

A photograph of a man with glasses and a light blue shirt speaking into a microphone. He is holding a small white object in his left hand. In the background, a white flag with red and blue text is visible against a blue sky with clouds. The title text is overlaid on a semi-transparent grey box at the bottom of the image.

# Democratisation & New Voter Mobilisation in Southeast Asia

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# The evolution of Southeast Asian democracy



The growth of participatory democracy in the region is one of the issues of interest to the Southeast Asia International Affairs Programme at LSE IDEAS. In this connection, the workshop that was organised in February on “Democratisation and new forms of voter mobilisation”, driven by Research Fellow Dr. Eva-Lotta Hedman, was not only relevant to the programme, but also ground-breaking as there had been no such focus before. While the workshop pointed to the need for more research to draw general conclusions and to anticipate likely future developments, the papers presented (extracts of which are reproduced in this Special Report) and the discussions that took place captured a vibrant phenomenon in the democratic process in Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines and Thailand which makes full use of the offerings of ICT (information and communication technology) while also employing the more traditional means of garnering political support.

While here in London we are in the midst of twittering about the British general election campaign, in Southeast Asia (with the Philippines also running into an election this May) there is no less excitement, not least in the digital sphere, that great equaliser. Of course, I would need to qualify this by stating we are here talking about the processes, and not the institutions, of democracy. Indeed during the discussion at the end of the workshop this point came up: there has been greater progress in advancing the democratic process in Southeast Asia than there has been in the establishment of the institutions, principles and practices of liberal democracy.

Having said that, it might well be to the good if we were to reflect on the likely evolution of Southeast Asian democracy which the papers here presented encourage. Clearly, there is not going to be a one-size-fits all situation, even among Southeast Asian states, let alone in comparison with western liberal democracies. As I write this, a rather extreme form of physical and direct democratic expression has been taking place in the streets of Bangkok, even as websites open up or are closed down and radio programmes scream the messages of dissent or support for the government. In the Philippines electoral campaign political murder takes place side by side with some rather snazzy appeals in the digital sphere. It is therefore necessary that a mental note is made that the history of democratic development, not just in Southeast Asia, has been a mixed and uncertain one – however excited one might be by the growth of participatory democracy in these new forms of voter mobilisation.

**Dr. Munir Majid**

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# Democratisation and New Forms of Voter Mobilisation in Southeast Asia

As Southeast Asia entered the twenty-first century, the procedures and practices associated with democracy had become important social facts in many parts of the region. By the 1990s, competitive elections in Thailand and in the Philippines had (re)emerged as the primary mechanism for the assumption of state office. By the turn of the century, Indonesia, the region's most populous country, had likewise experienced two peaceful transfers of presidential office, as well as the country's freest and fairest election since 1955. Meanwhile, opposition parties made strong showings in federal elections in Malaysia, seizing control over state assemblies and increasing their share of seats in the national legislature.

However, democracy has also remained intensely contested in these countries, in ways that extend beyond more familiar forms of election campaigning and voter mobilisation. The unresolved political crisis in Thailand is the most obvious case in point, prompting a return to extra-constitutional interventions by royalist military elements against an elected parliamentary government. Moreover, despite the recent build-up of pressure for change in Malaysia, its limited form of parliamentary rule remains firmly in place. While no Thai-style reversal or formal restriction of competitive elections and democratic institutions has occurred in Indonesia or the Philippines, the elected governments in Jakarta and Manila have faced charges of oligarchical rule, party cartels, corruption and electoral fraud.

Unsurprisingly perhaps, and as elsewhere, the optimism evident in much scholarship and other research focused on democratisation in the region has given way to a rather more cynical weariness vis-à-vis the political parties and electoral processes that followed transitions from authoritarian rule. Indeed, recent political trajectories across Southeast Asia challenge standard conceptions of democratisation as an essentially linear development, with democracy as the last stop at the end of the line. Instead, the complexity and variety of electoral politics in the region demand more careful attention to the dynamics of old and new forms of voter mobilisation. Thus serious electoral studies analysis requires a departure from the typical efforts at identifying political parties in Southeast Asia in terms of what they lack – 'real' ideologies, policy platforms, and memberships.

In this vein, this special report spotlights trends in shifting patterns of voter mobilisation in Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines and Thailand in recent years. It features extracts of papers presented at a workshop held in February 2010 at the Southeast Asia International Affairs Programme at LSE IDEAS. The workshop included participants from prominent national media and survey institutions in Southeast Asia, as well as academic researchers from the region and elsewhere. Participants were encouraged to reflect upon how political parties and politicians in the region today seek to mobilise voters in ways insufficiently captured by more commonly noted patterns of machine politics and vote-buying, patron-clientelism and cleavages. Related to broader trends and themes (e.g., reformism,

populism) also observed in the region, this LSE IDEAS workshop sought to spotlight novel mobilisational practices and electoral campaigning which have yet to attract more serious or systematic scrutiny. In as much as such practices and campaigns are part and parcel of the travails of democracy in Southeast Asia, this special report provides a first cut of papers on an otherwise comparatively overlooked perspective in the existing literature and debates on democratisation in the region.

In the first contribution to this special report, Andreas Ufen examines changing forms of voter mobilisation in Indonesia. He notes the diminishing salience of social cleavages for the mobilisation of votes since the return of competitive elections in 1999. At the same time, Ufen argues, political parties have become more personalised, characterised by generally weak platforms and loose linkages to voters. He attributes this development to a combination of factors, including the decline of ideologies, the moderation of political Islam within the party system, new media, reforms of formal institutions, and new forms of party financing connected to the altered relationship between private capital and the political class.

In a second paper on Indonesia, Syahrul Hidayat focuses closer attention on the changing strategies of one particular political party, the PKS, and its performance in the two most recent elections. Compared to 2004, the PKS was able to maintain its overall percentage of the vote in the 2009 general elections, thus making it the fourth largest party in the Indonesian parliament as well as the biggest Islamic party. As Hidayat also demonstrates, however, the party did not perform as well in urban areas in 2009 as it had previously, slipping into second or third place in the five largest cities of the country. Through this analysis of PKS, an ideological party, and changing voting patterns in urban areas, Hidayat also explores dynamics of moderation in democratic processes.

The article by Joseph Chinyong Liow turns to an examination of new forms of voter mobilisation in Malaysia. While variously described as 'soft authoritarian' or 'semi-democratic', Malaysia has

in recent years seen the proliferation of civil society activism and the advent of new media politics. As noted by Liow, such developments have had a transformative effect on Malaysian politics, and the country now stands at the cusp of a two-party (or two-coalition) system. With reference to recent elections, Liow argues that a brand of alternative politics has emerged at the nexus of civil activism and new media. Whether such transformation in the forms and processes of voter mobilisation will translate into the paradigmatic change in Malaysian politics that many have anticipated, particularly after the monumental March 2008 elections, remains to be seen.

Ibrahim Suffian focuses on the role of the internet as a conduit for expressing a public desire for political change in those 2008 general elections. According to Suffian, Malaysia's ruling coalition failed to comprehend the reach and transmission network of opposition and dissident citizen communications in the election campaign. Citing a post-election survey, he notes that more than two-thirds of the Malaysian electorate had access to information about the elections from sources other than the mainstream media, such as the internet, leaflets, and activist meetings. With an increasingly young electorate, Suffian concludes, this is merely the beginning of a wider role for information and communication technology in Malaysian political and social discourse.

In the next article, Duncan McCargo examines the changing dynamics of voter mobilisation in Thailand. The rise of Thaksin Shinawatra's Thai Rak Thai and its successor parties in recent years has been hailed as evidence of new modes of political marketing in Thailand, reflecting a global shift towards ideologically lightweight, leader-centred campaign styles. While such claims contain elements of truth, McCargo argues that Thai elections also continue to be characterised by money politics, vote-buying, and clientelist methods of vote-harvesting, especially but not solely in rural constituencies. As illustrated here by McCargo, the resulting picture is a complex and somewhat contradictory one.

Following on from this analysis, Pravit Rojanaphruk discusses the contested meaning of democracy and the deepening political crisis in Thailand since 2006. Underlying this crisis, Rojanaphruk notes, is a debate about the appropriate role of the monarchy in the future of Thai politics and society, an issue that cannot be discussed openly without risking severe punishment under *lèse majesté* legislation, which carries a maximum punishment of 15 years of imprisonment. Rojanaphruk shows how this constraint shapes Thai political discourse and impacts upon the on-going protests.

The article by Eva-Lotta Hedman shifts attention to the Philippines, where a succession of 'reformist' or 'populist' campaigns has accompanied presidential elections since the restoration of formal democratic institutions in 1986. Identifying key political, social, and economic conditions associated with such changing forms of voter mobilisation, Hedman highlights the considerable staying power of money, machine politics and electoral fraud in Philippine elections. With reference to the 2010 general elections scheduled for 10 May, Hedman argues, the phenomenon of 'political branding' of candidates and their platforms and parties has made evident inroads, supplementing more familiar modes of voter mobilisation in the country.

Staying with the Philippines, in the final paper, Emmanuel Yujuico turns to a discussion of information communication technology (ICT). Yujuico charts the diffusion of various forms of ICT in the Philippines, including cell phones and the internet, with particular focus on social networking sites. He also offers a brief examination of the usage of these technologies in the context of the 10 May 2010 Philippine general elections. While these technologies cannot be said to represent a 'bottom up' movement, Yujuico suggests, they are nevertheless becoming increasingly vital components of election campaigns in the digital age.

Overall, this special report points to shifting patterns in voter mobilisation across Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand and the Philippines. As campaign managers, media consultants, and public opinion surveys contribute to reshaping electoral processes in Southeast Asia, as elsewhere, further research in this area is important for our understanding of the travails of democracy in the region, as the myriad ways in which political candidates seek to appeal to voters across the region raise questions about Southeast Asian electorates and the complex and rapidly changing sociological landscapes in which they are embedded. ■

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# Forms of **Campaigning** and the Transformation of Political Parties in Indonesia

**Dr. Andreas Ufen** German Institute of Global and Area Studies

## Introduction

The relationships between forms of electioneering, socio-structural change and the transformation of political parties in Southeast Asia are not well researched. In the West, three stages of campaigning can be discerned, and these have depended – inter alia – on the phase of technological evolution. Initially campaigning was characterised by mass events, rallies, and face-to-face communication among party members and voters. Consultants were not important in comparison with canvassers and other party activists. In the second phase, mass media, especially television, played a decisive role. Large-scale opinion polls were sources of feedback, specialist consultants were gaining prominence, and campaigns were organised nationally by the central party apparatus with party-based salaried professionals. TV debates, press conferences, and ‘pseudo-events’ were central to campaigning. During this second, modern stage, catch-all parties trying to mobilise voters across all categories replaced the mass-integration or mass-class parties of stage one. The ties between citizens and parties were weaker in the second stage, and party activists at the grass-roots level lost their previous importance. At the same time, charismatic personalities and the central party apparatus in general became focal points for voter mobilisation. The current, third stage, of campaigning began in the late 1980s and early 1990s and refers post-modern or ‘American style’ electioneering. In this stage, parties use new communication technologies such as the internet and public relations consultants who base their findings on sophisticated opinion polls and focus-group interviews. Campaigning is much more targeted and business-like. Consultants are quite independent from the traditional party leadership. The so-called electoral-professional parties are said to be the typical organisational outgrowth of these developments.

