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AS YOU LIKE IT – FOLLOWING IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF THE USA, ASIAN POLITICIANS HAVE NOW ALSO SUCCUMBED TO THE CHARMS OF FACEBOOK AND TWITTER

Paul Linnarz

In April 2010, the “Youth Lab” of the governing alliance in Malaysia, Barisan Nasional (BN), published the results of a survey which showed that more than 60 percent of voters below the age of 35 favored neither the BN nor the opposition coalition, Pakatan Rakyat (PR).¹ The young voters surveyed intend to vote at the next election irrespective of any party-political preferences, based solely on which candidate they think represents more important issues or simply appears more confident.² Around 73 percent of the Malaysian population is below the age of 40. More than half of the 11 million entitled to vote are undecided. Among the most important issues cited by respondents were developments on the employment market and their career prospects, the quality of education and training and the cost of living. Malaysia's younger generation is particularly concerned about the crime rates in the country. Around a quarter of those surveyed stated freedom of speech as their greatest wish. 65 percent of respondents were of the opinion that Malaysia is generally making good progress; for approximately 30 percent, however, the country's development is cause for concern.

1 | For a more detailed examination of the development of political communication in Malaysia with respect to new media, see the article by Thomas S. Knirsch and Patrick Kratzenstein, “Press Freedom, New Media and Political Communication in Malaysia – A Society in Flux” in this issue of *KAS International Reports*.

2 | cf. <http://bnyouthlab.wordpress.com> (accessed April 22, 2010).

The BN “Youth Lab” is a cross between a focus group and an opinion research institute. The 30-strong team uses mainly social networks like Facebook or the platform Twitter to carry out its online surveys of 18 to 35-year olds. However, nowhere near all of the results can be considered to be representative. In March, for example, almost 90 percent of the 200 Facebook “friends” and Twitter users surveyed stated that they were registered to vote. In fact, all of the parties in Malaysia are trying to galvanize up to four million eligible voters, many of whom are below the age of 30, who have not yet registered to vote in the next election in 2013. However, possible methodical inaccuracies in the online survey method have not lessened the high expectations pinned on the results of the BN “Youth Lab”: “In the past, the government knew everything. That no longer applies today”, boasts Suffian Awang, leading member of the youth organization of his party, Umno, and a close aide of Prime Minister Najib Razak. The new guideline is intended to be clearly apparent to the public. Through its BN “Youth Lab”, the governing party alliance hopes to improve direct contact with (predominantly young) citizens.³ The reason for this is clear: in the parliamentary election in 2008, it was the younger generation that tipped the scales, causing the Barisan Nasional to lose its two-thirds majority. Now, the plan is to use Twitter and Facebook to win back the “digital natives” who have grown up using the Internet.

Prime Minister Razak recently invited 300 of his Facebook “friends” to tea. It could have been more; after all, by April 20th, he had more than 150,000 fans on his Facebook page.⁴ In addition, a good 15,000 Internet users follow the prime minister’s every move on Twitter.⁵ The “followers” also found out from a Twitter entry on April 20: “Yesterday I had a useful meeting with PM Yukio Hatoyama. We agreed to strengthen cooperation in environment + energy: <http://bit.ly/d6s9YX>.” The link at the end of the message led the reader to the prime minister’s official website, with photos from his visit to Japan. At the beginning of March,

3 | cf. http://www.transformation.gov.my/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=365%3Awhen-what-youngsters-say-counts-&catid=39%3Anews&Itemid=148&lang=en (accessed on April 22, 2010).

4 | cf. <http://www.facebook.com/najibrazak> (accessed April 22, 2010).

5 | cf. <http://twitter.com/NAjibRazak> (accessed April 22, 2010).

