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Malaysia's Internet Blackout: Politicisation of Online Activism?

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Synopsis

The Internet Blackout Day in Malaysia last fortnight has caused the Najib administration to re-evaluate recent amendments to the Evidence Act. While this outcome may be interpreted as a success for online activism in the country, would a similar outcome have been achieved if the campaign had not been supported by the major Opposition parties?

Commentary

AN INTERNET Blackout Day was declared in Malaysia on 14 August, 2012. This was in protest against Section 114A of the recently-amended Evidence Act, which enables the authorities to act firmly against individuals who post defamatory, inflammatory and/or seditious content on the Internet.

The law not only holds the user/blogger potentially accountable for the offending post(s), but also any individual or organisation connected to the objectionable website or blog such as a person who: (a) owns, administers or edits the website; (b) is registered with the network service provider; and (c) is in custody or control of the computer at the time the offence was committed.

Curtailing Internet freedom through Section 114A?

These new amendments have alarmed many netizens and civil society groups because of the legislation's wide scope and the heavy onus placed on the accused to prove his/her innocence. Expectedly, many individuals have interpreted these amendments as an attempt by the Malaysian government to stifle internet freedom. The Stop 114A campaign was spearheaded by the Centre for Independent Journalism (CIJ), a civil society group, but it soon attracted support from several prominent civil society organisations, bloggers and Opposition parties.

In the wake of Internet Blackout Day, the Najib administration promised to re-evaluate Section 114A, with the Prime Minister assuring the public that "Whatever we do, we must put the people first". While this outcome may be interpreted as a success for online activism in Malaysia, the question this raises is whether such online activism can truly create an impact on its own, or whether it needs support from Opposition parties and political notables to do so.

"Bitroots" activism in Malaysia

The Internet Blackout Day was inspired by a similar campaign launched earlier this year in the United States. This was organised to protest the Protect IP Act (PIPA) and the Stop Online Piracy Act (SOPA), two bills aimed at curbing internet piracy by targeting foreign websites that commit or facilitate intellectual property theft. The bills would have given US authorities the right to compel US companies such as internet service providers, credit card companies and online advertisers to cut off ties with such websites.

While lawmakers expected both bills to be passed effortlessly through the US Congress, they encountered massive resistance from activists as well as major players in the IT industry. Google, Wikipedia and Reddit for example, blacked-out their websites on 18 January, 2012 in support of Internet Blackout Day. The strong support for the blackouts convinced many law-makers who had initially supported the anti-piracy bills to withdraw their support. This subsequently forced Congress to delay plans to enact the bills into law.

Online activism had suddenly become very powerful. As Larry Downes from Forbes Magazine, observed: (It was) “the introduction of the Washington establishment to “bitroots” activism, arising from a community of ordinary internet users that have used technology as tools to promote their cause”.

In contrast, the CIJ’s Internet Blackout Day in Malaysia did not attract enthusiastic support from industry players but gained backing from political heavyweights. These notables included Opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim (Parti Keadilan Rakyat [PKR]) and Lim Kit Siang, leader of the Democratic Action Party (DAP) as well as blogger Marina Mahathir, daughter of former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohammed. While it did have support from other civil society organisations as well as some private sector companies, the involvement of these notables, and the awareness and additional support they were able to generate, created momentum to sustain the CIJ’s campaign.

The Opposition parties, too, were politically advantaged by supporting the CIJ’s Internet Blackout Day. This was because they could: (a) portray themselves as being in sync with the people and the people’s wishes; (b) underscore their role as an effective check on the Government; (c) distinguish themselves ideologically and administratively from the ruling coalition; (d) emphasise their willingness to champion the people’s rights as well as what rights/values the party represented; and (e) increase their visibility. All these are important considerations for the Opposition with the general election expected to be called very soon.

Prudently, the Opposition parties (PKR and DAP) did not hijack the campaign but united in support of it. A united opposition is often well-perceived by the voters, and helps with possible coalition formation in the aftermath of elections.

Implications

Although online activism is seemingly gaining prominence in Malaysia, it does not appear to be taking the form of “bitroots” activism. This is where “the online community” struggles against “the establishment” as in the US case. The prominence of the Opposition parties in the CIJ’s campaign suggests that online activism, while initiated by ordinary individuals, is sustained by support from the major political parties, and hence, likely to be politicised in the end.

As there is much political capital to be gained from championing certain causes, Opposition parties might begin to align themselves more with interest groups and activists. They could also hijack existing causes or tacitly instigate groups to advocate and mobilise around specific causes.

In light of this possible eventuality, the incumbent Barisan Nasional coalition could find itself in a possible face-off with an emerging political combination of bitroots activists and the political opposition. Dealing effectively with this highly potent combination may well prove to be the most important challenge for the Malaysian government ahead of the next polls.

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