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In Malaysia's 12th general election, in March 2008, three opposition parties collectively cracked the hegemony of the ruling coalition, Barisan Nasional (BN, or National Front). As the opposition parties formed a coalition called Pakatan Rakyat (PR, or People's Alliance), a two-coalition system appeared to have taken shape. This essay analyzes how PR reached that electoral outcome by moving from "imagining" to "realizing" dissent. Imagining and realizing dissent are not treated as disparate acts here but as tasks borne by qualitatively different networks that helped PR to overcome its structural, organizational, and resource disadvantages. The first networks considered are the cyber-networks that used ICT-sited or -enabled links to construct an alternative media linking PR's organizers and supporters in an imagined community of dissent. PR's second type of network consisted of physical coalitions—groups and organizations that connected the PR parties with their allies in civil society and their supporters at large. Their common objective was to mobilize dissent for electoral contestation. Even after 2008, however, PR was vulnerable to regime harassment and blandishments because it was missing a third type of network that would link party structures and social, community, and civic associations. By analyzing PR's networks, this essay offers a fresh perspective on the travails of building a two-coalition system.

Keywords: Malaysia, 2008 general election, Pakatan Rakyat, cyber-networks, two-coalition system

In Malaysia's 12th general election, held on March 8, 2008, 49 percent of the electorate voted for the non-formalized opposition coalition—made up of Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR, or People's Justice Party), Parti Islam (PAS, or Islamic Party), and Democratic Action Party (DAP)—and finally cracked the hegemonic hold of the ruling coalition, Barisan Nasional (BN, or National Front). The opposition made electoral history by winning 82 of 222 seats in Parliament, thus denying the BN its customary two-thirds

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majority. Among the 11 states in Peninsular Malaysia, the principal political arena, the combined opposition that later formalized its coalition with the name of Pakatan Rakyat (PR, or People's Alliance) took control of the state governments of Kedah, Kelantan, Penang, Perak, and Selangor. In fact, the opposition won 10 of 11 parliamentary seats in Kuala Lumpur; but the national capital, by virtue of being a Federal Territory, continued to be administered by the BN-led federal government.

By the standards of Malaysian elections, the regime had been struck by the most destructive wave of voter dissent or the most disastrous convergence of socio-political conditions ever—hence the popular use of the terms "tsunami" and "perfect storm"[1] to depict the outcome of the election. No doubt, the two metaphors had to be used with care. A genuine political tsunami would have swept the BN from power altogether. And a perfect storm would not have completely bypassed Sabah and Sarawak.

Even so, a watershed had been reached and a two-coalition system might finally have taken shape within Malaysian politics. Since 1990, various dissident parties had envisaged and striven to establish such a system (Khoo 2003, 159–164). But only the present opposition—hereafter PR (unless clearly inapposite)—had actually advanced toward that goal in 2008. To put it differently, one might say that PR had progressed from imagining to realizing dissent, no matter that PR had a long way to go before reaching its ultimate goal of supplanting BN in governing the country. To be sure, it would not do to cast imagination and realization as two disparate acts occurring in strictly demarcated phases. But imagining and realizing dissent may be depicted as two principal tasks to clarify certain qualitative differences between the networks that helped PR in its progression to the tsunami in 2008 from Reformasi in 1999, the latter being the inchoate movement of dissent triggered by mass outrage against the maltreatment of Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim—sacked by Prime Minister Dr. Mahathir Mohamad on September 2, expelled by UMNO (United Malays National Organization) on September 3, and imprisoned by the regime from September 20 (*ibid.*, 100–108).

The first networks to consider are the cyber-networks, which broadly included the information and communication technology (ICT)-sited or -enabled links between e-mail lists, discussion groups, Web sites, online media, online forums, blogs, text messages, etc. These cyber-networks were able to perform some crucial functions, from gathering information to disseminating reports, from rallying opinion to rebutting official claims, and from questioning mainstream news reporting to constructing alternative media. In

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1) The use of the term, exhilarating for some, recalled the utter shock the terrible tsunami of December 26, 2004 held for a nation that had hitherto been spared natural disasters of that kind or scale. For the allusion to a perfect storm, see Steven Gan, Editorial, *Malaysiakini*, March 9, 2010, accessed March 10, 2010.

short, PR's cyber-networks wove a web of counter-hegemonic discourses that helped the coalition's organizers, allies, and supporters to imagine themselves as a community of dissent.

