Virtual civil society: resurgence of social capital and the 2008 General Election in Malaysia

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Abstract
This article portrays how internet usage was a last resort for opposition groups in a political arena that is semi authoritarian in nature. In this political system, the mainstream media has been distorted by the government, with opposition rallies and group meetings always treated with suspicion and dispersed with force by the incumbent government, thus inhibiting convergence of social capital. Elections are streamlined to favor the ruling coalition, the Barisan Nasional. Control of government since 1969 until 2008 has always been hegemonic, with UMNO, the dominant party of the coalition, firmly holding unto power and dictating policies. The literatures examined concurred that internet usage especially during elections is accrued to the liberal nature of the mainstream media which lacks the power to be critically blatant; however, others see the authoritarian nature of states to be the push factor. By examining political events prior and after the 2008 general elections through opposition accounts and publications, academic literatures and personal accounts, this article depicts the internet and social capital as unrivalled synergies that effect change in a strict socio-political setting.

Keywords: Social capital, internet, Barisan Nasional, elections, Malaysia

Introduction
The 12th Malaysia general elections in March 2008 marked a significant milestone in the history of Malaysian politics. From the propaganda surrounding the allegation of misdeeds of the former government to the renewed perception of Malaysians about politicians through social capital and also, the remarkable change in electoral results was unprecedented. For the first time in the history of this country, except for the year 1969, the ruling multi-party coalition, the Barisan Nasional that has consistently maintained a two-thirds majority in parliament, saw its unpopularity following the rise of a unified and more purposeful opposition that gained popularity and support from the populace. Most importantly, the internet was very well utilized as an alternative medium to propagate the repugnance of the malignant scourge that has held the Malaysian politics to ransom. This change in business as usual in the Malaysian body politic did not occur by chance but through an invigorated reconstruction of social capital amongst Malaysians. One such indispensable mechanism which has been considerably underrated by several influential groups, especially political parties, is the internet. In the 2008 elections, the internet exposed its importance by surpassing all other sources of disseminating information. The internet blatantly exposed all the contradictions inherent in the political system, thus redefining the prospects of the 12th general elections.

State policy on the media is a fundamental factor that determines the performance of the mainstream media. The state media is being controlled by the government and ownership of the private media companies are mostly controlled by pro-government elites. Besides, the strict principles of media practice associated with ownership and control, automatically makes it a