## Campaigning in the 1950s

With reference to Indonesia, these three stages of campaigning and party development are, at least to a certain extent, also identifiable. The first elections in 1955 were not unlike those of stage 1 described above. Some particular campaigning characteristics stood out:

- Agencies and consultants were absent, and there were no opinion polls
- TV and radio were not widely used; even the newspapers had only a combined circulation of 821,000
- Mass rallies and face-to-face communication were the major channels used to popularise parties and their platforms
- Campaigning was not about selling or marketing concepts, but was intended to broaden knowledge about parties and their goals
- A decentralised campaign organisation with strong local branches was of tremendous importance

The latter feature in particular necessitated parties with strong village-level organisations, high membership numbers, and an efficient apparatus. Although parties were weakly organised until 1953 – with the communist PKI (Partai Komunis Indonesia, Communist Party of Indonesia) and the Islamic Masyumi (Majelis Syuro Muslimin Indonesia, Consultative Council of Indonesian Muslims) the exceptions – the election campaign itself transformed parties and voters alike. Parties developed more advanced organisational forms, and the elections produced a shift in the village-status balance and new ‘collectivist entities’. According to Herbert Feith in his *The Indonesian Elections of 1955*, in a number of village areas ‘party branches acquired the characteristics of living communities’.

These communities have to be seen against the background of aliran or sociopolitical ‘streams’. The four most important parties, with their affiliated women, youth, religious, professional, and labour organisations, politicised these streams. Nahdatul *Ulama* (NU, Renaissance of Islamic Scholars), a traditionalist Muslim party, represented mostly Javanese *ulama* (religious scholars) and their rural followers. NU members belonged to the orthodox Muslims or *santri*. This was also true of the modernist Muslim Masyumi, which counted urban intellectuals, traders and artisans among its followers and was particularly successful beyond Java in the Outer Islands. The non-orthodox or syncretist (that is: *abangan*) parties were the nationalist PNI (Partai Nasional Indonesia, Indonesian National Party), strong among state employees and civil servants and their clients, and the communist PKI, a well-organised party with followers among *abangan* workers and peasants in urban and rural areas.

The parties of the 1950s may thus be tentatively classified as variants of mass-integration parties. They were rooted in social milieus and mobilised voters along social cleavages: *abangan* versus *santri*, traditionalist versus modernist Islam, urban versus rural, Java versus Outer Islands, capital versus labour.

## Campaigning after the fall of Suharto

At least some elements of stage two and three are also typical of Indonesia after the fall of Suharto in 1998. The elections that have taken place since 1999, when the first free elections after 1955 were held, have to a large extent centred on television as the primary campaigning site. Talk shows, duels between presidential candidates, and particularly TV advertising have been – according to different surveys – the main venues for political parties and candidates to spread information and heighten their popularity. The costs of campaigning are rising rapidly, and at least thirty percent of party funds are used for TV, radio and print media advertisements.

Today elements of campaigning associated with stage three can also be identified. For instance, a 2009 study by Marcus Mietzner perceived a decisive change in the style of electioneering since 2005, that is after the introduction of direct local (*pilkada*) and direct presidential elections, in which pollsters have emerged as the ‘makers and breakers of political campaigns’. Especially in *pilkada*, parties have had to identify the most popular

candidate and would-be candidates have had to conduct surveys to check their own popularity ratings. In some cases, consultants have engineered an entire campaign and actively created new images. They have identified popular would-be candidates and offered them a package complete with investor financing for an entire campaign with the expectation of being rewarded after the successful election of such candidates.

All this shows that the introduction of TV and surveys has had an impact on party politics. It is not clear, however, whether it is predominantly these factors that have caused political parties to change or whether other factors have played a stronger role.

### The transformation of parties in Indonesia

In Europe, the transformation of parties has been affected by new forms of campaigning, mainly due to technological developments, and by socio-structural change – that is, the decline of religious and class linkages, the pluralisation of milieus, and individualisation of the voters. Today, catch-all and electoral-professional parties dominate in Europe. Has a similar transformation of parties since stage one of campaigning taken place in Indonesia too?

Indonesian election results since 1999 suggest that despite major socio-economic change, some of the main cleavages structuring the party system are still alive. The most obvious is the division between secularist and Islamic/Islamist parties. 'Islamist' parties are those such as the PPP (Partai Persatuan Pembangunan, United Development Party) and the PKS (Partai Keadilan Sejahtera), which support – more or less openly – the implementation of shari'a law (including the penal code). Secular parties include the PDI-P (Partai Demokrasi Indonesia – Perjuangan, Indonesian Democratic Party – Struggle), the PD (Partai Demokrat), and, to a certain extent, Golkar (Partai Golongan Karya, Party of Functional Groups). Among the moderate Islamic parties are the traditionalist PKB (Partai Kebangkitan Bangsa, National Awakening Party), a successor of the NU of the 1950s, and the

modernist PAN (Partai Amanat Nasional, National Mandate Party), which is linked to the Muslim mass organisation Muhammadiyah. The salience of other cleavages has been documented by a range of surveys and analyses.

However, a range of indicators suggest that the age of mass-integration parties is over. First, parties have poor platforms and/or are usually no longer as deeply rooted in social milieus. Linkages between voters and parties are, according to surveys, mostly 'emotional'. Second, there is a tendency among political parties to form cartels; inter-party competition is centripetal, whereas in the 1950s it was centrifugal. Third, new parties without predecessors, such as the PD, Gerindra, and Hanura, have successfully been formed. The reasons for this realignment are as follows:

- Socio-structural change and suppression by the New Order regime (1966–1998) led to the decline of communism/socialism and marhaenisme (the Sukarnoist radical nationalism with its notion of the suppressed 'small people').
- The religious cleavages have been weakened within the party system because of the pluralisation of political Islam and the convergence of abangan and santri as well as of traditionalist and modernist Islam due to the modernisation of traditionalist lifestyles and the globalisation of Islam. Religious knowledge is now individualised because of new communications technologies, expanded education, and the emergence of new interpretations of Islam.
- New media has weakened traditional leaders such as *ulama* and strengthened direct linkages between party leaders and the electorate.
- Direct presidential and local elections as well as the 'open candidates list' since 2009 have caused a personalisation of politics. The 'open list' strengthened local identities during the 2009 electoral campaign, in which candidates from the same party competed against each other and were more independent of the central executive in Jakarta.

## Concluding remarks: The rise of clientelism?

But are Indonesian parties today catch-all parties or electoral-professional parties like their Western counterparts? Today there are parties such as the PKS and the PDI-P that still exploit the inherited charisma of the Sukarnos, and parties such as Golkar, PAN, and the PD that have at least some similarities with catch-all parties.

New forms of campaigning interact with dynamics often overlooked by political scientists. In this vein, Herbert Kitschelt differentiates between charismatic, clientelist and programmatic linkages in *Comparative Political Studies* 2000. Charismatic parties are dominated by single personalities, whereas politicians in clientelist parties '... create bonds with their following through direct, personal, and typically material side payments'.

The work on Indonesia in general has to take into account the role of different kinds of clientelism. Clientelism encompasses:

- the rise of canvassers and vote-buying, particularly after the introduction of the 'open list' and due to the increasing competition in the electoral districts;
- the usual practice that candidates buy their candidacy and finance their own campaign;
- the impact of businessmen such as Yusuf Kalla or Aburizal Bakrie in party organisations;
- and the growing strength of traditionally powerful families with extended patronage networks, especially beyond Java.

The evolution of campaigning in Indonesia is to a certain extent comparable to that in Western countries. Even the dealignment of political parties is related to Western developments; however, different forms of clientelist voter mobilisation are undermining democratic elections. Today Indonesia combines forms of campaigning typical of all three phases of campaigning with clientelism, and features of electoral-professional and catch-all parties are intertwined with different forms of clientelism. This is what makes the analysis of Indonesian parties so difficult. More suitable concepts and terms for analysis have yet to be developed. ■

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# Moderation and the stagnation of the PKS in the 2009 legislative election

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## A Mixed Outcome

The Indonesian election in 2009 has revealed two different results for the PKS (Partai Keadilan Sejahtera or Prosperous Justice Party). On the one hand, the party benefited from the personality of Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono's (SBY) PD (Partai Demokrat or Democrat Party), who helped to boost support from just 7.5 percent to 21 percent: by contrast, other parties suffered from declining support. Accordingly, the PKS was able to maintain its percentage of the vote from the previous election, making it the fourth largest party in the Indonesian parliament as well as the biggest Islamic party. On the other hand, in urban areas the party did not perform as well as it had in 2004, slipping into second or third place in the election table in the five biggest cities: especially Jakarta and Depok. The PKS owed much to provinces in Central and East Java as well as Sumatra and Kalimantan where it gained more votes as the loss of votes in urban areas was compensated by votes gained in other areas.

In order to understand why the party performed badly in big cities, it is necessary to consider voting patterns in urban areas as a distinctive phenomenon rather than looking at the party's performance more generally. This is a relevant concern since urban voters have traditionally favoured the party. Therefore, this essay offers an understanding of why support for the party has stagnated in cities by focusing on the urban context. For that purpose I make use of a moderation framework, which can be applied to an ideological party such as the PKS in democratic processes.

## Moderation Analysis

In *Parties and Party System: A Framework for Analysis* (1976), Giovanni Sartori argues that the existence of ideological parties is not impossible since they can accept and follow the general rules of democratic processes. Parties can either preserve or reduce their ideological standpoints in order to initiate centrifugal or centripetal tendencies. The former occurs if a party maintains its ideological stance, which has the effect of limiting its opportunities to gain popular support, while the latter occurs if a party moves toward the centre of the political spectrum.

Centripetal parties (which is to say ideological parties that work within democratic systems) need to sacrifice their ideological stance in order to integrate themselves into the system. In this way, they shift toward the centre for the purposes of winning elections. In this centripetal process of political moderation a political party with a radical position, platform or ideology, involved in an electoral process, moves to a median position.

