Chapter 8
Mobile Media and Youth Engagement in Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

Youth engagement is often said to be at the heart of democracy, though the extent of such efforts in affecting policymaking remains highly debatable. Nonetheless, there have been heightened attempts by “ordinary citizens” to reform the country’s state of politics and to improve society’s living conditions. Malaysia’s authoritarian democracy has been a crucial motivation for young adults to “have their say” in challenging the current regime. This chapter highlights the various ways in which young adults use mobile media to activate and participate in civic, community, and political engagement whilst taking into account the many restrictions that are set up by the ruling government to monitor and control such engagements. Discussed alongside youth definitions of nationalism, citizenship, and activism that are embedded within the interviews, the findings are juxtaposed with present post-election discourses taking place within the country. The relationship between mobile media and youth engagement further affirms the idea of a new generation of mobile users that are not just technologically savvy but are using their knowledge to affect significant societal changes.

INTRODUCTION

In May 2013, more than 100,000 Malaysians, mobilized and coordinated by waves of text messages, assembled at the Kelana Jaya Stadium – the first of five Black 505 rallies held nationwide to protest electoral fraud. During the previous year, following the Bersih 3.0 rally which garnered over 250,000 people at the Merdeka Square, Parliamentary member Fong Po Kuan’s (DAP – Batu Gajah) queued regarding jammed telecommunication lines during the rally. In a written reply, Information, Communications and Cultural Minister Datuk Seri Dr Rais Yatim explained how the system could not handle the high usage:

Cellular telecommunication systems generally do not have enough capacity to support such high numbers of telephone conversations and transfer of data, as what occurred during the Bersih 3.0...

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Both the Black 505 and Bersih rallies offer clear examples of how online social networks contribute to the mobilization of individuals leading to more civic engagement in the physical world. The response on telecommunication jamming presents us with two indications pertaining to mobile media in Malaysia. First, the current condition of cellular telecommunication system in Malaysia leaves much to be desired, and second, mobile phones are the main form of communication during such rallies. A counter argument arising from the query was that authorities had jammed phone services to hinder further mobilization of people. If this was true, then the rationale for doing so would be based on the idea that mobile phones are indeed the main source of information and method of communication among rally supporters, thus allowing crowd engagement via mobile phone updates. This further affirms the significance of mobile media in influencing participation among youths in Malaysia. However, as put forward by Cherian George (2005), in his well-known thesis on Internet penetration, it is necessary for the Internet to be studied alongside political contexts – whereby high Internet penetration does not imply higher participation. The extent to which mobile penetration affects physical engagement in civic, community and political activities must be challenged and probed.

While social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter continue to serve as the main communication tools accessed via mobile phones, another important function gaining increasing popularity are mobile applications (or mobile apps), developed for 3G phones including the iPhone, BlackBerry, Android and Windows phones. In May 2012, a study reported that more mobile subscribers used apps than browsed the web on their devices (Perez, 2012).

During the recent 13th General Elections, several mobile apps were launched, including the most frequently installed UndiPRU13 (created by a local app developer, Appandus Sdn Bhd – see Figure 1), to enable users to get information on the 727 constituencies, including their locations, and a flexible search function for key words relating to a (previous) member of Parliament, State Assemblymen and election results since March 2008 (The Malaysian Insider, 2013). The apps, downloadable for free via Google Playstore and Apple iTunes, could even set a reminder on the various ceramahs (campaign talks). The opposition, Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR) on the other hand, launched a mobile app called ‘PKR’ as a campaign tool to disseminate information to the public. Various features included providing the latest updates on election-related issues, voters’ registration check, info graphics, videos of ceramahs.
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