the two parties in the future, although he did also caution that there was a need for an upheaval of existing government institutions before any such cooperation could take place (*Malaysiakini* 2009). On the other hand, PAS spiritual leader Nik Aziz staunchly warned against any move by the party to pursue ambitions of unity with UMNO (*Bernama* 2009b).

For PAS, matters came to a head at the party assemblies of 2008 and 2009 when persistent talk of cooperation with UMNO resulted in strong statements by divisional and national leaders opposed to such a move condemning it. PR coalition partners voiced similar disaffection towards PAS’s positive reception of UMNO overtures. In response to the sentiments from the ground, the leadership of PAS was forced to declare its continued commitment to the PR coalition. Yet despite this evident attempt to close ranks, elements within PAS continue to entertain the possibility of future cooperation with UMNO for several reasons. First, some within PAS leadership circles continue to harbour reservations towards Anwar, and are hesitant to wholeheartedly support his leadership role in the opposition movement. This was clear in how the party leadership refused to endorse Anwar as the opposition’s choice for prime minister in the event the opposition coalition won the elections and formed the government.⁶ Second, the long-term future of the Peoples’ Alliance coalition remains murky to many within the PAS leadership, particularly given the DAP’s persistent opposition to their Islamic state objective.⁷ Indeed, the conservative elements of the PAS leadership see the DAP as a major hurdle to this ultimate goal.⁸ As a consequence, while the party remains committed to the opposition alliance it is not under any delusion regarding its limitations. Third, there remains a pool of PAS leaders who share UMNO’s concern for the increasing assertiveness of the non-Malays, and the threat that this would pose to Malay supremacy. This uncertainty is compounded by the fact that PAS had, after the heights of 1999 when it was the largest opposition party in parliament, fallen behind UMNO, PKR, and DAP by virtue of the number of parliamentary seats won.

the closest PAS has come to cooperating with UMNO was when they banded together with *Parti Melayu Semangat 46*, a splinter UMNO party formed by UMNO stalwart Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah, under the umbrella of the APU (*Angkatan Perpaduan Ummah*) coalition, which lasted from 1989 to 1996.

- 6 This was evident during the debates on the president’s address at the general assembly in 2008, which the author attended.
- 7 For details of the debate over the Islamic state in Malaysia, see Liow 2009.
- 8 Interview with PAS ulama, Kuala Lumpur, 24 February 2009.

With the embers of unity talks barely snuffed out, the issue resurfaced again with UMNO-inspired provocations, among them in the form of a statement by a Ministry of Information Communication and Culture representative who reportedly suggested that one advantage of collaboration between UMNO and PAS was the eventual realisation of the goal of an Islamic state (*Bernama* 2010a). The report mentioned the critical ideological difference between PAS and its coalition partners – DAP and PKR – which prevents it from pursuing its goal of the establishment of an Islamic state in Malaysia. One might expect that such statements made by government officials would elicit a negative response from non-Malay members of the ruling coalition, particularly since parties such as MCA and MIC were reeling from dismal performances at the 2008 elections that were attributed to their perceived reluctance or inability to take UMNO to task for pushing an Islamisation agenda at the expense of non-Muslims. Instead, MCA President Chua Soi Lek was surprisingly bullish in his response to the potential of such a merger, opining that it would “not affect unity among the races” (*Bernama* 2009c).

It should be noted at this juncture that within PAS itself, there exist voices of prominent non-ulama within the party who, from various statements made publicly, opposed the idea of cooperation with UMNO. Dzulkefly Ahmad, a leading voice among “professionals” in PAS, warned against warming up to UMNO, cautioning that “UMNO is not a friend, but an enemy” (Dzulkefly 2009a). Together with others who shared his reservations and using the internet as his prime vehicle of dissemination, Dzulkefly laid out a three-point statement outlining why the idea of cooperation with UMNO should be rejected (Dzulkefly 2009b). This being said, opponents of unity talks have also been quick to deny that they were criticising the party president – who floated the idea, or that they were against moves to strengthen the position of the Malay community. This speaks to a strong polemical undercurrent that gravitates towards Malay communalism that even a political party with a robust Islamist agenda is not immune to. Although the party has publicly taken steps to play down and quell the voices that support collaboration between the two opposing political entities, PAS leaders admitted that the “undercurrent is still active and can erupt anytime [...] (Whenever the issue of) Malay unity is drummed up.”⁹