The motivations behind this shift may be pragmatic-strategic or ideological or a mixture of both. The first is driven by a desire to win elections in pursuit of political office. Moderation, then, is seen as an effort to attract median voters and its achievement depends on whether it is convincing or not. The second reason for moderation is based on the development of new interpretations of a standing

ideology. Shifting a political stance may be seen as a consequence of new understandings of existing values. In the context of an Islamic society, new interpretations are necessary in order to develop moderate attitudes, which can be put into practice in political arena such as building democracy in an Islamic society. However, Jillian Schwedler's case studies in *Faith in Moderation* (2006) confirmed that interpretation on certain political situations can be developed through religious perspectives.

Despite the debates on what motivates moderation, sacrificing some aspects of an ideological standpoint is a necessary precondition. But this may not be an easy option as it could cause internal conflicts within parties that take this option. Occasionally this may cause splits and the establishment of splinter parties; in the wider context, this situation may confuse the party's potential supporters, especially in the electoral process.

### **Appealing to Voters**

In the 2004 election, the PKS was thought to be a rising star alongside Partai Demokrat. Its support grew from 1.4 percent of the vote in 1999 to 7.34 percent in 2004, gaining it 45 parliamentary seats. It also became the most popular party in Jakarta, the capital, and other four major cities. One reason for this achievement was the image of the PKS as a party supporting good governance and morally grounded politics, which struck a chord with voters' demands for change. However, the party's use of the slogan 'clean and care' may have reflected an understanding that its Islamic-appeal did not necessarily guarantee its electability.

The PKS's main approach to improving its image during the election was through sporadic canvassing in urban districts. By contrast, it did not make great use of a media strategy. But the party benefited most from public demand for alternatives to the older parties, which were widely seen as corrupt.

Following upon its success in the 2004 election, the PKS adopted a strategy of using the mass media to promote itself in rural areas: this was influenced by the success of the presidential and vice presidential candidates, SBY-Kalla, who used similar strategies in the 2004 presidential election in order to compensate for their inability to penetrate rural areas through party networks. In fact, media promotion was the dominant campaign strategy, operated by all major political parties in the 2009 election. The ambition of the PKS to become a major party by gaining 20 percent of the vote in 2009 encouraged it to implement a more extensive campaign strategy, using a mixture of media, more traditional door-to-door campaigns, and its trademark social care activities.

In this way, the PKS tried to advertise itself as an inclusive, but also nationalist party, ready to accept and recognise different groups within Indonesian society. In February 2008, the party held a National Summit in Bali, specifically because the island is dominated by Hindus and a favourite destination for tourists, in order to show its enthusiasm for recognising different identities. During the summit one of the MPs symbolically invited a Hindu preacher to join the party in order to express this eagerness. Furthermore, in order to show the nationalist spirit of the party, 'freedom' (*merdeka*) was shouted together with 'Allahu Akbar' during the party's meetings.

However, the party courted controversy when it declared the former president, Soeharto, who was accused of corruption and held by some to be responsible for political crimes, a national hero and guru. This move reflected the party's strategy to extend its support beyond its traditional basis. The party also made use of other significant figures in its advertising, designed to represent different segments of Indonesian society, including Soekarno, the first president who was known for his nationalistic and progressive ideas, as well as Ahmad Dahlan and Hasyim Asy'ari the founder of two Islamic social organisations, Muhammadiyah and Nahdatul Ulama.

### Impact on the PKS

The media campaign operated by the PKS in 2009 raised confusion and controversy, not least because it clashed with the message of change promoted by the party in the previous election. For potential supporters in big cities, the new message might not have been understood quite so easily since it seemed to run contrary to the 'clean and care' slogan used by the party in 2004, as well as its more basic Islamic identity. For those who wanted to vote for change, as shown by the previous election, admiration of the former president could be seen as a betrayal of the spirit of reformasi. This mainly affected voters in big cities who were more critical and demanding and who tended to have better access to mass media. Therefore, when a party does not fit their demands, they are less likely to vote for it. The controversy raised by the messages delivered through the mass media was to some extent good for the party since it increased its public profile. However, this did not ensure support for it at the ballot box, as was demonstrated by the results of the election in urban areas.

This strategy caused difficulties for party cadres working at the grass-roots level in big cities, who frequently found themselves confronted by hostile questions from potential voters about the election strategy being operated by the party. This was not helped by the fact that the cadres themselves often could not account for the party line that they were supposed to represent.

The direction and behaviour of the party in politics, especially during the electoral campaign, became a serious concern for some of its members. Some members, mainly in Jakarta and its suburban cities, responded to criticisms of how the party had developed its image in the mass media by creating several forums to discuss this situation, especially before the election. The al Hikmah mosque in southern Jakarta hosted monthly open gatherings, attended by at least 300 party cadres, in order to discuss the direction of the party. This led some of the attendees to form a further discussion group, the Forum Kader Peduli (Forum of Concerned Cadres), in order to discuss the situation more intensively and to formulate action plans. Although limited in size, these groups were attended by a mixture of middle-ranking and senior party members who invited more junior members along in order to disperse the content discussed in the group more widely.

The general feeling of these groups was that the party campaign strategy had violated its identity by putting political success before religious considerations. Their members accused a number of the party's leaders of initiating a new campaign strategy without consulting or engaging with the concerns of its middle-ranking and junior members. Therefore there was a prevailing spirit of questioning the party's leadership, which spread from middle-ranking to more junior party members.

As a cadre party, with a strong training system based on certain values, uncontrollable discourses within the system can become quite influential. Although it has been estimated that only around ten percent of the party's cadres have been openly critical of it, this internal dissent can affect the morale of other cadres who are less inclined to openly criticise the party. Additionally, working for the party can be tiring for cadres; hence criticism of the party from within can make them feel disinclined to promote the party to the electorate. It has been found that the level of enthusiasm to work for the party varies according to how its members perceive its direction. While the majority of cadres continued working passionately for the party during the 2009 election, there were also members who were less enthusiastic about campaigning or even did not want to work at all. In an extreme case, one former cadre declared that he would campaign against the party.

## Conclusion

The 2009 election showed the growing anxiety and suspicion of some cadres toward the PKS leadership and how this influenced their dedication towards the party's election strategy. This stands in stark contrast to the 2004 election, when almost all of cadres campaigned enthusiastically for the party. The more pragmatic direction of the party's 2009 election campaign left some of its members confused, concerned, and critical of its leaders. This also left potential voters in big cities confused as to what the party stood for. The efforts of the party leadership to moderate the image of the PKS resulted in internal tensions and a confused message, the outcome of which was stagnation in the 2009 election. ■

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# Message, Medium and Mobilisation in Malaysia: **Paradigm Shift** or Business as Usual?

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Elections in Malaysia were described by Harold Crouch in his contribution to *The Politics of Elections in Southeast Asia* (1996) as “no more than a ritual providing a cloak of legitimacy for what is really authoritarian rule”, where they “allow critics to let off a little steam while giving the government a useful means of gauging the level of public dissatisfaction.” By that yardstick, the results of Malaysia’s twelfth general elections on March 8, 2008 were nothing short of remarkable. Islamists, secular democrats, and Malay reformists – all from the opposition – somehow managed to surmount their differences and cobble together a formal alliance which managed to deal a major blow to the ruling National Front coalition. Led by the indefatigable Anwar Ibrahim, the former deputy prime minister who was unceremoniously sacked and jailed for alleged corruption and sexual misconduct in 1998, this opposition coalition, which would later take on the name of the Peoples’ Alliance (Pakatan Rakyat), managed to deny the National Front a two-thirds parliamentary majority, no mean feat by Malaysian standards. Not only that, the opposition also managed to inflict upon the incumbent regime a string of defeats in a concurrent series of state-level local elections which resulted in five state legislatures falling into their hands. This was a feat never before achieved by the political opposition in Malaysia. The election results of 2008 were all the more poignant given how the National Front had won a landslide victory when the country last went to the polls a mere four years earlier, in 2004.

The March 8 election results clearly showed up the weaknesses of the Abdullah Badawi administration. Over and above that, the elections were significant for two further reasons. First, there was a marked departure from the communal narrative that had long dominated political discourse in Malaysia. Although the opposition coalition consisted of Islamists and non-Muslim activists, it managed to jettison tried-and-tested practices of falling back on ethnic and religious affinities, and instead based its appeal to a cross-section of the public on shared aspirations for justice, welfare, and anti-corruption. Second, more so than in any previous election, the new media was effectively used as alternative vehicles for the transmission and dissemination of information detrimental to the cause of the incumbent. New patterns of mobilisation in Malaysian politics then, rested on these twin pillars of message (post-communalism) and medium (new media). Evidently, both combined to such remarkable effect that observers quickly pronounced the advent of a “new politics” that successfully surmounted what seemed insurmountable in Malaysia – primordial identification and race-based politics.

Much of the hope underpinning predictions of a new era of politics in Malaysia stems from the notable changes in the means of political mobilisation. That is, the opposition appears to have found new ways to reach the populace on a large scale, bypassing the conventional instruments of information dissemination in the process (which in any case work to favour the incumbent over the opposition). The 2008 election was very much an 'internet election', where the opposition's political campaign was run, with the help of an activist civil sphere, primarily online, and to devastating effect. Indeed, so significant was the role of new media that even incumbent leaders have conceded that their inability or reluctance to factor the role of the new media into their overall strategy was arguably their biggest tactical mistake.

More important than the means of mobilisation, however, is the message. In this regard, it bears noting that the hope for a new dawn in Malaysia's political narratives does not appear to have been borne out in the events that have followed since. To be sure, what was initially striking about the 2008 reversal of fortunes for the contestants was the fact that it resulted from an erosion of the dominant narrative. This time, it was the Peoples' Alliance that played on the fears of the non-Malays regarding minority rights, drawing attention to the Abdullah government's inability to protect the respective communities from the gradual erosion of freedom of worship in a number of controversial, high profile cases of religious conversions and "body-snatching"<sup>1</sup>. At the same time, the opposition also focused on numerous scandals and abuse of power that had been uncovered by the instruments of new media, not only to lay siege on the incumbent, but also to underpin a consensus shared across the ethno-political spectrum for new models of governance based on judicial reform, democratic pluralism, anti-corruption, and social justice.

