HOW VIDEO CAMPAIGNING SHAPED MALAYSIA'S ELECTION

By Ross Tapsell

SYNOPSIS

New media technologies are always central in shaping Malaysia's election campaigns. GE15 was dominated by video content, which is leading to questions around whether short, pithy video content consumed on smartphones furthers transparency in a democracy but enhances polarisation and hate speech.

COMMENTARY

New media technologies are central to Malaysia's general election (GE) campaigns. In GE12 (2008), blogs and online commentaries allowed for new forms of partisan political discourse. GE13 (2013) featured social media campaigning via Facebook and Twitter, and the emergence of 'cybertroopers' online. In 2018's GE14, the professional organisation of WhatsApp messenger content and groups became crucial to campaign strategies. 'Big data' companies targeting voters via social media, such as Rafizi Ramli's Invoke, were also an innovation in social media campaigning in GE14.

In Malaysia's recent GE15, video content produced for social media became the 'new' technology that dominated campaigning. Video material has long been a feature of Malaysian political discourse ('sex tape' exposes, for example, have been a common form of slander against a political candidate.) However, GE15 saw the massification, even democratisation, of video campaign content, which shaped the nature of the campaign.

Increasing Popularity of Video Campaigning

The increasing popularity of video campaigning is due to four key factors. First, mobile phone technologies and internet access and bandwidth improvements in the country have enabled the massification of such video content. The Media, Communications

and Multimedia Commission says 95 per cent of Malaysians now own smartphones, which means they have the ability to watch, record and share videos. In previous GEs, this would be more onerous, expensive, and less common.

Second, social media platforms have generally been moving in the direction of more and better video content. Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter all now have video uploads and livestreaming options. This trend has been in place for some time. Video is increasingly the dominant feature of social media platforms, signalling a trend away from written, photographic, even memetic content.

Third, TikTok, a platform which is exclusively video content, has emerged a key platform for younger voters and therefore for social media innovation. TikTok was central to the GE15 campaign.

Fourth and finally, political parties were willing to invest more funds and labour in social media campaigning than ever before. Some younger Malaysian politicians, such as Nurul Izzah, Khairy Jamaluddin, and Syed Saddiq, have amassed millions of social media followers on a range of platforms. They have become adept at producing videos on these platforms, thereby increasing their popularity and engagement. The voting age being lowered to 18, the lingering nature of the COVID-19 pandemic, the potential for floods, and the short election campaigning period, were all factors leading candidates and parties to fund campaign staffers to attempt new innovations in video content for GE15.

On the Campaign Trail

I spent two weeks on the campaign trail with candidates from all parties in a number of locations in peninsula Malaysia. Many candidates had at least five social media staffers, some even seven or eight, assigned to manage different platforms (Facebook, TikTok and WhatsApp) and in different languages. At least one to two staff followed their candidate continuously, livestreaming any public (or semi-public) speech or interview, or recording short, choreographed videos.

It seemed that everyone in the campaign team, as well as the candidate, was on board with the idea that video content must be regularly uploaded. The candidates I spoke with proudly showed me various forms of video content which received thousands of shares and likes, believing that these were helping them win their campaign.

It is difficult, perhaps impossible, to adequately measure just how impactful all this new video content was. However, a number of videos did seemingly shape the nature of the GE15 campaign. UMNO leader Zahid Hamidi's speech at the MIC congress held early on in the campaign, where he said BN must win to prevent selective acts of prosecution, became widely shared online. It suggested that the only reason Zahid wanted an election was to avoid prosecution for corruption. From this point, BN declined in the polls, and continued to decline throughout the campaign, seemingly unable to overcome the anti-Zahid narrative other parties pushed.

Towards the end of the campaign, a short video of Muhyiddin Yassin speaking of the 'danger' of an opposition supported by 'Jews' and 'Christianisation' made significant headlines, especially amongst non-Malay groups. Muhyiddin later said that his

remarks were 'taken out of context' and that the video had been 'selectively edited' and circulated by his political opponents to create a false narrative. In the aftermath of the election, as the prime ministerial position hung in the balance, the comments were proof to some that Muhyiddin was stoking racial tensions. The belief that a PN-led government would discriminate against non-Malays, reinforced for them the need for a multi-racial or 'unity' government.

Many social media campaigners saw it as their professional duty to produce positive or inspiring videos of their candidates in order to win over voters. However, it seems that the video content in GE15 were mainly in the form of negative campaigning: viral videos were disseminated widely that seemed to turn away the candidates' supporters. In this regard, Anwar Ibrahim's social media campaigners largely adhered to facts, and nothing overly controversial resonated enough to significantly hinder his overall campaign. The same could be said for DAP and PAS, which won the most seats. Social media content tailored for their constituencies seems to have galvanised their base.

Implications of the New Media Technologies

If the 'medium is the message', then the medium of smartphone video content enabled a number of key messages for politics and the media in Malaysia.

First, content becomes more democratised. GE15 was arguably the 'freest' election for Malaysia's media in its history, and live videos further exemplified the more transparent and open nature of the campaign. In GE14, 'subversive' or 'underground' content, spread clandestinely through closed WhatsApp groups was vital in spreading messages of the Najib government's corruption despite the 'anti-fake news law' then in operation. In GE15 there was less of a need for this secrecy, with this law revoked and a more fervent online discourse growing since GE14. Campaigning was much more 'open', as exemplified by content regularly and monotonously livestreamed on social media.

At the same time, the massification and popularisation of video content is allowing for a wide variety of professional content producers to engage in political discourse, from politicians, to preachers, celebrities, activists, and even social media campaigners themselves.

Video content also enables a cacophony of 'influencers', including some who are essentially professional rabble-rousers engaged to stir up racial and religious tensions in the country. The danger is the possibility of controversial video content moulding Malaysian society to become even more polarised around race and religion.

Fervently negative video content has the potential to capture the attention of consumers in a flooded video market. Media headlines simplify this trend via headlines asserting that the main problem is TikTok. But as I have argued here, innovations in video content are cross-platform, seen as innovative, and increasingly all-encompassing. The emergence and success of TikTok in Southeast Asia is one driver of this, but it is not the only one.

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