In PAS’ latest general assembly in June 2010, party leaders such as Youth Chief Nasrudin Tantawi refused to completely shut the door for any future cooperation with UMNO, signalling the long drawn issue may yet

9 Yusof 2010: 122. See also other prominent non-ulama in PAS, such as Khalid Samad in his blog where he viewed the idea of collaboration and unity with suspicion, Samad 2009.

take another turn (Jabatan IT PAS Pusat 2010). While the debate continues as to whether PAS and UMNO should enter into some form of a political alliance for reasons detailed above, UMNO's persistent overtures to PAS all but places the opposition Islamists on the defensive even as it fans the flames of factionalism within the party. Similar allusions were raised in a meeting held in December 2010 at the Terengganu Palace which was attended by the presidents of both PAS and UMNO. While PAS and its opposition allies vehemently denied rumours that the meeting was aimed at advancing UMNO-PAS cooperation, both the mainstream and alternative news reports continued to raise the spectre of such a merger. Given that the primary driving force behind these rumours of UMNO-PAS unity and cooperation is the matter of the need for Malay-Muslims to circle their wagons, the persistence of these unity talks indicates that racial alignments still play a pivotal role in Malaysian politics and underlines the primacy of ethnic-based party politics in post-March 2008 Malaysia.

The portents of successful unity talks between UMNO and PAS could be, not surprisingly, very significant. To be sure, it will almost immediately (and fundamentally) reconfigure coalition politics in Malaysia. Not only that, the success of unity talks will likely threaten the unity of PAS, where a large segment of the rank and file have opposed the prospects of collaboration with UMNO. With regard to the theme of new post-communal politics in Malaysia though, even without any successful conclusion, the fact that such talks have been, and continue to be, pursued behind closed doors speaks to the persistence of opaque elite bargaining and compromise along the all-too-familiar narrative of communalism despite the portents of more transparency and accountability that followed the advent of new media. Moreover, the fact that proponents of unity talks in PAS continue to pursue this issue despite the uproar of disapproval by its rank and file (and ordinary Malaysians as well) over the internet illustrates the severe limitations to new media in terms of its ability to fundamentally influence the nature of Malaysian politics. Interestingly however, if the absence of debate in the new media over the issue of unity talks (not least because of the opaque nature of these talks that take place behind closed doors) speaks to the former's limitations in influencing the matter, then the intense debate online on another key issue – the “Allah” controversy – conversely demonstrates how new media can and has been complicit in the perpetuation of communal narratives.

The Allah Issue

When the Malaysian High Court ruled on 31 December 2009 that the Catholic magazine, *The Herald*, was allowed to use the Arabic word “Allah”

to refer to God in its Malay-language section, the decision was met with protests in the central mosque in the capital city, Kuala Lumpur, and was challenged in several online chatrooms by Malay-Muslims. Even more disconcerting was the fact that up to eight churches were attacked by arsonists in the days following the ruling (see Liow 2010).

Reactions to the Allah issue provide an insight into the myriad of views pertaining to the nuances of the Malay-Muslim community in Malaysia. In order to fully appreciate the popular sentiments involved, it is necessary to gauge the political partisanship regarding the issue at hand, as the views presented may be considered to be a reflection of the general electorate. Officially, the opposition groups support the court's decision in allowing the term Allah to be used by non-Muslims, while UMNO has challenged the decision. It can certainly be surmised that in doing so, the government is at least in part demonstrating a cognizance of its religious credentials, which it hopes to brandish in order to win Muslim support it may have lost at the March 2008 elections, particularly from camps who feel that usage of the term "Allah" is the sole prerogative of Muslims.

It should also be noted that not everyone affiliated to PAS support the party's decision. Indeed, despite the fact that key leaders Nik Aziz and Abdul Hadi Awang publicly articulated support for the court's decision on exegetical grounds, the issue had elicited heated debate within party ranks, with major personalities such as deputy spiritual leader Harun Din and Harun Taib, head of the party's clerical wing, taking contrarian positions.