However, as the euphoria of victory gave way to the reality of incumbency it soon became clear that one of the immediate and pressing challenges confronting the opposition coalition was the need to cement the opposition alliance, or at least to minimise ruptures to it arising from differences in ideologies, interests, and goals. To that effect, initial analyses of voting patterns were encouraging. The PAS and DAP electoral machineries cooperated extensively during the campaigning. As a result, PAS triumphed not only in its core rural Malay-Muslim constituencies, but also in several others with high concentrations of non-Malays. Likewise, the DAP won in many mixed constituencies, whether ethnic Malay support often tilted the balance to their favour in close contests. Outperforming both parties though, was the resurgent PKR, which was winning solid support from both ethnic minorities as well as urban Malay voters.

Beyond the immediate exigencies of campaign politics, the real litmus test of Malaysia's resolve to transcend race and ethnicity, in particular the promulgation of the ideology of Malay primacy, is the continued relevance of affirmative action policies launched under the New Economic Policy (NEP), a national economic program implemented in 1970 with the aim of leveling the economic playing field between the Malays and other ethnic groups (notably, the Chinese). To that end, it is noteworthy that on the campaign

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<sup>1</sup> "Body-snatching" is the colloquial term used in Malaysia to describe incidents where state Islamic religious authorities intervene in non-Muslim funerals to confiscate the body of the deceased on the grounds that the deceased was in fact a Muslim and hence had to be buried under Muslim rites. This has become a particularly controversial practice in Malaysia because state Islamic religious authorities often do not, or are unable to, produce verifiable evidence that the deceased had actually converted to Islam before his or her death.

trail Anwar Ibrahim declared categorically that the opposition would dispense with the NEP and race-based affirmative action policies if it came to power. Campaign rhetoric aside, the practical dismantling this thirty-eight year old policy of affirmative action proved much more difficult. Soon after DAP gained control of the state of Penang, the chief minister announced that he would do away with the NEP and adopt a tender-based system for contracts. This provoked harsh reactions from Malay politicians, including leaders of PAS. Recognising of the brewing rift, Anwar attempted to calm the situation by suggesting that while the affirmative action policies under the NEP were problematic, they needed to be reformed rather than abolished outright. Evident from Anwar's shift in position is the explicit unwillingness on the part of Malay leaders – even among those from the Peoples' Alliance – to move away wholesale from affirmative action policies.

Debates over affirmative action within the Peoples' Alliance speak to deeper concerns regarding the viability and sustainability of this coalition and its attempt to transcend the dominant narratives of race and ethnicity. It bears recalling the fate of the Alternative Front formed to contest the 1999 general election, which collapsed because it was eventually unable to reconcile the interests of the DAP and PAS, the latter of which was resolute in its pursuit of the Islamic state objective. Given the memory of that recent failure, the success of the Peoples' Alliance as a real alternative to the National Front will undoubtedly hinge on continued collegiality and cooperation between component parties. To that end, there are reasons to be skeptical of the resilience of the DAP-PAS leg of the alliance. Ideologically, the parties are poles apart, even though they have endeavoured to cement their relations within the rubric of the Peoples' Alliance by registering the coalition as an official institution. Given the mass of ideological tensions which are currently barely papered over, it should not be a surprise that since the elections problems have surfaced on several occasions between DAP and PAS, above all over the Islamic state objective of PAS that has historically impeded cooperation and set the two parties against each other.

Doubts over the longer-term viability of the alliance have been compounded by rumors of a potential coalition between UMNO and PAS. Soon after the March 8 election, it became evident that part of UMNO's strategy to regain lost ground was to reach out to PAS on the premise of "Malay-Muslim unity." Almost immediately after the election results were announced, the upper echelon of the UMNO leadership extended an olive branch to PAS on the grounds that the fractures in the Malay-Muslim community caused by UMNO-PAS rivalry needed to be healed given that non-Muslim minorities were becoming increasingly assertive of their rights and questioning the principle of Malay primacy.

The fact that a certain segment of the PAS leadership responded to UMNO overtures caused much disquiet not only among the party rank and file, which was unsure of what to make of the mixed signals being sent, but also for the other component parties of the Peoples' Alliance as well, whose leaders expressed frustration and disappointment that they were neither informed nor consulted on a matter which had such potentially explosive consequences. Even more shocking was the fact that the first meeting took place barely a few days after the elections and explored the possibility of localised UMNO-PAS coalitions in Selangor, which was won by the opposition.

The issue of cooperation with UMNO was raised and intensely debated at the PAS general assemblies of August 2008 and June 2009. While some senior stalwarts defended the party leadership's decision to accept UMNO invitations for dialogue, most of the rank and file disapproved the move. By virtue of being the most senior leader involved in some of the talks, PAS deputy president Nasharuddin Mat Isa bore the brunt of the criticisms. In response to the sentiments from the ground, the leadership of PAS declared its continued commitment to the Peoples' Alliance at the end of the meeting. Yet despite this attempt to close ranks and bring the issue to a close, elements within PAS continue to entertain the possibility of future cooperation with UMNO for several reasons. First, some within PAS leadership circles continue to

harbour reservations towards Anwar, and are hesitant about wholeheartedly supporting his leadership role in the opposition movement. While PAS is prepared to accept Anwar's current role as the leader of the opposition, major figures in the party have raised doubts about his seemingly unbridled ambition. Second, the long-term future of the Peoples' Alliance remains murky to many within the PAS leadership, particularly given the DAP's staunch opposition to their Islamic state objective. Indeed, the conservative elements of the PAS leadership see the DAP as a major hurdle to the party's ultimate goal of establishing an Islamic state in Malaysia. As a consequence, while the party remains committed to the opposition alliance it is not under any delusions regarding its limitations. Third, there remains a pool of PAS leaders who share UMNO's concern regarding the increasing assertiveness of the non-Malays, and the threat that this would pose to Malay-Muslim primacy. This uncertainty is compounded by the fact that PAS has been relegated from its previous position as the second most powerful party in Malaysia in 1999 (by virtue of the number of parliamentary seats it controlled) to the fourth in the pecking order, behind PKR and DAP.

In sum, contrary to the aspirations to transcend race-based politics articulated by the opposition during the election, the communal framework still holds sway, while ethnic, racial, and religious referents remain factored into the calculations of the members of the Peoples' Alliance; fundamental ideological cleavages persist, and the narrative of Malay supremacy continues to weigh down the prospects for democratic pluralism in Malaysia. ■

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# Reflections of the 2008 Malaysian General Election: Role of the Internet in **Political Communications**

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## Introduction

The 2008 Malaysian General Elections produced a result that has since changed the political landscape of the country. The outcome of the elections were to a large part due to the confluence of issues and of personalities, one important factor that has emerged is the role played by the internet as a conduit for expressing public desire for political change.

The Malaysian mainstream media, particularly the vernacular Malay and English presses as well as the electronic medium, are controlled by either the government via the free-to-air televisions channels operated by the Ministry of Information, or the private channels operated by companies with strong links to the ruling coalition. Malaysian general elections since independence in 1957 have always been won by the ruling coalition of the National Front, a coalition of thirteen parties that represent various ethnic groups across the country dominated by the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO). In the eleven general elections held between 1957 and 2004, the National Front had always retained at least two-thirds of the seats in the Parliament, allowing it to amend the constitution at will. At the onset of the election campaign in 2008, most pundits and analysts observing the Malaysian political process agreed that this election would be no different, and the National Front would win handsomely, as it had in 2004 when it gained 92% of the seats in parliament with 64% of the popular vote.

However, unseen by the masses and largely dismissed by National Front strategists were the impact of concerns over the economy and rising public resentment over its handling of the interests of its polyglot citizenry. These issues began transforming into a discourse which found a thriving environment in the new media.

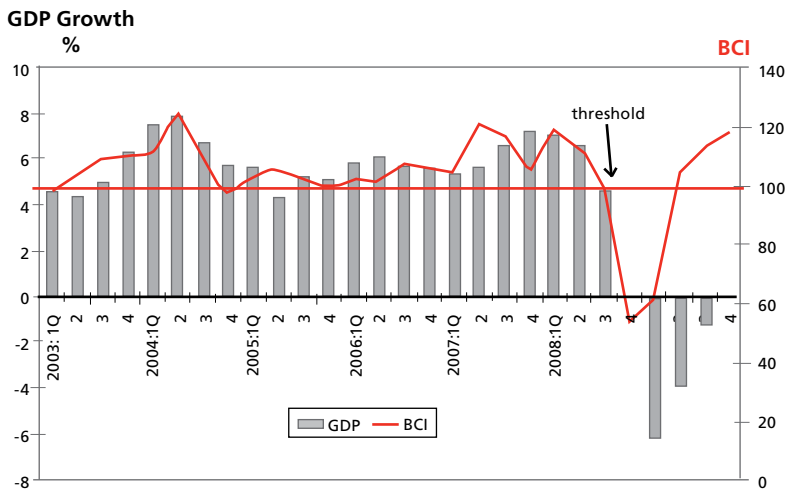
## Overview of the Factors Influencing the 2008 Elections

The 2007 Malaysian survey of the Asian Barometer Survey project found that the key election issues were voters' perceptions of economic performance, leadership performance, management of inter-ethnic interests and the capability of the opposition.

## Economic Performance

Following the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis the economy had shown signs of recovery and posted growth rates exceeding four percent between 2001 and 2005. By 2006 however, rising global oil prices and the ensuing increase in food prices forced the Malaysian government to rollback subsidies on essential items such and the successive increases in the price of fuel had a direct impact on the popularity of the government.

The chart below shows GDP growth and the Business Confidence Index from 2003 to end 2009. The 2008 elections took place prior to the end of the first quarter of 2008, before the precipitous drop caused by the recent financial crisis.



Source: Malaysian Institute for Economic Research

## Leadership

In October 2003, Abdullah Ahmad Badawi became prime minister after twenty two years of Dr. Mahathir. Abdullah enjoyed unparalleled public support in the wake of his 2004 election victory, with approval ratings as high as of 91%. Abdullah's honeymoon lasted 18 months after which his popularity decreased as fuel and other consumer staple prices increased, and he came under verbal attack from Dr. Mahathir as well as increasing public criticism from among civil society.

## Managing Ethnic Interests

One enduring feature of Malaysian politics is the complex management of the interests of the many ethnic groups that make up its population. For five decades, the National Front coalition had achieve a modicum of success in occupying the middle space in the Malaysian political spectrum, balancing the specific interests of the ethnic based political

parties. Over time however, the perception has increased that too much power had been accrued in the office of the prime minister under the guise of fast-tracking development and decision-making, eventually eroding the effectiveness of institutions tasked with maintaining checks and balances.