Khairy Jamaluddin, head of the Umno youth organization, held a "Tweet Up" (a meeting of Twitter users) which Carolyn Hong of the Straits Times in Singapore attended. In her online report on the event, the Malaysian daily news correspondent noted with a note of awe that Jamaluddin "answered all questions". Thanks to the numerous

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Blackberries in use, the first photos and updates from the meeting were already in circulation even before the politician had finished answering his supporter's questions completely "offline" while enjoying a meal of lamb and rice. "Twitter has become the hottest address for young politicians in Malaysia. Follow [on Twitter] just a few of them and you can become a part of their heated, but generally polite, online political debates."⁶ The journalist's euphoria and the eager involvement of the online users in tea parties and political "Tweet Ups" are understandable in view of the fact that, by Western standards, the traditional media in Singapore and Malaysia are far from free. Strict requirements for licensing media companies and a large number of taboo topics prevent lively and controversial national political debates in the press and radio. The Internet, however, enjoys significantly more freedom in Malaysia and Singapore.

IN THE SPIRIT OF FRIENDSHIP: FACEBOOK, TWITTER & CO. FOR MORE CREDIBILITY

This phenomenon can also be seen in other Asian countries. Social networks, blogs and Twitter have led to the rise of "private public spheres" that are difficult to control. At the same time, a look at the statistics shows that freedom or lack of freedom of the traditional media is just one of the reasons for the advance of interactive online services. Facebook & Co. are also gaining considerable ground in liberalized media markets.

According to a comScore statistic from February, almost 85 percent of all Internet users in the Philippines and in Indonesia were members of a network. In addition to Malaysia (77.5%) and Singapore (72.1%), Facebook is also the market leader in Hong Kong (62.6%) and Vietnam

6 | <http://blogs.straitstimes.com/2010/3/5/twitter-is-tops-for-politicians> (accessed April 22, 2010).

(18.4%).⁷ One of the fastest-growing groups of Facebook users – by worldwide comparison – is that in Indonesia: from March to April 2010, the number of users grew by almost two million, or just over 10 percent. In the Philippines – placed third worldwide in terms of growth – the network gained more than a million new users (+9.6%) during the month concerned. With around 650,000 new members within just four weeks, Malaysia ranks seventh, ahead of the United States. Of course, in absolute figures, that means very little. By April, Malaysia had fewer than six million users, compared with almost 115 million Facebook “friends” in the USA. However, what is important is the growth rate of the network. From March to April 2010 it was half a percent in America, while the market in Malaysia grew nearly 13 percent in the same period; the increase from March 2009 to March 2010 was 364 percent.

Currently there are no indications that this trend will weaken in the near future. Given these growth rates, the growing importance of Facebook, or rather, how important Facebook will be for reaching the large group of young voters, who are networked together, in the parliamentary election in Malaysia set to take place in three years, is clear even to the skeptics. But what accounts for Facebook’s worldwide appeal? Jon Klein, president of CNN, provided a convincing argument in an Interview with Bloomberg BusinessWeek in New York in March of this year. In response to the question of how he views competition with Fox News, which for many years has been CNN’s most dangerous competitor in the USA, he responded, to general surprise: “The really worrying competition is with the social networks. We (CNN) want to be the most credible source. But it’s the people you’re friends with on Facebook or the people you follow on Twitter who are trusted sources of information.”⁸ Credibility, particularly for younger Internet users, is a question above all of free interaction and communication as far as possible in “real time” within the virtual community of friends, fans and “followers”. This is also the case in Asia. The objective reporting to which the traditional media aspire, the clear boundaries between opinion, information and advertising,

7 | cf. http://www.comscore.com/Press_Events/Press_Releases/2010/4/Social_Networking_Across_Asia-Pacific_Markets (accessed on April 22, 2010).

8 | <http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/pda/2010/mar/10/digital-media-television> (accessed April 22, 2010).

sound research and the verification of the authenticity and plausibility of all sources face a tough job in the fast-paced cyberworld. Carolyn Hong, for instance, writing about the recent “Tweet Up” in Malaysia, says, “I already knew some of the guests – in as much as one can really know someone through Twitter”.