Concomitantly, it is important to consider the grounds of the respective positions. The president of PAS supported the court ruling to allow the usage of the word Allah for non-Muslims. He stated that the crux of the matter bored down to the usage of the term by Muslims, while expounding that the matter should however be tackled at a pedantic level (Abdul Hadi Awang 2010). Abdul Hadi elaborated on his response in his personal webpage several days later. He conceded that the Christians in Malaysia have been using the word "tuhan" instead of "Allah," while Malay-Muslims have been using "Allah" (Abdul Hadi Awang 2010). Nevertheless, he also expressed support for religious freedom, while cautioning against "going overboard," and elucidated that the matter should be handled at a "careful" and "scholarly level" as the ramifications on wrongful usage may "affect Muslims who revere the word." Significantly, he went on to defend the fact that "the word Allah had been used by Arabs and speakers of Arabic who adhere to many religions, be it Judaism, Christian, and idol worshippers since long ago" (Abdul Hadi Awang 2010). Unlike the more dispassionate tone of PAS' official statement, his personal statement is clearly directed towards the Muslim audience; it contains a total of eight Quranic verses and two quotes

from classical Islamic scholars to support his view. This view was also echoed by Nik Aziz Nik Mat (Zulkifli Sulong, Salmah Mat Husein, and Rizal Tahir 2010). In an interview, Nik Aziz explained his support by pointing out that the usage of the term “Allah” had predated Islam (Zulkifli Sulong, Salmah Mat Husein, and Rizal Tahir 2010), as was also mentioned in his blog entry (Nik Abdul Aziz Nik Mat 2010). However he cautioned that the purpose of the usage should be benevolent, with no intent on “confusing the society with the terminology to attract them towards Christian teachings, as it will tarnish the name of their religion” (Zulkifli Sulong, Salmah Mat Husein, and Rizal Tahir 2010). He warned that in doing so “the image of the priest will be compromised, so it is good that they show sincerity if they really want to utilize the word” (Zulkifli Sulong, Salmah Mat Husein, and Rizal Tahir 2010).

Notwithstanding Nik Aziz and Abdul Hadi Awang’s extensive explanations, Harun Din warned against supporting the usage of the term by non-Muslims, saying it could indirectly cause “deviation or polytheism.”¹⁰ He also voiced his disappointment at those who supported the court decision (Arifuddin Ishak 2010). To understand the difference in opinions, Harun’s argument warrants a closer look. In a press conference in January 2010, Harun Din made clear that he was concerned for the semantic aspects of the usage, citing a copy of the Bible and recounting specifically the words “God” and “Lord” in it (Haron Din 2010). He asserted that as the two words are already translated as “tuhan” in Malay, the point of contention is then purely semantic, and not religious. In making this case, he may well be echoing the dominant view of Malay-Muslims in Malaysia regarding the issue. Harun’s argument was very similar to that set forth by *Jabatan Kemajuan Islam Malaysia* (JAKIM), Malaysia’s highest federal religious body which also criticised the court’s decision. In JAKIM’s paper refuting the decision, the primary points revolve around linguistics, specifically in Malaysian Malay language usage (Mohd Aizam bin Mas’od 2010). Furthermore in the thirteen-page paper, only two Quranic verses were used to support their stance, as opposed to the eight cited by Abdul Hadi Awang in his three-page statement. This signals the critics’ stress on approaching the issue from a distinctively semantic and cultural vantage point, rather than the religious-Islamic jurisprudential point of view provided by Abdul Hadi Awang and PAS.

Meanwhile the leaders of the ruling UMNO have taken a seemingly more consistent unified stance in opposing against the court ruling (*Bernamea* 2010b), with both Prime Minister Najib Razak and Home Minister Hisham-

10 Original text: “Kalau kita sokong perkara yang kufur, kita pun secara tak langsung akan kufur sama.” See Arifuddin Ishak 2010.

muddin Hussein, neither of whom are immediately recognisable religious leaders, maintaining that Muslims have the right to protest the “Allah” ruling within mosque compounds, despite fears it might escalate tension in the country (*Pergerakan PEMUDA UMNO Parit* 2010; Spykerman 2010).