At the same time, efforts by UMNO to regain lost ground from the 1999 elections among Malays led to the perceptible rise of pro-Malay rhetoric and discourse over Ketuanan Melayu (loosely defined as Malay Supremacy). In the period leading to the 2008 elections, several incidents took place which raised public temperament including the discovery of a video showing a prominent lawyer fixing the appointments of judges, 'body-snatching' by Muslim administrative authorities, deaths in police custody and the demolition of temples on public land by state authorities. In late November 2007, a demonstration by the Hindu Rights Action Force was met with force and some of the organisers were detained under the Internal Security Act, resulting in an abrupt loss of ethnic Indian support for the National Front.

## **The opposition**

In the 2008, the Malaysian opposition came together in a fashion that was unlike in previous elections. All three parties came to joint understanding based on their reading of the public mood and developed a tacit understanding of their roles that influenced their strategy in meeting the oncoming elections. In addition, many opposition campaigners had established working arrangements on common campaigns prior to the election, including the protests on free and fair elections, fuel subsidies, and judicial independence. Also salient was the centrifugal role of Anwar Ibrahim in moderating the stances of senior leadership in DAP and PAS that created a framework for practical cooperation among the three parties, including a basic campaign platform that downplayed ideological issues. The result was that the campaign communications of the opposition were generally uniform, and targeted the key issues of the government's handling of the economy and inflation, its treatment of minorities, and the erosion of public confidence in the judiciary, the police and the prime minister himself.

## **Web Based Strategies**

The political campaigns' presence on the web was dominated by the opposition parties of PKR, PAS and DAP. The ruling coalition's footprint on the web was miniscule, despite investing in improved websites and recruiting 'cybertroopers' to counter pro-opposition messages. Using their web pages, but particularly the blogs of individual contesting candidates, opposition parties focused their communications on such target issues as high inflation, criminality, and corruption, as well as the prime minister's lack credibility.

The opposition also promoted a message of change anchored in a more equitable and practical redistribution of national wealth, the dismantling of monopolies, and a more responsible government. In the personality-driven political environment of Malaysia, Anwar Ibrahim was portrayed as a genuine alternative leader and a person who, after serving six years in prison on trumped-up charges, was duly cleansed of his prior role in government.

Anwar's party, PKR, centred its campaign message almost solely around his persona. Inspired by the Turkish AK Party's successful experience of promoting former Istanbul mayor Raccip Tayep Erdogan to win recent elections, PKR presented Anwar as a symbol and bearer of change. In cyberspace, Anwar's blog featured prominently as a source of information about the party, his campaign speeches and commentaries on developing events. By taking the style of a 'presidential campaign', PKR was able to deflect criticisms about the party and its lack of experience or pool of established leadership.

## **Application of Information Technology in the Elections**

The evidence clearly indicates that the opposition was clearly more prepared and deliberate in their approach in using the internet and other technology in their communication strategy than the ruling parties. Some of these include:

**Text Messages** – short message services (SMS) was utilised to the maximum by campaigners in the opposition. Some elements within the opposition had developed a capacity to send targeted messages to individuals living in particular locations, and had the ability to inundate voters in a particular location with SMS blasts carrying various messages. These messages were utilised to inform voters about nearby events and to send teaser messages to get them to visit websites. On the eve of the election day, several tens of thousands of voters in targeted constituencies received a pre-recorded audio message by Anwar Ibrahim asking them to vote for change.

**Candidate Websites** – numerous campaign websites sprouted in support of candidates, the majority of which were developed by opposition candidates. These websites carried information about the candidates and reported on events, and some also solicited donations. Some notable successes were online donation drives by blogger-turned candidate Jeff Ooi who raised tens of thousands of dollars online to win handsomely; and Badrul Hisham, running against the prime minister's son-in-law, raised more than RM30,000 within a week.

**Party Media Portals** – party sites such as Harakahdaily and Suara Keadilan became portals that made material available for subsequent duplication and transmission amongst the public. PAS developed a daily newsletter which carried the statements and reportage of campaign issues and events, which was widely distributed during the campaign by party activists.

**Supporter websites** – in addition to party websites, a number of homepages operated by party activists and supporters also carried additional information and generated materials and leaflets that could be downloaded and distributed.

**Youtube and other video sites** – the opposition was denied access to mainstream television networks and so relied upon video sharing sites like Youtube to showcase its events and speeches. A large quantity of user generated material found their way on Youtube, with one of the more popular video clips showing the Malaysian prime minister asleep at various public events.

**Distribution of Video Discs** – an adaptation of the leaflet, the general election saw further widespread use of the video compact discs (VCDs) as a form of digital leafleting by campaigners from both sides. These VCDs were used to carry various forms of messages, from the typical introduction of a local candidate to the transmission of insidious material denigrating a particular candidate or party. During the campaign, activists likely linked to the National Front re-issued an old video purporting Anwar Ibrahim's sexual scandal, but the impact was negligible as the material was nearly a decade old and had been discredited by the legal process which acquitted Anwar in 2004. On the other hand, a VCD by the interest group HINDRAF depicting the destruction of Hindu temples and homes of Malaysians of Indian descent by Malaysian local authorities proved pivotal in inflaming voter passions.

## **Impact of Information Technology**

The National Front ran its campaign defensively yet retained a hubristic outlook that assumed members of the public would simply accept what was handed to them. It underestimated the level of resentment and disillusionment latent within the Malaysian electorate. The National Front also failed to comprehend the reach and transmission network of opposition and dissident citizen communications. A post election survey conducted by the Merdeka Center, a polling organization, found that while more than 90% of Malaysians learned about the elections via the mainstream media, two-thirds also had access to secondary and alternative sources of information such the internet, leaflets, and activist

meetings. Although these alternative forms of communications were difficult to maintain over time and were largely aided by the huge mobilisation of volunteer resources, they nonetheless achieved a decisive impact in the outcome of the elections. Campaigners from the ruling party failed to comprehend the corrosive nature of the content of the material being transmitted on the internet and by secondary information networks on their legitimacy and standing in the eyes of the electorate.

The use of information technology will be a permanent feature of election campaigns. Its potency will be fueled by the type and nature of issues at hand as well as the strategy adopted by the mainstream media. At the time of writing, the Malaysian mainstream media continues to resist further liberalisation, and television and radio networks remain wedded to the wishes of the National Front ruling coalition. The electorate has clearly become increasingly cynical of the mainstream media and its masters, as a Merdeka Center poll conducted in July 2008 found that only 25% of Malaysian voters felt that they had some trust in the political news coverage of the local mainstream media, with less than 10% expressing “strong trust” in the medium.

Malaysia continues to invest in its broadband networks and as internet access continues to widen beyond the urban areas of the country political actors are now more empowered and better able to utilise these tools. The disparate opposition has coalesced into the People’s Alliance who now control five provincial governments. At the same time, the evolution of Malaysian politics is likely to continue apace as information becomes more freely available to the public. Along with an increasing young electorate – many of whom are likely to have Internet access – the promise is that this is merely the beginning of a wider role for ICT in Malaysian political and social discourse. ■

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# Mobilising Voters in Southeast Asia: Take **Thaksin**, Take **Thailand**

Prof. Duncan McCargo University of Leeds

Inspired by the way in which American and European political parties and candidates have appropriated sales and advertising techniques from the private sector, political scientists have recently created a new subfield of political marketing studies. This inter-disciplinary area of study has met with some sniffy responses from more conservative academics, who prefer to understand election campaigns in terms of conventional models that emphasise, for example, voter choices between alternative policies and platforms, and the salience of grassroots campaigning by party activists. Students of political marketing, by contrast, point to the decline of party memberships and machines, and the growing sense (acutely visible in the case of Britain) that in a post-ideological area, distinctions between different parties and politicians are often matters of style rather than of substance.

While electoral studies in developed democracies have been strongly challenged by new approaches that depict voters more as consumers than as active political citizens, the study of elections in the Asia-Pacific region remain stuck in a time-warp. Influenced by over-deterministic and teleological readings of democratisation theory, most of those who work on these elections in the region are desperately seeking evidence of the emergence of 'real' political parties, which sport 'proper' ideologies, and feature complex membership and branch structures, along with 'genuine' policy platforms. In reality, many Asian countries are in the process of bypassing the entire apparatus of modern political parties, moving instead directly from elections based largely on personalism, patronage and corruption, to elections in which these traditional campaign elements are compounded and modified by hybridised parties with 'electoral professional' elements, using all the latest media and marketing techniques.

There are few better examples than Thailand, where political parties have never been the same since former premier Thaksin Shinawatra launched his Thai Rak Thai (Thais Love Thais) Party in the wake of the Asian financial crisis. Capitalising on a popular mood of anti-IMF nationalism, Thaksin created a party that captured the zeitgeist, foregrounding himself as a catch-all, can-do leader who would bring the energy and creativity of the business sector to a country for too long dominated by bureaucrats, the military and the palace. Thai Rak Thai did not rely upon traditional notions of the political party: mass membership, branches and ideology were of marginal importance. At the centre lay a dynamic leader whose decisions and policies were shaped by focus groups and marketing teams, and who epitomised the idea of an electoral professional party, Southeast Asian style. Thai Rak Thai proceeded to win an impressive victory in the 2001 general elections, and successfully complete a full four year parliamentary term. After absorbing a couple of coalition partners and pulling off a second triumph in the 2005 polls, Thaksin was able to form Thailand's first elected one party administration.

The downside of Thai Rak Thai was that for all his supposed modernity, Thaksin was very reliant on the hundreds of old-style politicians whom he had brought into the party. Around half of his MPs were unreconstructed rural machine politicians, who relied upon networks of canvassers to harvest votes through personal connections and money politics. Thai Rak Thai was a schizophrenic party, adroitly bridging the old and the new. There was no real inconsistency between the rise of the professional politician and the persistence of the local boss. Both could live side-by-side in the hybridised politics epitomised by Thai Rak Thai, a party with the deeply ironic slogan 'Think new, act new'.

As Anyarat Chattharakul has shown in her study of vote-canvassers during the Thaksin era, parliamentary candidates in Thailand use sophisticated mapping techniques to classify households and communities into sympathetic, neutral and hostile categories, deploying a range of diverse election campaigning techniques to secure votes. In many traditional communities, such as slum areas or those inhabited by religious minorities, votes may be readily secured through vote-buying and by winning over key community leaders with whom strong personal connections are cultivated. In more middle class gated communities, such tactics would be utterly counterproductive; candidates need to find ways of accessing these voters to present images of themselves as sophisticated, educated and above the fray of grubby electioneering. In theory there is an enormous difference between the two styles electioneering, but Anyarat argues that in many ways the two approaches are mirror images of one another. Whilst the middle classes tend to look down on lower levels of society with a lofty disdain, reproaching them for 'selling' their votes and behaving in immoral ways that reflect their lack of education and understanding, members of the Thai middle classes are themselves engaged in dubious patronage-based deals to secure their own business interests, and to gain access to privileged domains – such as ensuring that their children can be admitted to elite schools.