Thus, to the dismay of many traditional media channels, Facebook is another electronic kiosk in addition to Google, MSN and Yahoo. According to Hitwise in the USA, the websites of these networks are visited more often than the

world’s largest search engine. Google never

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tires of emphasizing that its popularity also serves the traditional media, citing the fact that the “Google News” service led month for month to a billion clicks on the Internet sites of press publishing companies and

broadcasters in the previous year. However, in terms of upstream use by users of the traditional media’s online services in the US, Facebook now outperforms even the news page of the search engine giant. However, more than twice as many Internet users now visit the websites of the US media via Facebook.⁹ In view of that, at the end of January the network published a guide on its company blog on how members can set up their own news channel on their profile tailored to their personal needs and the information they are interested in.¹⁰

UNITED WE STAND: GREATER VOTER PARTICIPATION THANKS TO THE FRIEND COUNTER

Nowadays, the main problem for the traditional media is that the younger Internet users’ attachment is first and foremost to the “electronic kiosk”, i.e. Facebook, MSN, Yahoo or Google, while the loyalty of these “digital natives” to a specific media service at the lower end of the chain of use is steadily decreasing. Thus, as one blogger recently wrote, it will not be long before the first online users confuse Facebook with the Internet – which would likely please the politicians. After all, online digital

9 | cf. http://weblogs.hitwise.com/us-heather-hopkins/2010/03/facebook_users_prefer_broadcas.html (accessed April 22, 2010).

10 | cf. <http://blog.facebook.com/blog.php?post=276507062130> (accessed April 22, 2010).

get-togethers have developed into an effective mobilizing instrument among young voters - more effective at least than newspaper announcements. During the US presidential election campaign, for example, Facebook set a non-partisan message to its members urging them to register their votes. A "ticker" showed Facebook users in the USA how many of their "friends" had already voted. "This transformed voting, traditionally a private matter, into a social activity", concludes Randi Zuckerberg, responsible for marketing at Facebook. "It's your friends, not some outside party, telling you that you should vote."¹¹ And no one wants to be the only one who didn't vote.

The group dynamic of social networks is now one of the key requirements of US "Public Diplomacy" in the State Department in Washington. US embassies around the world "tweet" and "post" for all they are worth. The diplomatic mission with the most fans on Facebook (with more fans than all of the Facebook pages of the 197 American embassies worldwide and the US State Department itself) is the US embassy in Indonesia. As per April 2010, it had more than 130,000 followers.¹² While the employee responsible for its online presence correctly points out that the achievements in building such an impressive fan base are attributable mainly to the intensive communication of the US embassy, its efforts also received a great deal of support from the fact that Facebook boosted membership in Indonesia by almost 800 percent between March 2009 and March 2010, exceeded in Asia only by Thailand (918%), the Philippines (1,027%) and Taiwan (2,872%).

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The fêted rise of social networks in nearly all of the countries in Asia cannot, however, belie the fact that in many places only a minority actually have access to the Internet; in Indonesia, for instance, it is only around 10 to 12 percent of the total population. This figure must be qualified since the statistics do not include the use of

11 | <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-HhHmQPuWrg> (accessed April 22, 2010).

12 | cf. http://www.thomascrampton.com/indonesia/us-embassy-indonesia-facebook-jakarta/#utm_source=rss&utm_medium=rss&utm_campaign=us-embassy-indonesia-facebook-jakarta (accessed April 22, 2010).

online services at work, university and in the countless Internet cafés. If these are included, it is likely that almost half the population in Malaysia regularly surfs the net. Nevertheless, it is true that the majority of people in the developing and transition countries in Asia still use the traditional media for information and entertainment. However, in Asia, too, the press and the broadcasters no longer rely on this alone. Statistics on the prevalence of the Internet and the use of social networks do not provide any indication as to the precise identity of the friends, fans and followers of personalities from the worlds of politics, the economy and show business. However, this is what is decisive for the influence of Facebook, Twitter & Co. on opinion-building among the population. This is because when network members communicate with followers and fans in their virtual circle of friends through updates, recommendations and indications, they

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naturally also reach disseminators, including journalists, who use these online "tweets" in their reports. In its blog entry on the top trends in the newspaper industry the World Editors Forum notes in this context that: "The idea that there are journalists who do not yet use Twitter is almost unbelievable."¹³ Thus,

in his recent "Tweet Up" in Malaysia Khairy Jamaluddin not only spoke to the followers present in the restaurant, but consciously also targeted the journalists who follow him and his party alliance on Twitter.