Political brinkmanship aside, what is telling is the manner in which the Allah controversy has been discussed, and allegiances are declared. Over the internet, it was clear that the court’s decision to overturn the ban on non-Muslim usage of the term “Allah” was hugely unpopular.¹¹ In the social-networking website *Facebook*, groups were formed both to protest and support the court decision. Upon inspecting the groups which support the exclusivity of the usage of “Allah”, two issues come to the fore: first, the prominence of UMNO leaders and affiliations in some of these groups – such as members of the Executive Committee of UMNO’s youth movement and various UMNO political sub-groups – despite the group’s claim to be apolitical, and second, the considerable number of people who lent their support to the group’s agenda, reaching almost 300,000 members.¹² Comparatively, the *Facebook* group that supports the court ruling amounted to just slightly over 100,000 members.¹³ Based purely on volume, it is clear that the majority of active online citizens opposed the court decision.

While it is ultimately difficult to ascertain the ethnicity of members of the *Facebook* groups under scrutiny, one can plausibly surmise that it is likely those who support the court ruling would be non-Malays (and mostly non-Muslim), while the majority that opposed the ruling were likely to be Malay (*UMNO Reform* 2010). Should this be true, this trend can be explained at least in part by the fact that the issue could be intertwined with others pertaining to culture, language and religion in Malaysia, especially with regards to Malay identity and Islam. Observer Jyh Wee Sew posited that this formation of a unique identity might cause an emotive response, which is neither new nor radical, and emotions cannot be structurally ignored in such cases (Sew 2010). From this vantage, any threat to religious identity might be interpreted as a threat to ethnic Malay identity, and eventually, in accordance to the dominant narrative in Malaysia, the supremacy of the Malays. Indeed,

11 *Zack Rambles* 2010. Indeed, even PAS leaders expressed this concern in private to the authors.

12 Menentang Penggunaan Nama Allah Oleh Golongan Bukan Islam, on: *Facebook*, online: <<http://www.facebook.com/group.php?v=info&ref=mf&gid=227724322514>> (14 January 2011).

13 We support the use of the name Allah by all Malaysians, on: *Facebook*, online: <<http://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=248123628088&v=info>> (14 January 2011).

this is precisely the interpretation that some in UMNO have attempted to propagate.

On the other hand, known Malay-Muslim supporters of the court decision were either PAS members or those affiliated to liberal NGOs such as Sisters-In-Islam. Among them are the likes of social activist Marina Mahathir, a significant number of PAS leaders, and those that may be regarded as apolitical or independent Islamic religious leaders or teachers. Most called for refrain from emotional reactions and a discernment of the etymology of the term and a more objectivist approach to the issue (Mohd Azri Mohd Nasaruddin 2010; Mahathir 2010; Abdul Hadi Awang 2010; Md Asri Zainal Abidin 2008). However, these elements are facing a challenge from more vocal responses among the majority, such as those who label the Malay-Muslim supporters of the decision “liberal” or, curiously, “Wahhabi,” to claims that the supporters of the court are betraying Malay interest and capitulating to non-Malays (Abu Syafiq Al-Asy’ary 2010; see also *Al-Islam Forum* 2008). At the opposite end, the more fervent supporters of the decision also categorize the opponents of the ruling as being UMNO supporters, while warning that the issue is wholly an UMNO political agenda (Dinsman 2010).

UMNO’s position on the issue plays to the communal script of the primacy of Malay-Muslim interests, and the support it has garnered testifies to the currency of communal narratives even in post-March 2008 Malaysia. The polemical backlash from the issue was intense, more so in relation to PAS, which almost exclusively banks on Malay-Muslim support. In dissecting PAS’ position on the controversial issue, several points can be made. First, as an Islamist party, PAS’ stance can be attributed to their strict adherence to the Islamic scripture and historiography that their clerics read as supportive of the use of “Allah” by non-Muslims. Second, the decision can also be read as a strategic move on the part of PAS. Specifically, the party aligned itself to the prevailing mood among the non-Malay community in pursuit of its ambitions of national power – ambitions that the party leadership realizes can only be achieved through the PR alliance, whose unity could have potentially been undermined if PAS had taken a position similar to UMNO. Third, PAS’ position may well be further demonstrative of the party’s seeming identity shift from a fundamentalist Islamist party that targeted Malay-Muslims to one that is increasingly inclusivist in its rhetoric and practice of politics. Be that as it may, it is premature to conclude that PAS is robustly defying the politics of ethnic communalism. As a matter of fact, the persistence of rumours on the prospects of UMNO-PAS unity on the grounds of the need to defend Malay rights and supremacy speaks precisely to the salience and resilience of communal politics.