In this respect, Thaksin Shinawatra and his hybridised mode of political mobilisation epitomised all the contradictions and double standards of early twenty-first century Thailand, where what purported to be new was actually based on longstanding and highly questionable social practices. Thailand was an interesting example of where older notions of the political party based on mass bureaucratic models – emphasising mass membership, branches, collective decision making and ideology – had never properly caught on, despite the persistent belief that only such parties would constitute 'real' political parties. No genuine mass bureaucratic party had ever emerged in Thailand, and with the decline of such parties worldwide, the likelihood of their ever appearing must now be considered extremely remote.

Instead, Thaksin-style hybridised, pseudo-electoral professional parties are now the order of the day. While TRT was abolished by the courts in 2007, and its successor People Power Party suffered a similar fate in 2008, the torch of Thaksinisation is still carried by the Puea Thai Party. Meanwhile the Democrat Party has adopted a similar leader-centred approach, building its image around the youthful, British-educated premier Abhisit Vejjajiva, and adopting policies and communication styles which are highly resonant of Thai Rak Thai's methods, postures and language. None of this means that electoral professionalism has truly arrived; in many parts of the country, vote-canvassing networks and money politics continue to rule the ballot box. Thailand's electoral politics remains a mass of contradictions. ■

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# Popular Mobilisation and Thai Democratisation: **Thai Politics** in Late Rama IX Era

Mr. Pravit Rojanaphruk The Nation Newspaper, Thailand

Since 2006, Thai politics has witnessed mounting popular mobilisation and a deepening political crisis. As so-called 'yellow shirts' and 'red shirts' have taken their protests to the international airport, the national government, and the city streets of Bangkok, Thailand has also seen the articulation of ultra-royalist versus (alleged) anti-royalist sentiments. In a bid to oust (former) Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra in 2006, the yellow-shirted People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD) presented themselves as ultra-royalist and Thaksin as a threat to the monarchy. According to the PAD, Thaksin aimed to turn Thailand into a republic. From 2007 onward, when the pro-Thaksin red-shirted United Front for Democracy Against Dictatorship (UDD) came into being, a significant element within this movement became critical of not just royal advisors, whom they accused of having orchestrated the military coup in 2006 which ousted Thaksin, but became critical of the institution of the monarchy itself.

By late 2009, the UDD leadership began distancing itself from the faction most critical of the monarchy, Red Siam, and insisted that all red shirts are loyal to the throne as well. Beneath the surface, however, discussion about Thai politics and the monarchy continues. Indeed, political mobilisation since 2006 reflects, in no small measure, the differing views about the role of the monarchy in the future of Thai society and politics.

## The meaning of democracy in Thailand

Although the contestation over the meaning of democracy in Thailand between yellow-shirt and red-shirt supporters has intensified, genuinely in-depth discussion about democracy in Thailand remains difficult under current legislation. That is, the role of the monarchy in Thailand's politics, society and economy cannot be discussed openly in a critical manner without risking severe punishment under lese majeste law which carries a maximum punishment of 15 years of imprisonment. This constraint shapes Thai political discourse, including the on-going protests, in important ways.

When the PAD demonstrated against the then elected Thaksin Sinawatra in 2006, charging him with corruption and abuse of office they called for a royally-appointed prime minister to replace him and denounced him as a threat to the throne. Eventually it was a coup on the eve of September 19, 2006, which, while claiming to be under His Majesty's grace, managed to oust Thaksin. The coup makers, later known as the Council for National Security quickly dropped any link by name to the king as their initial proclamation met with consternation from foreign governments. Instead, they denied that the palace was in any way involved in leading or giving the putsch a blessing.

In Thailand, those who care and dare to discuss the stark choices that confront the political system as regards the role of the monarchy have mostly gone underground, withdrawn to virtual anonymity

on-line, or confined themselves to private reflections, amongst a close circle of trusted friends. In public, even red-shirt leaders, branded anti-monarchist by the movement's foes, still insist publicly that they are in favour of a democratic system with the king as head of state, while also expressing many critical views about the monarchy and its royal advisors.

The comparative absence of open and critical discussion and debate about the role of the monarchy in Thai politics and society in the country is all the more striking when viewed from abroad. Last year, for example, saw at least three issues of the London-based *The Economist* banned from circulation in Thailand, allegedly due to the sensitive nature of its articles on the Thai monarchy. In a similar vein, Paul Handley's unauthorised biography of the reigning Thai monarch, King Bhumipol Adulyadej, has been banned in Thailand. Titled 'The King Never Smiles,' this book was published by Yale University Press. More generally, hundreds of websites critical of the monarchy are blocked by the state.

Of course, officials will insist that His Majesty plays no role in politics. However, those critical of the institution long for a transparent, accountable monarchy subject to public scrutiny and criticism. By contrast, ultra-royalists dread to think what will happen if the Thai media were to behave like tabloid newspapers in London when it comes to coverage of the royal institution.

As for the mainstream media in Thailand, they will typically not hesitate to lavish ever more excessive praise and flattery on the members of the royal family. They are also virtually silent when it comes to portraying the royal institution in an even mildly critical manner. Instead, their depictions tend to idealise people's relationship with the monarchy as an institution and to censor anything even mildly critical of the monarchy. At best, such media portrayals present a flat, one-dimensional caricature of the Thai people, always eternally loyal to the throne. At the same time, it is worth bearing in mind that most Thais learn about the royal family through whatever is reported on mainstream mass media.

### **The meaning democracy to the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD)**

As noted by observers, PAD has emerged an advocate for the leadership of the well-educated and 'moral' elites. This was perhaps most apparent in their now-abandoned proposal for 'New Politics.' According to this proposal, some 70 percent of the members of parliament should be selected by some "independent" organisations while only 30 percent were to be elected. More generally, it has been noted, the PAD harbours deep distrust of poor and less educated Thais who comprise about 70 percent of the population. Hence their call for a royally appointed prime minister and support for the 2006 coup which ousted Thaksin.

Indeed, it would appear that, to the PAD, elections are little more than a sham and fraudulent way for rich and corrupt politicians to grab power. As expressed by a frequent reader in a letter to the Editor of *The Nation*, the country's major English-language newspaper: *"In Thailand, the event (the general election) is just a ritual to confer the reign of parliamentary control through vote-buying."* (Nethirat Intira, 22 July 2008)

## Challenges facing Thai democracy

In the present context of continued mobilisation and unresolved crisis, there are at least four key challenges confronting the Thai people:

First of all, how to put the military back in their barracks for good? After 20 coup attempts with nine successful putsches, the military, especially the army, is not about to give up its power easily. In fact the most crucial meeting which paved way for the current Abhisit Vejjajiva administration to assume power took place at the residence of Army chief Gen. Anupong Paochinda in late 2008.

Under the junta-sponsored 2007 charter, the prime minister has no direct control over the appointment of army chief, the most powerful post at the Defense Ministry. Coup rumours are common whenever political tension exists. Civilian oversight over the military is very weak and the army control a large number of radio stations and two television stations for “national security” purposes. Yet blame should not simply be placed upon the military alone as the Thai public, including the vast majority of mainstream Thai media, have repeatedly welcomed tanks on the streets of Bangkok in hope of political salvation. Thailand is a coup-addicted nation in need of some form of serious political rehabilitation. Military intervention remains a popular idea especially among many of the educated middle class and elite.

Second, what kind of space will the monarchy inhabit after the current reign draws to a close? This big issue is tragically avoided by the mainstream mass media due to censorship, self-censorship, lese majeste law and ultra-royalist ideology amongst influential members of the media. In private, many Thais, be they red-shirt, yellow-shirt, and those not part of the two political movements do discuss and speculate about what might become of the monarchy in Thailand, especially in the post Rama IX era. Due to media censorship and self-censorship, virtually all speculations are based on rumours and hearsays, making it very difficult to discern a way

out of the current impasse. More informal and on-line speculation and discussion can be expected however as the current king advances in age and weakens in health.

Some want to see a strong monarchy to counter balance the power of non-royal related political and business groups. Others wish to see a strictly limited monarchy system like those in the United Kingdom, while a few are republicans. With the media not really touching the issue in any significant manner, Thai society appears to be in self-denial about what is going on. Reform, beginning with the abolition lese majeste law, may enable people to become less restrictive in discussing the role of the palace in Thai society but many ultra-royalists want to see more severe punishment added into the law.

Third, what to do with the voices of the poor and less educated? Decades of elitism and middle class’ misgivings about poor and less-formally-educated people’s ability to make sound political and electoral decisions have fanned a good part of the red-shirt anti-old-elite movement. The poor have found their political voice through Thaksin, who, despite charges of abuse and corruption has not diminished in his popularity among the rural poor. Instead, it seems unlikely that, in the wake of his populist policies, these rural folks would return back to their villages and let politics be the same as before Thaksin came to power and find themselves voiceless again. But is it possible for the rural and other poor to strike some kind of compromise with the mostly urban educated middle class who look down upon them?

Fourth, what to do with new political-business groups like Thaksin and his cronies? There is no easy answer to this vexing question either. For one thing, many of those in opposition to Thaksin opted for a military intervention or top-down “solution”, as discussed above. As also noted, however, this familiar formula has failed to provide a viable resolution to the political crisis which is instead deepening.

## Conclusion

On February 7, 2010, front page news reports from Daily News newspaper and ASTV-Manager Daily newspaper reported that privy council member Gen. Kamthorn Sinthanond called for the government to protect the monarchy from being attacked. "Thais must be knowledgeable and truly understand about royal power and royal activities so they can be proud and know how important the king is to the nation; however we are currently witnessing an increasing media war... and the monarchy has been dragged into it..." Kamthorn, who insisted that he was speaking in a private capacity as a citizen, added that perhaps organisations such as the state's Psychological Institute for Security should be enlisted to "make the people understand about the role of the monarchy."

As Thai society is unable to critically and publicly debate the monarchy, attacks and remarks critical of royal persons (e.g., the King, Queen) and the monarchy as an institution typically resort to the usage of code names, allusions, innuendos, metaphors and parables in order to avoid falling foul of lese majeste law. However, the excessive lavishing of praise on the institution of the monarchy that tend to characterise mainstream media portrayals has also backfired as some Thais perceive it in a negative fashion.