WORLDWIDE DATA STORM: EPIDEMIC DISSEMINATION, ALMOST IN REAL TIME

For those in the media, social networks primarily provide leads for topics and events that might subsequently be worth reporting in traditional publications and programs. After all, in the print edition of the Straits Times in Singapore, a half-page was devoted to Carolyn Hong's article on the survey results of the BN "Youth Lab" in April. In Malaysia itself, journalists are likely to have followed the "Tweet Up" and the related Twitter updates with great interest. The second phenomenon through which the importance of social networks for opinion making can be measured is the

13 | http://www.editorsweblog.org/analysis/2009/12/the_year_in_newspapers_trends_to_follow.php (accessed April 22, 2010).

rapid speed with which messages and posts spread via links within networks, per newsfeed or SMS. Information proliferates like a virus. Twitter in particular stands alongside the traditional news agencies in many editorial offices. The microblogging service now also has its own search function - and with good reason. Google announced that in the future it will also list entries from social networks as "real time updates", which are refreshed continually.

Around the clock, online journalists use their computers and cell phones to monitor any conspicuous increases in messages posted by Internet users concerning a specific event. The quantity of leads from "informants", whom the editors do not otherwise know, replaces the reliability of an individual source, or can at least indicate that a matter is worth investigating. Ever since Janis Krums from Sarasota, Florida, an eyewitness to events in New York tweeted "there's a plane in the Hudson" accompanying the message with a "twitpic" from her iPhone well before the traditional media reported the item, the microblogging platform has been under constant supervision by the press and broadcasters as an important lead-giver. In Asia, the terrorist attacks in Mumbai in November 2008 are considered to have been the historic moment for short messaging services. When the first shots were fired, a veritable Twitter storm broke out online. The situation soon became impossible to navigate and a considerable proportion of the supposed witness reports proved to be false. Nevertheless, CNN, BBC and other international media broadcasters took every effort to stay up to date on the events in the Indian city via blog entries and Twitter updates from the scene of the action.

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However, it is not only in the event of accidents or attacks that updates, which are restricted to 140 characters, have disseminated at an exponential rate. On May 16, 2009 for instance, two events in Asia gained worldwide attention: the Sri Lankan government declared that the civil war against the Tamil rebels had been won following 25 years of fighting, while in India the results of the parliamentary election were announced. The daily news of the German public service broadcaster, ARD, reported the events in Sri Lanka and the election result in India only after items about

demonstrations in Berlin and in Prague, the FDP party convention and the tax debate between the CDU and the SPD. In contrast, in the world of microblogging India was the top issue on the Saturday in question. Worldwide, the Twitter “hashtag” (meaning search term) “#indiavotes09” was searched more than any other term. This is significant if one considers that according to Sysomos, India disseminated fewer messages in the last quarter of the previous year than the citizens of the Netherlands during the same period.¹⁴ According to recent statistics, “tweets” are more intensive even on the tiny channel island of Jersey than in China, South Korea and presumably also in India. Thus, in cyberspace, the outcome of the election was also extremely interesting for those outside of India, or the comparably small number of Twitter users on the subcontinent spent the day in question doing little else other than sending and receiving messages. What is clear is that Twitter is used particularly intensively during political elections and election campaigns.

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In July of last year, there was also a steep upswing in the trend during the election in Indonesia. The discussions carried out by short message following political debates on television were particularly lively (hashtag: “#debatcapres”) and in discussions about

the presidential candidates (hashtag: “#pilpres”), which is hardly surprising. This trend looks set to continue in the foreseeable future. In mid-April, Twitter cited its total number of registered users at 105 million, with 300,000 new users registering daily. A mere four years after the US company was set up, 60 percent of users are from abroad. Every day, the service registers around 600 million searches.

