Virtual Civil Society: Malaysia’s 2008 General Elections Revisited

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Abstract - This article revisits the 2008 general elections in Malaysia to examine how the internet contributed to the remarkable political change never experienced in the history of this country. The ruling coalition, Barisan Nasional lost its two-thirds parliamentary majority seats it had enjoyed since 1969, while the opposition that capitalized on the internet in the run up to the elections returned to full political limelight. The literature examined provides significant leads to the different political scenarios that herald increased internet usage among concerned citizens, which in the article were ably justified against the political reality in Malaysia. Moreover, through a close study and analysis of Malaysia’s political terrain prior to the 2008 general elections, we observed that numerous controversial issues and events that engulfed the ruling coalition government, which were effectively divulged via the internet reduced the ruling government’s public confidence and provided the opposition and civil society activists with tremendous leverage in amassing electoral support against the ruling coalition. Based on these observations, the article contends that the intensity of contestations surrounding a particular government coupled with the judicious use of the internet as its channel of dissemination, significantly aided the course of political change.

Keywords: internet, social capital, ruling coalition, opposition, elections, Malaysia.

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