Groups critical of the monarchy are today crudely branded in only one shade – as that of anti-monarchists working with Thaksin toward abolishing the monarchy. A more nuanced public debate has become impossible and Thai society is paying a high price for it. Such is the tragedy of Thai politics in a transitional period late in Rama IX's reign. According to the ultra-royalist discourse, Thaksin is but a corrupt and ambitious politician wanting to overthrow the monarchy, and thus, conveniently enough, the cause of all political crises. At the same time, a deafening silence accompanies the calls by a substantial number of the Thai population for a change in their relationship with the monarchy and its advisors, as well as for a greater political voice.

Thailand is like a sick man who cannot discuss his own medical condition fully and openly. Like a patient who needs surgery but does not dare to undergo medical examination, diagnosis and treatment, he waits bitterly, grudgingly and confounded as the pain mounts and the situation becomes increasingly untenable. ■

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# Beyond **Machine Politics?** Reformism, Populism and Philippine Elections

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The general elections in the Philippines are fast approaching. On May 10, more than 85,000 candidates will contest some 17,000 elected offices, including the Presidency, half the Senate, the entire House, and all elected local positions (governor, vice governor, board members, mayor, vice mayor, councillors). Much attention is focused on the presidential candidates and their campaigns, featuring political speeches, star-studded rallies, and, invariably, candidates breaking into song and dance. With an expected three million first-time voters and projections of a 'youth swing vote' from the 40 percent of registered voters aged 18-35, the election period has also seen more concerted efforts to mount 'virtual campaigns' using web-based tools, in particular presidential front-runners Senator Benigno 'Noy' Aquino (Liberal Party) and Senator Manny Villar (Nacionalista Party).

## I. Democracy in the Philippines

Democracy in the Philippines has been described variously in terms of "factionalism" and "clientelism", "caciquism" and "bossism" but the overall pattern has been clear. Elected politicians have been drawn from the landowning, commercial and industrial oligarchy of the archipelago, representing its interests both directly and through delegation. Competition for political office has revolved around contestation for the spoils of state power between rival families and factions within this ruling class. Poverty and economic insecurity have combined with a highly decentralised political structure to render the majority of Filipinos susceptible to clientelist, coercive, and monetary inducements and pressures during elections. Meanwhile, the prominent role of money in Philippine elections – for buying votes, bribing officials, and otherwise oiling the machinery – has created a structural imperative of fund-raising that guarantees politicians' continuing use of state powers and resources for personal and particularistic benefit and their abiding reliance on landowners, merchants, bankers, and industrialists. Small wonder that observers have been most impressed by the continuities in this seemingly seamless system of oligarchical democracy in the Philippines, as seen in the close attention paid to "political dynasties" that have dominated municipalities, congressional districts, and in some cases entire provinces across several generations and many decades.

## II. Back to the Future: New Forms of Voter Mobilisation

Of course, it is also possible to discern efforts aimed at challenging or circumventing such political dynamics through alternative forms of voter mobilisation. During what I have termed 'critical elections,' the mobilisation of – voluntarist, non-partisan, patriotic – national citizens campaigns for 'free and fair elections' have helped energise the opposition's bid for the presidency against a continuista incumbent. Such campaigns accompanied the 1953, 1969, and 1986 elections, and, as I have shown elsewhere, enjoy a close affinity with the demonstrations of 'People Power' that helped unseat a president in 1986 and, again, in 2001.

Since the restoration of formal democratic institutions and practice in 1986, moreover, contests for the highest elected office of the land have also seen – failed and successful – alternative forms of voter mobilisation in the Philippines. On the one hand, in the first presidential election since the fall of Marcos, anti-graft and corruption crusader Miriam Defensor Santiago launched an electoral campaign in 1992 characterised by unprecedented reformist zeal and appeal, especially to younger generations of voters who have come of age in the post-authoritarian period. Whether or not her failed presidential bid fell foul of large-scale electoral fraud, as widely charged at the time, including in an election protest filed with the Supreme Court, the outcome signalled that “democratic consolidation” had been achieved, albeit in such ways as to confirm the staying power of Philippine oligarchic democracy and the vigour of its electoral machinery, at the expense of greater democratisation.

On the other hand, in the second presidential elections in the wake of authoritarian rule, the populist appeal of opposition candidate and (former) movie star Joseph ‘Erap’ Estrada succeeded in captivating a nation and capturing the presidency in 1998. Having won election first to the vice-presidency in 1992 and then the presidency with the largest vote margins in Philippine history, Estrada found himself the target of mounting public criticism and the first presidential impeachment hearing to reach the Philippine Senate, prior to his unceremonious unseating by ‘People Power’ in January 2001.

Fast-forwarding to 2004, the third presidential elections to be held in the post-authoritarian period, what stands out is the failure of Philippine cinema’s all-time great Fernando Poe, Jr., popularly known as ‘FPJ’, to translate his long-standing and nation-wide iconic star into electoral victory. As in 1992, the successful capture of the presidency by the ruling party candidate was accompanied by allegations of wholesale electoral fraud. Once again, the opposition filed an election protest with the Supreme Court, but in addition, this time the allegations of electoral fraud gained much wider traction and directly

implicated the re-electionist presidential incumbent Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo who, as Estrada’s former vice-president, had assumed the top job in 2001. As in 1992, however, the Supreme Court dropped the case and the ruling party’s candidate was declared the duly elected president of the Philippines.

In the post-Marcos period, it is thus possible to discern at least two distinct forms of voter mobilisation that, in different ways and to varying degrees of success, have sought to circumvent the role and significance of clientelism, coercion and capital in Philippine politics and society. As indicated by the brief review above, in two out of three presidential contests during this period, the 1992 and 2004 electoral campaigns to elect Miriam Defensor Santiago and Ferdinand Poe Jr. respectively, suggest themselves as significant instances of such alternative forms of voter mobilisation. At the same time, they failed to translate widespread support – for ‘Miriam’ in 1992 and for ‘FPJ’ in 2004 – into final victory at the polls. By contrast, while the winning presidential bid of ‘Erap’ succeeded in mobilising voters in ways irreducible to machine or money politics in 1998, neither his unprecedented vote margin, nor his enduring popularity, could prevent the extra-electoral ouster from power that followed in mid-term. As a result, (former) vice-president Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo assumed the presidency without having won election in 2001.

### **III. Something New: ‘Philippine Democracy, Inc.’**

Despite the considerable staying power of an entrenched system of voter mobilisation through clientelism, coercion, and capital in the Philippines, it is thus also possible to see the addition of ‘something new’ to such pervasive patterns. First of all, it is worth recalling that in the Philippines, as elsewhere, the structural decline of patron-clientelism has been linked to demographic change. Since the late 1960s, the expansion of a segment of urban poor and, in absolute terms, a growing urban middle class, has anticipated an overall decline in what has been

referred to elsewhere as the 'integrative capacity' of political machines. The resurrection of formal democratic institutions in the post-Marcos period saw the resumption of economic growth and the rapid growth of many urban and peri-urban landscapes across the Philippines, which, once again, raised the spectre of new social imaginaries.

Second, shifts in the political party and voting system in the Philippines have followed changes to the electoral rules in the post-Marcos period. The new electoral rules introduced with the resurrection of formal democratic institutions spelled the end of the two-party system and the associated zero-sum logic of Philippine elections. As the new rules removed representatives of the incumbent administration and the dominant opposition parties from boards of election inspectors and canvassers, they also anticipated the shift to multi-party electoral competition that has characterised Philippine politics and society in the post-authoritarian period. This shift, in turn, has opened up new possibilities for a more variegated and 'flexible' array of political parties and coalitions to field candidates in the contestation for an unprecedented number of elected seats at municipal, provincial, and national level.

Third, in class terms, the configuration of elected representatives has changed in tandem with the expansion and differentiation of the Philippine economy. That is, the diversification of business interest across economic sectors and administrative districts has anticipated patterns of brokerage by which the owners of the largest conglomerates in the Philippines lend support to top corporate lawyers, veteran machine politicians, and celebrities. This development has been evident in both the Philippine House and Senate and has seen major magnates bankroll clusters of candidates in elections, as well as lobbying campaigns on specific pieces of legislation during their terms. This pattern of brokerage indicates a shift in the relationship between the spheres of business and politics, allowing for a new cast of candidates to 'take the money and run.'

As suggested by the succession of presidential contests in the post-authoritarian period, however, there are at least two key constraining conditions working against the realisation of the kind of transformative potential suggested by the enabling shifts identified above. On the one hand, electoral fraud and undue advantages enjoyed by the incumbent administration have served to delimit the scope for 'something new' to register in the canvassing of votes during elections (1992, 2004). In this regard, the changes in electoral rules and the pattern of brokerage described above have also encouraged electoral fraud of a so-called 'wholesale' kind in the canvassing of votes. Little surprise then, that the (comparatively untested) introduction of an automated vote count in the 2010 elections is a cause for concern. According to a recent national survey, almost half of respondents (47%) agreed that "[t]he machines that will be used to count the votes in the 2010 election can easily be sabotaged in order to fake the election results" (Social Weather Station October 24-27, 2009).

On the other hand, the mid-term ouster of a sitting president who had won election against the (former) incumbent administration candidate was not merely unprecedented, but arguably, also a new, unconstitutional precedent against the future inroads of 'something new' in Philippine politics and society. As opposition politicians, corporate executives, and Catholic clergy returned to the parliament of the streets with calls for 'civil society' to support the 'moral crusade' against Estrada, 'People Power' spelled the unceremonious end to a Philippine presidency in mid-term. Having first changed the course of history in 1986, by helping to prevent Marcos from sanitising his long-term authoritarian rule through a national ballot, 'People Power' has since gained added circulation as political discourse, no longer merely part of the repertoire of protest against the conduct and outcome of elections, but also against an incumbent president. Whether 'the end justified the means,' as argued by some in the aftermath of Estrada's ouster, this turn of events presented

a departure from the constitutionally prescribed procedures for presidential succession. As such, it has also left a complex legacy for the consolidation of democratic practice in the Philippines.

The post-Marcos period therefore suggests a rather mixed picture in terms of new forms of voter mobilisation and, not least, the effects thereof for shrinking what has been referred to as the 'democratic deficit' in the Philippines. As indicated by the 2010 election campaign, the phenomenon of 'political branding' is an important aspect of the trends in shifting voter mobilisation in the country. Assisted by professionalised campaign managers, media consultants, and national opinion surveys, a political brand is developed to help advertise a candidate and his/her platform in the market of votes. In the 2010 general elections, for example, there are evident efforts at such branding of the two front runners, Manny Villar and Noyoy Aquino, as young outsiders ready to take on oligarchical rule, party cartels, political corruption and electoral fraud. Of course, neither Villar, nor Aquino is new to Philippine politics, or without the political machinery of the country's two oldest parties. Nonetheless, their campaigns underline the extent to which political branding has made inroads in Philippine elections, supplementing more familiar modes of voter mobilisation in the country.