PR's second type of network consisted of physical coalitions. The term, despite its lexical imprecision, refers to various groupings and organizations having different structures and degrees of cohesion, which brought together PR parties, their allies in civil society, and their supporters at large. These coalitions—themselves offline and ground-level networks of people—were formed for a range of political actions that extended from issuing informal appeals to joining ad hoc activities, participating in structured events, and making highly organized interventions. The common objective of these actions was to realize dissent through electoral contestation.

I   Cyber-Networks and a Community of Dissent

In the wake of the tsunami, Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi conceded that BN had lost the "cyberspace war."[2] Perhaps Abdullah was being self-serving when he paid that backhanded compliment to PR's cyber-networks, which had battled the pro-state print and broadcast media and sought to offset the structural advantages in electoral competition that BN enjoyed after a half-century's exercise of power.[3] The regime did not earnestly rein in the ICT-based alternative media, notably by threatening to use the notorious Internal Security Act, for several reasons. Mahathir had given a no-censorship guarantee when he launched the internationally targeted Multimedia Super Corridor project in 1996. Moreover, the regime grudgingly accepted that the Internet could not be effectively censored or policed. (Hence, for example, Mahathir merely advised Malaysian Internet users to be guided by their own values when surfing.) Beyond that, BN had overvalued its monopoly of the print and broadcast media, which were controlled via selective ownership of press and broadcasting stations, tight regulation, and constant oversight. As Abdullah admitted, "We thought the newspapers, the print media, the television were important but young people were looking at text messages and blogs."[4] Yet, UMNO had not neglected the Internet. In fact, UMNO had set up a "new media unit" of "cyber-troopers" that "managed to balance the game" against the Opposition

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2) "Internet Served a Painful Lesson," *New Straits Times*, March 26, 2008.
3) It was self-serving to the extent that it diverted attention from the non-technological causes of BN's losses. Disgruntled UMNO figures blamed Abdullah's poor leadership and forced his resignation as prime minister and UMNO president a year later.
4) "Internet Served a Painful Lesson," *New Straits Times*, March 26, 2008.

back in 2004, only "to lag behind . . . unaware the landscape had changed in 2008. It was no longer write-ups, there were a lot of slanderous pictures and videos, that's why we got knocked out" (Aw 2012).[5]

The origins of dissident cyber-networks lay in the politics of Reformasi. Tech-savvy dissidents set up numerous pro-Reformasi e-mail discussion groups, Web sites, and online forums, many linked to one another.[6] They did this out of compulsion, resorting to new forms of IT-based media, aware that the opposition parties and civil society dissidents had been routinely misrepresented, maligned, or shut out by the state-controlled mass media. But they also did it by choice since their expressions and reports of anti-regime activity as well as state repression could be disseminated far more effectively, quickly, experimentally, and creatively.

Reformasi brought an unintended fulfillment of the regime's slogan, *Cintai IT!* (Love IT!), as the Reformasi-minded and the merely curious surfed the Internet to post information, access materials, and connect with other people. Soon Reformasi Web sites carried countless and diverse postings, including announcements of Reformasi events; reproductions and translations of news reports; unofficial transcripts of Anwar's trial proceedings and transcripts of interviews; press releases and eyewitness accounts of protests and public events; economic and political analyses; summaries of public talks; letters, appeals for support, petitions, and reminders on voter registration; rebuttals of official statements, diatribes against leading politicians, denunciations of senior public officials, and accusations against corporate figures; police reports and copies of official and purportedly official documents; poems, modern fables, photographs, and cartoons; and recordings of speeches and video clips. Of course, not all the material was verifiably correct or honest. How could it be in a climate of heightened politics and spreading anger? Suffice it to note that "[i]mpressions, fears, opinions, and conclusions are all traded equally on the Web" (Ayres 1999, 141). Moreover, an immeasurable amount of Internet material was downloaded, circulated by e-mail, reproduced in what print media existed for the Reformasi movement, and redistributed in the form of facsimiles and photocopies to those not connected to the Internet.