The third characteristic when evaluating social networks as an instrument of mobilization and opinion-building, particularly among the younger generation, initially has nothing to do with Facebook, Twitter & Co. Nevertheless, it is probably the most important trend of all. Mary Meeker, responsible

14 | cf. http://blog.sysomos.com/2010/01/22/the-top-twitter-countries-and-cities-part-2/?utm_source=feedburner&utm_medium=feed&utm_campaign=Feed:+SysomosBlog+%28Sysomos+Blog%29 (accessed April 22, 2010).

for monitoring global developments in technology at Morgan Stanley, presented the formula “3G + Social Networking + Video + VoIP + Impressive Mobile Devices” at a Google event on “convergence”¹⁵. What the analyst christened “Queen of the Net” by the US press a decade ago means by this is the merging of Internet and mobile

telephony. For Asia this development could indeed trigger a technological revolution. At the end of last year 423 million people in Asia were already connected with the Internet via their cell phone. By the end of 2015, it will

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be more than 1.4 billion - a 233 percent increase. This will mean 800 million mobile Internet users in China alone, 260 million in India with more than 100 million expected in Japan where the penetration of the market with internet-capable “3G” cell phones is already at 96 percent. The less developed markets in Asia are rapidly catching up: by the end of 2015 a total of 120 million people will regularly use their ‘Smartphone’ to surf the Internet in the Philippines, Indonesia and in South Korea. Already, 37 percent of active Twitter users use their cell phone to send and receive updates. By 2015 at the latest, the stationary PC will, in general, have lost its place as the standard device for Internet access. The majority of users will be using Blackberry, iPhone, Kindle & Co. to navigate the World Wide Web, be it at home, in the office or while riding the tube. Newspapers like the New York Times, Le Monde in France and the British publication, the Guardian, as well as news agencies like the Associated Press (AP) are already intensively marketing “Apps” (short for “Applications”), to allow users to access the media content of these traditional sources from their Smartphones. Since April, an App for the Asia News Network (ANN), which is supported by the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, has been available for the iPhone.

The trend towards mobile online use is already far more advanced than the dissemination of stationary Internet was during the mid-1990s. Worldwide, data transfer for mobile Internet is set to increase almost forty-fold by

15 | <http://gigaom.com/2010/04/12/mary-meeker-mobile-internet-will-soon-overtake-fixed-internet/> (accessed April 22, 2010).

2014, predicts Meeker. Mobile video content would then account for nearly 70 percent of Terabytes worldwide.¹⁶ These hand-held devices will soon be the most important platform for communicating with customers and as an advertising means. According to the British agency mobile-SQUARED, which specializes in mobile telephony, “brands and companies have to ensure that they have a strong mobile presence. Now is the time to introduce relevant strategies.”¹⁷ This is precisely what politicians are now trying to do.

What are the greatest hindrances? For countries like Thailand, it is the language. The issues that get pulses racing in digital discussions across the globe are for the most part communicated in English. However,

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sufficient knowledge of the English language is the exception rather than the rule among Internet users in Thailand. Conversely, the dominance of the Lingua Franca on the Internet explains why, according to figures for the last quarter of 2009, the small country of Singapore ranked eleventh in terms of Twitter use in Asia, placing it just behind India and ahead of the Philippines.¹⁸ Japan and China both prefer to “tweet” in their native language and both countries developed their own microblogging platforms and social networking sites along the same lines as the US Twitter service several years ago. Japan is also likely to be the first country in Asia in which political “Tweet Ups” are standard practice in the fight to gain the approval of young voters. There, 75 percent of all Internet users navigate virtual social networks exclusively from their Smartphone.

This article was completed on April 22, 2010.

16 | cf. <http://www.readwriteweb.com/start/2010/04/mary-meekers-internet-trends-the-future-is-mobile.php> (accessed April 22, 2010).

17 | <http://www.mobilesquared.co.uk/?p=2166> (accessed April 22, 2010).

18 | http://blog.sysomos.com/2010/01/22/the-top-twitter-countries-and-cities-part-2/?utm_source=feedburner&utm_medium=feed&utm_campaign=Feed:+SysomosBlog+%28Sysomos+Blog%29 (accessed April 22, 2010).