Malaysiakini

Malaysian Daily on the DotCom Path to Democracy

By Dr. M. Nadarajah*

Truth often poses a threat to (State) Power

Use the Internet explorer or Netscape navigator or any other search engine you like.Type www.malaysiakini.com or type www.malaysia.com.my. for its mirror site.

 You will, in an instant, be taken to a neat looking site with pleasant colours and informative reports on Malaysia. "Only the news that matters" may not catch your attention if you are not Malaysian or are not interested in the goings-on in Malaysia. However, it will capture the attention of a Malaysian who is looking for fair reports on their world. Malaysiakini dot com is really about the politics of "truth" in Malaysia. For "truth" , as the controversial filmmaker, Oliver Stone, suggests in his film, JFK, "often poses a threat to (state) power".

Malaysiakini, an independent bilingual news source and Malaysia's first professionally produced online newspaper on the Internet, offers anyone interested, alternative narratives on Malaysia that follow the convention that an increasing number of Malaysians as well as others see as constituting "independent journalism" (read " a journalism not guided by officialdom") and therefore as fair, honest and courageous. It is seen as taking an increasing number of readers closer to the "truth" of what is happening in Malaysia. That this is so, is clear when one considers the visitors per day to the site – this has increased from about 75,000 hits at the beginning of this year to about 110,000 today.

Malaysiakini came into existence at an opportune time in Malaysian political history. The sacking and arrest of deputy prime minister, Anwar Ibrahim, in 1998 set in motion a wave of protest and changes in Malaysia, all demanding "reformasi" (reformation, in particular political reformation). It brought many issues of critical importance into focus, covering socio-cultural, political, legal, economic and technological aspects. An issue of particular importance during the height of the Anwar episode was the behaviour of the mainstream media. Many Malaysians were suspect of the reliability, honesty and fairness of the mainstream Malaysian media, both print and electronic. It dawned on them that they are not going to get the "truth" in their mainstream media but only what the government wanted them to read or to know i.e the government's rendering of the "truth". Many did not want to read just one side of the story but the other side too. However, in mainstream media, the "other side" is almost always "demonised".

The Malaysian government has, over a period of time, gathered a large number of legal instruments which have been used to inhibit democratic involvement and deliberations by controlling spontaneous or non-governmental, active civil society-based collective action and through restricting communication and dissemination. Legislation like the Official Secrets Act

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(OSA) or the Printing Presses and Publications Act (PPPA) seek to control alternative rendering of "truth", disallowing people to arrive at the "truth" through deliberations and involvement. In addition, the Executive has also gained supremacy over the other arms of democratic constitution, in particular the Judiciary, severely affecting its impartiality. Truth had become an unfortunate casualty of the modernisation of Malaysia. The processes people could use to arrive at the truth were in serious jeopardy.

Malaysia's agressive Promotion for IT

The Anwar episode made many Malaysian actively turn to the international press for information about their country. However, something else was also emerging. And the PM Dr. Mahathir Mohamad had himself contributed to it. This was Malaysia's aggressive promotion of IT. Malaysia's encouragement of IT and the multi-media super-corridor (MSC) was to alter the basis for economic growth in Malaysia. However, the promotion of these technologies, in particular the Internet technologies, in its interaction with the political reality at the turn of the millennium and the "truth" seeking Malaysians made a pathway that helped recover and place in the hands of the people, the power to offer alternative renderings of truth. With the government's stand "no Net censorship" - basically to encourage investment - there was finally a way to get news uninfluenced by the government about Malaysia.

Internet activism in Malaysia took shape within the context of the Anwar episode. Both Mahathir and Anwar had inadvertently contributed to a new form of activism and dissemination of "truth". Within two or three months of the Anwar arrest in late September 1998, there were over 50 sites on Anwar and issues related to Anwar. Malaysians with Internet connection got their information online and those who had no access to computers and Internet, got photocopies of postings on the Net from their friends and reformasi activists. All this meant that there was a growing number of Malaysians who wanted news about their country reported to them without fear or favour. It is this opportune moment in Malaysia's political history that saw the birth of Malaysia's own online newspaper, Malaysiakini.

This dot com Enterprise was waiting to happen

Malaysiakini was founded by Steven Gan and Premesh Chandran. Both met when they were student activists in Australia. They returned to Malaysia in the mid-90s and worked in the newly formed English daily, the SUN. They of course believed that it would be an independent paper but to their disappointment they soon found out that the paper was "just as tame as the others". In 1997, they left the SUN and the local media scene. Premesh Chandran joined the Malaysian Trades Union Congress (MTUC) as a researcher. Steven Gan, who has been involved in the fight for press freedom for many years, went to Bangkok to work for one of the more independent papers in the region, the Nation (http://www.nationmultimedia.com). But they kept in touch.