Many characteristics of cyberspace elsewhere probably fit these cyber-networks. Within the cyber-networks, those who chose to could remain unnamed and yet go public, and show no identity but still belong. They included people who managed Web sites with names such as Mahafiraun (Great Pharaoh) or Mahazalim (Great Tyrant) that derided

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5) The leader of the UMNO New Media Unit said he had trained "around 1,800 members in social media use since being put in charge in 2010" (quoted in Aw 2012).
6) Tan (2010, 291–296) gives a detailed list of pro-Reformasi Web sites.

their target—Mahathir. Likewise, free of censorship but not liberated from worries of state retribution, some well-known Web sites were anonymously maintained, in Malaysia or abroad. Yet their designations made clear the concerns and objectives of those who maintained, supported, and visited them: *Laman Reformasi* (Reformasi Web site), *Jiwa Merdeka* (Soul of Independence), *Anwar Online*, and *freemalaysia*. Whereas many people might well have been nervous about the risks of ground-level dissident activity, they could probably imagine engaging in dissent on the Internet precisely because, there, to engage was to imagine. The cyber-networks were not wholly faceless, though. There were Web sites of established opposition parties and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). Other sites had well-publicized bloggers, such as Sabri Zain (*Reformasi Diary*), and webmasters, such as Raja Petra Kamaruddin (*The Malaysian* and *Kini*). These activists disdained concealing their names or goals; instead, they moved between the Street and the Net, striving to bridge any gulf between the imagined and physical communities.

The connections between the Internet, broadly conceived, and dissident politics since Reformasi have been variously discussed (Abbott 2001; Hilley 2001; Khoo 2003; Brown 2004; 2005; George 2006; Tan and Zawawi 2008; Steele 2009; Tan 2010). Yet, it is crucial here to orientate the discussion in a new direction by noting how dissident post-Reformasi cyber-networks fostered and strengthened a sense of community among those who had diverse motivations for opposing the regime and supporting the opposition as the 2008 general election approached. It may not be necessary to be able to tell precisely "when to apply the label 'community' to . . . resulting [Internet] interactions" (Bimber 1998, 146). But it was essential that the cyber-networks steadily occupied a "continuum of communities, identities, and networks . . . from the most cohesive to the most diffuse"[7] by drawing in and linking to political parties, NGOs, alternative media, different groups, and countless individuals. Besides, those who engaged with the cyber-networks availed themselves of the

> powerful counterhegemonic use of the Internet . . . [its] ability to communicate intersubjective knowledge—as much an attribute of hypertext as innate in the Internet. People from different places, with radically variant experiences, are able to convey a notion of what it is like to be them, to live their lives, via the Net. (Warf and Grimes 1997, 267)

Applied to Malaysia's multi-ethnic society, the Internet's ability "to communicate

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7) ". . . [T]he distinction of real and imagined or virtual community is not a useful one, and that an anthropological approach is well suited to investigate the continuum of communities, identities, and networks that exist—from the most cohesive to the most diffuse—regardless of the ways in which community members interact" (Wilson and Peterson 2002, 462).

intersubjective knowledge," facilitated by the surfing quality of Internet exploration, might have reduced sociocultural distances to some degree. Without extensive surveys, however, no one could reliably establish the density of such boundary-crossing networks. Even so, Internet users who habitually moved from one site to a wholly different one, culturally speaking, were likely to have virtually crossed rural-urban, interethnic, and interreligious divides. In the process, their practices had a good chance of moderating the alien feel to the physical communities they met or, just as often, did not meet in everyday life. Such cyber-crossings could diminish with time. At crucial moments of heightened dissent—during Reformasi and 2007–08—they could intensify the sense of belonging to an imagined community of dissent.

Sabri Zain's *Reformasi Diary* was an outstanding example of how to manage "intersubjective knowledge" creatively and responsibly. Entry after entry in the diary recorded how, energized and transformed by Reformasi, "someone like him" could move between the Street and the Net, so to speak, from participating earnestly in protests and demonstrations to uploading eyewitness accounts conscientiously thereafter. On the ground, the crossings of sociocultural divides were daily multiplying in ways almost unimaginable before Reformasi (Khoo 2002). Elderly Chinese read PAS's party organ, *Harakah*; the Selangor Chinese Town Hall Civil Rights Committee forum featured an all-Malay panel; Malays in large numbers attended the "Chinese" DAP forums; dissenting Malays kept a vigil for DAP's Lim Guan Eng, whose defense of an underage Malay girl had led him to prison; and the oft-arrested and severely bashed Tian Chua emerged as a hero to the predominantly Malay protesters (Sabri 2000). On the Internet, as an observer of Reformasi was to say later, the linking of the opposition's Web sites could encourage