In conclusion, as discussed above, underlying changes in the human geography of voters, the regulatory framework of elections, and the economic diversification of oligarchs have contributed to opening up possibilities for new forms of voter mobilisation. At the same time, such possibilities and the promise they hold for further democratisation in the Philippines continue to struggle against not merely the old, familiar politics of clientelism, coercion and capital, but also the more recent permutations of certain kinds of wholesale electoral fraud. While typically associated with progress and change, and, indeed, with 'new citizens-cum-voters', 'People Power,' as a perhaps all too familiar repertoire of protest, may also have emerged as part of the challenges to institutionalising democratic consolidation in the Philippines. ■

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# Digital Democracy and Voter Mobilisation in the Philippines

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Despite the Philippines' status as a developing country, advanced information and communication technology (ICT) has already had a considerable impact on its political processes. While those interested in development concentrate their attention on how ICT can transmit useful information to would-be entrepreneurs, those interested in politics are interested in how it can facilitate political mobilisation in traditional and non-traditional ways. In this note, focus is placed on two important elements of ICT whose reach is widening in the Philippines: cellular phones and the internet. Both exemplify what are known as "general purpose technologies": those with variegated uses unforeseen by their original inventors. As such, these powerful ICT tools have been adapted to make them more suitable to the local vernacular.

In what follows, I will first detail how each technology has diffused in the Philippines to set the stage for analysing its potential impact on political processes. Next, I will explain how use of cellular phones and the internet demonstrate adaptability to the vagaries of political mobilisation in the Philippine context. Finally, I elaborate on how these technologies are being deployed by candidates for the 2010 presidential election. For an electoral contest in a developing country, several campaigns already feature remarkably sophisticated use of ICT.

## "Let a Thousand Cell Phones Bloom"

Like in many other countries, cell phones have diffused rapidly in the Philippines. At the end of 2008, the International Telecommunications Union (ITU) estimates that the worldwide cell phone subscriber base had reached four billion, compared to a world population of 6.6 billion people. In the Philippines, there were an estimated 55 million subscribers out of a population of 90 million. Whilst individual users may have multiple subscriptions, rendering the number of subscriptions an unsatisfactory basis on which to establish how many people have cell phones (the "penetration rate"), it is nevertheless believed that 80% of the Philippine population has access to a mobile phone. Moreover, the country is widely regarded as the world's text messaging capital, with 1.39 billion messages sent daily (the equivalent of each subscriber sending 9,125 messages annually) according to leading messaging technology firm Acision. Unlike in developed countries where a minute of airtime and a text message cost nearly the same, the least expensive prepaid airtime in the Philippines costs roughly \$0.10 a minute while a text message costs \$0.028, making the latter's cost an attractive option. The introduction of prepaid cards in 1999 greatly facilitated the popularity of text messaging among Filipino masses, making the country unique in that the bulk of network traffic is dedicated to SMS instead of voice calls.

In infrastructure terms, the relative ubiquity of cell phones derives from a number of attributes. State-owned telecom monopolies prevalent in less developed countries (LDCs) have not been compelled to expand access to fixed lines phones as doing so is often prohibitively expensive, especially to remote rural areas. In contrast, cell phones benefit from more recent trends towards telecoms deregulation as

well as the lower cost of establishing infrastructure. Adding incremental capacity via cell phone towers and the like allows piecemeal expansion to accommodate additional subscribers in a cost-effective manner for service providers.

During Barack Obama's 2008 presidential campaign, political pundits widely commented on his novel utilisation of text messaging to invigorate and inform supporters. Yet, it may be surprising to those unfamiliar with global politics that text messaging had been used to much greater effect in a country whose per capita GDP is but a fraction of America's. In January of 2001, cell phone-wielding opposition forces were credited with mobilising an estimated 250,000 people to march on Epifano de los Santos Avenue (EDSA) to oust then-President Joseph "Erap" Estrada over corruption allegations. This event has been termed EDSA II in reference to the first EDSA "People Power" revolution which culminated in the ouster of Ferdinand Marcos over disputed election results in 1986. Like the first event, EDSA II benefited from the support of Radio Veritas, the Roman Catholic Church-owned AM station; the charismatic presence of the late Philippine President Corazon Aquino; and desertion by the Armed Forces of the Philippines.

Estrada's removal from office enabled then-Vice-President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo to assume the remaining three years of his presidency. Ironically, although she had risen to become the country's leader in part via cell phone activism, it almost proved to be her undoing. The Philippine constitution only allows an elected president a single term in office; as it was adjudged that she did not serve a full term yet, she contested and was subsequently declared the winner of the 2004 presidential election. However, controversy dogged this result when tapes released in 2005 featured her discussing vote tallies during the election with then-Election Commissioner Virgilio Garcillano. It transpired that her cell phone had been tapped, and the subsequent media firestorm that erupted centred on vote-rigging allegations. Reflecting cell phone pop culture, ringtone remixes featuring Arroyo asking Garcillano "Hello Garci?...

So will I still lead by 1M?" – close to the nationwide margin of victory – quickly proliferated. Arroyo subsequently apologised for a lapse of judgment in keeping contact with an election official at an inopportune time. Still, her popularity never returned to pre-"Hello Garci?" levels, even if she has managed to retain her presidency despite numerous challenges. In light of this incident, her opponents adopted the rallying cry of "Let a Thousand Cell Phones Bloom."

## **The Internet and Political Mobilisation**

Diffusion of internet access is not as widespread as that of the cell phone in the Philippines. This situation is largely due to cost reasons. The ITU estimates that there are less than one million Filipino broadband subscribers. Still, overall internet access is more widespread due to the proliferation of internet cafes and kiosks charging for access on a time-limited basis. Once these more popular forms of access are accounted for, an estimated 24 million Filipinos use the internet – a penetration rate of 26.7%.

In contrast to cell phones, this smaller user base circumscribes the internet's potential for political mobilisation. Nevertheless, the relatively low cost of developing and distributing online content makes it an attractive medium. While political jokes proliferate via either cell phones or e-mail messages – such as "Erap jokes" poking fun at ex-President Estrada's perceived lack of sophistication during his term in office – other uses are more specific to the internet. In particular, Filipinos are becoming avid users of social networking sites. While online market research firm Comscore estimates that the Philippines has only 1,233,620 registered Facebook users – a penetration rate of 1.37% – Facebook, unlike in the rest of the world, is not the country's most popular social networking site. Rather, far more Filipino users are signed up to Facebook's predecessor, Friendster. Friendster preceded the likes of MySpace and Facebook, which were respectively oriented towards musicians and college students. Reflecting the relative technological savvy of Filipino users, Friendster was able to make early inroads into Philippine cyberspace

that it has yet to relinquish. 10.7 million out of 58 million worldwide Friendster users are Filipino, establishing the country as the world’s largest user of this social network. Unlike MySpace and Facebook, Friendster has more specifically catered to the Philippine market by offering an interface in the native language, Tagalog.

In addition to social networks, older generation internet communication media such as e-mail subscriber lists have been utilised for political mobilisation. More recently, Twitter, the so-called “microblogging” site that limits transmissions to 140 characters, is also in vogue among the web-savvy. Meanwhile, uploading YouTube is a cost-free way of making viewpoints and campaign material available online in video format.

### ICT and the 2010 Elections

In the current election cycle, Philippine presidential campaigns have, to varying degrees, attempted to use cell phones and the internet to propagate their campaign messages. In contrast to the largely spontaneous use of cell phones during the Estrada ouster and the attempted Arroyo removal, these campaigns have tried to create targeted marketing messages. The following table enumerates which platforms the most Web-savvy presidential candidates have enlisted for their efforts:

	Email	Facebook	Friendster	Twitter*	Online Donations	YouTube	Others
Noynoy Aquino		Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Multiply
Dick Gordon	Yes	Yes		Yes	Yes	Yes	SMS
Jamby Madrigal		Yes		Yes		Yes	Scribe (Villar docs)
Gilbert Teodoro		Yes	Yes	Yes		Yes	MySpace
Manny Villar	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes		Yes	Multiply

\*Twitter messages can be accessed via SMS at users’ expense

It bears noting that merely using certain technologies is no guarantee of parity in terms of reach. For instance, far and away the leaders in terms of attracting Facebook followers are current front-runners Noynoy Aquino and Manny Villar who each have over 500,000 “fans.” Interconnectivity is another important consideration in deploying these technologies as they are often deployed in tandem. For instance, Facebook can host YouTube clips, while Twitter messages or “tweets” can link to virtually any webpage. The important point is that despite using a variety of platforms, handlers need to ensure that they send a consistent message tied to the campaign imagery they wish to create both online and offline. Among marketers, this effort falls under the rubric of integrated marketing communications or IMC. It can be as simple as Noynoy Aquino using yellow, the colour associated with his parents, in campaign paraphernalia. IMC thus requires a modicum of coordination—from flyers to hoardings, TV advertisements and websites.

The lack of online options for fundraising with few of the most web-savvy candidates having such features requires additional mention. Whereas online donations have made an impact in the two most recent US presidential elections, the same does not hold in the Philippines. In contrast to highly financialised America where a vast majority of citizens have credit cards or PayPal accounts, this is not the case in the Philippines where use of financial products is still not very widespread. Keeping in mind the inexpensive nature of establishing a web presence – sending e-mail, building social networking pages, and uploading YouTube clips for free – the paucity of candidates sending campaign messages by SMS is attributable to it being a costlier option in comparison to web-centric means of mass communication. Still, supporters keen on receiving their candidates' messages via cell phone can do so via Twitter, albeit at their own expense. While the internet may not yet reach as many voters as traditional media like radio and television, its appeal lies in its relative cost-effectiveness and broadening reach, as demonstrated by its ubiquity among current campaigns.

### Looking Forward, Looking Back

Effective deployment of ICT by the present candidates is clearly dependent on the diffusion of these technologies in the general population. Given the broad array of ICT platforms being used, the Philippine example may have transferable implications for political marketing in other LDC contexts as to what does and does not work. More ominously, the recent history of Philippine politics in which ICT (particularly cell phones) have played a key role suggests that their real impact may be in the election's aftermath as opposed to its run-up. Just as the open-ended nature of ICT can benefit candidates when properly harnessed during election campaigns, so ICT can turn against them when the spotlight moves away from the polls. The court of public opinion that ICT lends itself to has often played as much if not a more decisive role in contemporary Philippine politics than formal elections. In this respect, ICT is a quintessentially double-edged sword. ■

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