An opportunity was in the making. Malaysia was in the midst of a political crisis after the sacking and arrest of Anwar Ibrahim. Internet technologies had become available. The government had promised no Net censorship to encourage investment. The mainstream media was faced with its worst credibility crisis. The 10th annual election was announced and was to

be held on November 29th. People were looking for fair news reports. Nine days before the election, on November 20th 1999, Malaysiakini was born. In the language of the market, there could have been no better time. This dot com enterprise was waiting to happen.

Malaysiakini was launched with a starting capital of RM$ 380,000 (US$ 100,000) from the South East Asian Press Alliance (SEAPA). SEAPA consists of journalist organisations from the three "free press" countries of Southeast Asia: Thailand, Indonesia and Philippines. It seeks to improve press freedom in their respective countries and help other countries in the region attain press freedom. Malaysiakini is its first big project. Since it went into action, Malaysiakini has grown from strength to strength. It is certainly seen as a model of independent journalism in Malaysia. A journalist with the online newspaper has even won an award from Reporters Sans Frontieres (RSF), (or Reporters without Borders), a French media-monitoring group. Malaysiakini commands respect and a lot of goodwill from other journalists, both local and foreign. Many established periodicals, both weeklies and fortnightlies have featured it, and all have promoted its popularity. As mentioned above, the site indicates a ballooning of the number of hits per day from the time it started.

Reservation among Journalists to work as an E-Journalist

The online paper is not without problems. To begin with, the government considers it as being a part of the "opposition-reformasi" group and not as a virtual media institution promoting independent journalism. Since it does not have to bother with getting an annual printing license, which is a must under the PPPA, it does not have to toe or be guided by the government's side of the story. Of course, this makes Malaysiakini's effort to get the government's side of the story in their reporting difficult. Permission to attend government functions has not been forthcoming. Many critics see the site as rumour-mongering or the mouthpiece of foreign powers. In addition to these problems, not many Malaysians have access to the online paper at the moment. The total number of Internet users hovers around 1.45 million with only about 600,000 Internet subscribers. Thus, only eleven percent of Malaysians have a private PC only six percent of which surf the WWW. This a very small number and is not sufficient to concern the government very seriously, for the moment at least. There are also problems in getting journalists to work for the paper. In spite of the fact that salaries match the going market rate. There is still reservation among journalists to work as an e-journalist as well as for a paper that is mistakenly seen as crudely anti-government and therefore incapable of offering a stable career option.

Troubling Finances

Financing the paper has been another major issue. There have been attempts to buy the newspaper. Steven Gan for instance, has been offered amounts of between RM 2 to RM 5 million by venture capitalists. Not completely against this idea, Steven Gan does not intend to give more than 20% to pure commercial interests. The paper has been toying with a number of other ideas to make itself financially strong and viable.

For instance, it intends to launch an "Invest in Press Freedom" fund. Readers can donate a small sum of money, which can later be converted into shares. Another idea is to set up a

foundation by supporters of the online newspaper. As of now, Malaysiakini is not operating without income. The present advertising revenue is about RM 10, 000 a month. However, all this is not enough for a move into the next phase of greater contribution to independent journalism, a phase that requires, according to Steven Gan, over RM 3 million.More problems. Much to the disappointment of many surfers who have come to depend on Malaysiakini, this announcement was found at the site at the end of July 2000: "Excessive traffic flow had triggered a shutdown of Malaysiakini's server on Monday, July 24th. We have changed to a new server and it will take a few days to go online. We apologise for the inconvenience caused". The newspaper was inaccessible for a few days. Many thought that the powers-that-be were behind the problem. Not so, announced an editorial. It was because of the unscrupulous US-based web host. Because of this problem of hosting the site, Malaysiakini is now testing its own server. Very recently, its mirror site at www.malaysiakini.com.my was hacked. The hacker identified as "The Immorale Xeno's" left the following message: "Do we need a morale (sic) code? No, we don't".

Net becomes Battleground for Truth

Even with all these problems, Malaysiakini does not show any signs of being an organisation waiting to move into oblivion. It has not become a part of the "world wide cob-web", as have many. They are, as it is said "going strong". With growing Internet activism, perhaps the only present danger one needs to look out for involves the growing attempt by many governments to develop surveillance technology and to control - not regulate - the internet. The Net has become a battleground for "truth". In the constitution of the "truth", many players have come to limit the monologue narratives of authoritarian power. Malaysiakini is one of them.

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