> greater interaction and negotiation between supporters of Malaysia's often divided opposition. A PAS supporter in Kelantan may have little inclination or opportunity to engage with the West Coast, Chinese-based DAP. One click, however, can bring him from the PAS Web site to the DAP's. Arguably, this represents the greatest counterhegemonic potential of the Internet for the opposition. (Brown 2004, 88)

Thus, for a civil society easily fragmented along ethnic and cultural lines, the cyber-networks permitted dissidence (and dissidents) increasingly to imagine itself (and themselves) a community unified by dissent rather than one split by dominant, narrowly communitarian narratives that served authoritarian purposes.

Even so, it would be judicious not to overrate the impact of Internet intervention in the political process between Reformasi and the tsunami. The proliferating pro-Reformasi Web sites, tentatively indicative of the opposition's edge over the regime on the Web, failed to win the wired, tech-savvy urban voters to the opposition's cause in the

November 1999 election. Instead, it was the mostly "un-hooked," rural Malay electorate placed at the poorer end of the urban-rural digital divide—and customarily captive to state-owned or -controlled broadcast and print media[8)]—that swung heavily against UMNO (Maznah 2003). At the 2004 general election, moreover, despite facing four and a half more years of expanding Internet penetration, growing sophistication of users, and improving quality of counter-hegemonic Web sites, BN (newly led by Abdullah Badawi) gained its largest ever victory. Anwar's party, as some regarded PKR, was reduced to a single parliamentary seat that was retained by his wife, Dr. Wan Azizah Wan Ismail. To compound the dissidents' disappointment, the strenuous, even heroic, efforts of the online Free Anwar Campaign and its kindred Web sites raised domestic and international awareness of Anwar's plight, but he remained in prison for six years.

It might be briefly noted that the Reformasi milieu had been greatly dampened by various developments. In the 1999 election PAS and, to a lesser extent, PKR inflicted considerable losses on UMNO. But the opposition coalition (Barisan Alternative, BA, or Alternative Front) failed to dent BN's domination, principally because DAP made no headway among the non-Malay voters (who rallied to Mahathir just as they had done in 1995). Not only was Anwar in prison, but leading Reformasi figures were swept into detention without trial in 2000. Not long after, growing differences between DAP and PAS, somewhat exacerbated by the worldwide repercussions of September 11, led to DAP's departure from BA, thus leaving the coalition moribund.[9)] The Malay cultural revolt that sparked Reformasi failed to ignite a nationwide revolt, thus confining the imagined community of dissent as much as it restricted political dissent as a whole. Between 2000 and 2004, the number of blogs and Web sites grew tremendously without being able to reshape the unfavorable political reality. After all, "[i]nter-networked computers are cultural products that exist in the social and political worlds within which they were developed, and they are not exempt from the rules and norms of those worlds" (Wilson and Peterson 2002, 462). In that political ebb, the prospects for reform having receded, the cyber-networks of dissent that Reformasi inspired lost their vibrancy.

Yet, two nodes were separately formed that helped to lay the basis of a resurgence of the cyber-networks. One node was *Malaysiakini*, the country's first online news portal, which Steven Gan and Premesh Chandran founded on the eve of the November

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8) In one of those twists that give the lie to the regime's presumed ability to control the popular imagination at will, this "Malay heartland" was revolted rather than persuaded by the media's incessant and lurid depictions of Anwar's supposed crimes.

9) Just as Gagasan Rakyat expired after the 1990 election, although DAP performed well then whereas Semangat 46 failed to win sufficient Malay support.