To recapitulate, the “Allah” controversy is another salient example of the centrality of communal politics in post-March 2008 Malaysia. While there undoubtedly are competing voices within the Malay-based political parties on the issue, the majority of Malay-Muslims in Malaysia (as we have argued above) still view the controversy through communal lenses. In that respect, in much of the public discourse on the issue, unrelenting positions have been drawn along ethnic and religious lines, reflecting the point that such debates ultimately amplify communal cleavages.

Conclusion

At the beginning of this paper, the question of whether the events of March 2008 had transformed the inherently communal nature of Malaysian politics was posed. The initial prognosis in the immediate aftermath of the elections appeared encouraging. The success of a multi-ethnic coalition that campaigned on national issues rather than parochial ones undoubtedly captured the imagination. Not only did DAP, PAS, and PKR sing from the same song sheet, the fact that election post-mortems revealed a development never before witnessed in any significant scale in Malaysian politics – where non-Muslims voted for an Islamist party while Malays voted for a Chinese-dominated party – lent further to the mood behind the prognosis that Malaysia had indeed entered into an era of “new (read: post-communal) politics.” As the dust settles however, the picture that emerges of the contours of this “new politics” is considerably more ambiguous. And almost three years on, such euphoria has waned noticeably. Anwar Ibrahim, the linchpin of the opposition coalition, now battles another ensuing legal case, while divergences in interests and ideologies have surfaced to threaten the unity of the opposition coalition. The UMNO-PAS unity talks and the “Allah” issue are but two examples of debates whose parameters continue to be chiefly defined by communalism, either explicitly or implicitly.

What the controversies over UMNO-PAS unity talks and the “Allah” issue illustrate is the fact that though hopes heightened for a new dawn in Malaysian politics in the aftermath of the March 2008 elections, in truth Malaysia remains polarised along the all-too-familiar communal script as these events have animated enduring features of parochial racial and ethnic politics. Reports of UMNO-PAS unity talks is often referenced to the fear of a fractioned and weakened Malay hegemony in Malaysia, alluding not only to the apprehension towards potential loss of political power on the part of the Malays, but also perceptions that the assertiveness of other ethnic groups is a threat. All this signals the pivotal role of ethnic alignments in Malaysian politics post-March 2008. Even in the case of PAS’ support for

the non-Muslim cause in the “Allah” issue, while it may have endeared the party to this segment of the population, their understanding of the issue as one rooted in questions of jurisprudence, and not semantics, has not resonated with the majority of Malay-Muslims in Malaysia. To that end, several quarters in the party leadership have privately acknowledged concern that as a consequence of this, support from its core Malay-Muslim constituents may erode.

Turning to the new media, it appears that in some respects at least, the fact that much of the debate over the “Allah” issue takes place over the internet speaks to the role of the new media in this reconfiguration, or reinforcement as it were, of longstanding features in Malaysian politics. No doubt, the new media has expanded the discursive terrain by providing new and alternative venues where these issues can be discussed and debated, thereby generating greater awareness and consciousness among the electorate. Playing the oft-cited role of “watchdog”, new media has changed the Malaysian public’s expectations and generated greater transparency and accountability on the part of the Malaysian government hitherto used to enjoying hegemonic control over the dissemination of information. Yet, as the paper has shown, while the role of the new media may have changed the character of political campaigning, it has not significantly altered the nature of Malaysian politics by diluting communal narratives or easing ethnic friction. Indeed, as the “Allah” issue illustrates, the new media the new media has in fact been complicit in this polarisation process.

All said, the point of this paper is to make the case that contrary to the aspirations to transcend race-based politics articulated by the opposition during the election, communal narratives and optics still endure despite efforts through the new media to change the nature of Malaysian politics, which continues to have at its heart ethnic, racial, and religious referents.

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