1999 general election and positioned as Malaysia's first independent and professional online news service (Steele 2009, 107–108). *Malaysiakini* provided, in its own words, "only the news that matters." Like the proverbial Internet start-up, *Malaysiakini* began with its founders' very limited personal finances and some external funding support. But it had plenty of goodwill from an informal pro-Reformasi network that included a diasporic following. Within about six months of its commencement, *Malaysiakini* saw its average daily number of viewers reach 100,000 (five times its target for the first year). Its peak number of 319,000 viewers was recorded on August 8, 2000, the day of the verdict on Anwar Ibrahim's trial on corruption charges (Tong 2004, 283). Hence, *Malaysiakini* had become an "E-zine news media" Web site that would

> develop and present original content using traditional journalism approaches. Staff editors create some of the core content by assigning fresh news stories or analysis pieces to paid contributors with journalistic training and experience. E-zines may salt this core content with links to other media, streamed audio and video segments, discussion forums, blogs, and so on. (Beers 2006, 117)

By providing space for readers' letters, popular comments, and guest columns, *Malaysiakini* became a hub with expanding links to subscribing readers, freeloading surfers, NGOs, political parties, and, so to speak, other refugees from the controlled mass media. The last named group intriguingly included some mainstream reporters with whom *Malaysiakini* discreetly maintained a symbiotic relationship: those mainstream reporters would sometimes share news materials with *Malaysiakini* reporters (when the latter were shut out of official events) or even supply *Malaysiakini* with copy they could not publish in their own newspapers (Steele 2009, 104). Over time, by adding a TV section loaded with video presentations, *Malaysiakini* became more multimedia. By adding free sections in Malay, Mandarin, and Tamil, it became multilingual, comparatively more national (if not fully Malaysian in the full scope of major languages) than the typical monolingual Malaysian newspaper, and closer to broadcast media having services in different languages. Since it declined to follow the controlled media's proclivity for suppressing news on sensitive issues, dissenting views, and criticisms of the regime, *Malaysiakini* was periodically harassed by the authorities. In one infamous incident, when the editors refused to reveal the name of a letter-writer, the police raided *Malaysiakini* and confiscated all its computers. As so often happens, the petty and futile state harassment only heightened *Malaysiakini*'s credibility and hardened its network's opposition to the regime.

In an instructive ethnographic study of *Malaysiakini*, Janet Steele rejects "the popular belief that it is the Internet that challenges the Barisan Nasional's stranglehold on power"; instead, she concludes that "the norms and values of independent journalism

. . . made *Malaysiakini* such a threat to government authorities" (*ibid.*, 108). But, surely, it was minimally the Internet and independent journalism at work: in the prevailing circumstances, a print or regular broadcast version of *Malaysiakini* was simply inconceivable. In general, it has been argued:

> What makes cyberspace so different . . . from the rest of the capital-intensive, mass media such as television, newspapers, radio, or cinema is not which discourse is dominant—for market-popularity is dominant in all technologically based mass forums—but, rather, that cyberspace alone is very cheap to enter. (Whitaker 2004, 474)

Consequently, "this cheapness . . . renders the Internet, unlike any other mass medium, open to identity-resistance popular activity that is almost unfiltered" (*ibid.*). What made cyberspace attractive elsewhere made it attractive and empowering for the pioneering venture of *Malaysiakini*: relative "cheapness,"[10] and insulation from censorship and suppression. More than that, as the controlled media steadily lost credibility it also lost its former status of an undisputed official voice. Faced with the state's near-monopoly of the media, enforced in various ways, the task for alternative non-state media is

> to somehow circumvent this media near-monopoly by creating an alternative "local media" and an alternative "official voice." . . . Simply creating an alternative "public sphere" . . . and then trying to flood the state or the world with its contrary identity-resistance popularity via "community" owned newspapers and radio stations would not do. (*ibid.*, 491)

In its design (as an online news service), by its practice (of journalistic autonomy), through its association (with anti-government blogging conferred by official harassment), and via its interactivity (with a believing and contributing audience), *Malaysiakini* was "pro-Opposition by default" (Brown 2004, 85) and more. It emerged as an unofficial "official voice" of the cyber-networks of anti-authoritarian resistance.

A second node was formed when Raja Petra Kamaruddin created *Malaysia Today* in 2004. RPK, as a devoted following affectionately later called Raja Petra, ran several series of political analyses and commentaries, namely *No Holds Barred*, *The Corridors of Power*, and *The Khairy Chronicles*. Tireless and prolific, RPK brought to *Malaysia Today* the tough attitude he had demonstrated in running the Free Anwar Campaign. Within the cyber-networks, RPK became a legendary blogger. Yet, he could be more accurately characterized as one of a "small subset of bloggers [who] assign themselves the role

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10) That *Malaysiakini* began with very limited financial resources makes this point the more persuasive. Yet, one should not exaggerate the point of cheap entry—at any rate, cheaply sustainable presence—because the commercial threat *Malaysiakini* faced was, arguably, not less than the obvious political one (Brown 2005, 47).

of news source, analyst, and interpreter . . . electronic pamphleteers, self-appointed editor/commentators who use their own highly selective filter to note, deconstruct, annotate, and re-spin news items produced elsewhere" (Beers 2006, 118). It was not reliance on "news items produced elsewhere" that made *Malaysia Today* the most popular blog in Malaysia. It was, rather, RPK's relentless outpouring of exposés of alleged corruption and wrongdoings in high places. By Malaysian standards, RPK had no peer in uncovering plots and revealing conspiracies, naming names and detailing links, and providing documentation that, if genuine, could only have been leaked by deep throats, wherever these were placed. Not only did RPK constantly taunt power that was tainted by scandals, he obstinately dismissed threats of litigation and police action.

An internationally known campaigner for Anwar's freedom who had been briefly detained under the Internal Security Act, RPK asked no one's leave to criticize opposition politicians and leaders, including Anwar.[11] Not for nothing had this half-Malay, half-Welsh scion of a minor branch of Malay royalty been motorcycle-loving in his youth. No other blogger had RPK's attitude: he would bash or mock Malays and Muslims (even though he was one of them) and Chinese (even though his wife was one of them) and Indians or others (even if it was politically incorrect to do so). Yet, he showed something of a libertarian tolerance, albeit spiced with sarcasm and scolding, toward the acerbic, bigoted, or obscene among his followers. As RPK took on an iconic status within the cyber-networks, the blogrolls of other Web sites increasingly linked to *Malaysia Today*. Over time, *Malaysia Today* added news reports from domestic and international media, while several well-known bloggers and guest columnists, writing in English and Malay, linked their output to *Malaysia Today*.

Within two years of its existence, *Malaysia Today* had become the most popular blog, far and away the single most influential blog in the Malaysian cyber-networks of dissent. At heart, RPK's rise to fame bears out the observation that "the irreverent personal voice that tends to thrive on the Internet is well suited to puncturing claims of authority designed to suppress debate" (*ibid.*, 124). But no other dissenting Malaysian of the period—including Amir Muhammad in his sarcastic newspaper column, Sabri Zain through his biting online diary, or Zunar with his furious cartoons—had made such powerful use of such an incorrigibly irreverent attitude! There was a muckraking core

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11) At the *Dialog dengan Persatuan-persatuan* (Dialogue with Societies), Sunway Hotel, Penang, June 4, 2006, a member of the audience asked Anwar for his response to RPK's complaint that Anwar had been recently quiet on critical issues. Anwar replied, "Petra supported me via the Free Anwar Campaign, then *Malaysia Today*. Now he makes this bit of criticism. Give him some credit. He has a right to disagree. He represents the kind of media (policy) we should have." This statement is based on the author's notes from the *Dialog*.

to RPK, but there was more to *Malaysia Today* than muckraking. Although it was not a party organ or addressed to organized groups of people, *Malaysia Today* regularly put forth RPK's challenges to his readers and PR supporters to determine and carry out what was to be done to eject the present regime. It has been suggested that "[i]f muckraking asks 'what went wrong yesterday, and who is to blame?' then future-focused journalism asks 'what might go right tomorrow and who is showing the way?'" (*ibid.*, 121). One could say of RPK and *Malaysia Today* that their "future-focused journalism," sharpened by a highly personalized style of dissident discourse, intuitively spoke to the cyber-networks' online anti-regime and pro-change yearnings otherwise burdened offline by impotent rage.

Most certainly, *Malaysiakini* and *Malaysia Today* do not—and cannot—represent the spectrum of views, opinions, and sentiments expressed in the large number of Web sites and blogs that were central to the dissident cyber-networks. But the foci of these two vastly popular sites went to the heart of the dissident discourses of the time: cleanse and reform the public institutions. To put it lightly, if one craved for news that was hidden from public view, one hooked onto *Malaysiakini*,[12] but for the lowdown on dirt in high places, one turned to RPK. Above all, *Malaysiakini* and *Malaysia Today* illustrated the influential roles that two successful nodes performed in keeping the dissident community visible in cyberspace, and imagined to be intact, which was all the more crucial as offline political contestation favored the regime.

II Physical Coalitions

Suddenly the tsunami struck, and evidently a new appreciation of the power of the Internet dawned: "Journalists, commentators, and parliamentarians themselves credited—or blamed—the Internet. With five well-known bloggers elected to Parliament, the election of 2008 seemed to spell an unambiguous victory for online media" (Steele 2009, 91). What had happened to make PR's cyber-networks so seemingly effective now? An important answer lies in their synergistic connection to another form of network—the physical coalition to realize dissent through ground-level mobilization, organization, and contestation.

In 2007, a critical year, three large-scale marches and protests took place in Kuala Lumpur, each the work of a new coalition of dissent and anti-regime protest (Khoo 2007).

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12) Thus did *Malaysiakini* successfully compete with the international media for reporting what was not reported by the domestic media.

There was a 2,000-strong "Lawyers' March" to the Palace of Justice, Putrajaya, on September 26. On November 10, there was a 40,000-strong BERSIH (Gabungan Pilihanraya Bersih dan Adil, or Coalition for Clean and Fair Elections) rally that proceeded to the Palace to deliver a petition to the King. Finally, a "Hindu" rally of about 30,000 protestors took place on November 25.

The Lawyers' March was led by the Bar Council and supported by NGOs and opposition parties. The marchers called for the head of the then Chief Justice for his alleged complicity in the manipulation of senior judicial appointments, including his very own. Exasperated with the unabated suspicions of deep corruption within the judiciary, the protesting lawyers and social activists demanded an end to the debasement and subversion of a key institution of state. The BERSIH rally wound its way from different locations in Kuala Lumpur to the Istana Negara (National Palace) to hand a petition to the King. BERSIH and the participants of the rally demanded a cleansing of the electoral system to break the crippling shackles the opposition experienced in every election. The Hindu rally, called by the newly organized Hindu Rights Action Front (HINDRAF), drew its supporters predominantly from Indians (but not necessarily Hindus) who converged on Kuala Lumpur from different parts of the country. Their destination was the British High Commission, where the HINDRAF leaders had prepared to hand a petition to Queen Elizabeth II, ostensibly to appeal for the historical restitution of the rights of Indian indentured labor that the colonial state had imported into British Malaya. In effect, HINDRAF protested "Indian marginalization"[13] and neglect under the present regime.

Each event of protest was organized around an ad hoc network of dissidence. For the lawyers, the Bar Council had traditionally been the hub of the legal profession. On the matter of the reform of the judiciary, successive executive committees of the Bar Council had rallied the profession, strongly supported by many NGOs and the opposition since the first judicial crisis of 1988. The BERSIH coalition was new in name and the specific demands it made. But the coalition's main movers, opposition parties and established NGOs, had been pressing in vain for basic changes to the electoral system that would level the playing field for a long-disadvantaged opposition. Only HINDRAF was truly new. Its protest against conditions of Indian marginalization was not in itself startling: NGO activists, the Malaysian Socialist Party, academics, and even some BN politicians had raised, disputed, and organized around the issue, without agreement on how to frame or resolve it. There was, arguably, even less agreement on HINDRAF's decision to pose the issue as a Hindu matter, but that became a non-issue with non-Hindu

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13) Since not just HINDRAF leaders but many NGO activists and politicians use "Indian marginalization" to describe the "Indian condition," this phrase is maintained here although its meanings are not entirely clear.

Indians and non-Indians who chose to support the HINDRAF rally.[14)] The HINDRAF demand for the restitution of socioeconomic grievances going back to colonial labor policies was novel for not adhering to the standard, dominant narratives of interethnic socioeconomic inequalities in Malaysia that set assumed Malay political power against Chinese economic power. The newness of HINDRAF lay in its eruption as a social movement, its strong interjection into the political process as almost an Indian Reformasi, and its rejection of the Malaysian Indian Congress as the accepted representative of the Indian community within BN.

The slogans of the Bar Council, BERSIH, and HINDRAF marches varied, and the phraseology of their protests differed. But their underlying messages had much in common: judicial reform, electoral reform, social reform. The marchers came from different backgrounds: mostly lawyers in the first march, mostly Malays in the second, and predominantly Indians in the third. Together, the three marches extended the boundaries of dissent beyond those of Reformasi itself. Now Reformasi experiences were relived. The regime responded to the BERSIH and HINDRAF rallies with police repression and violent assaults on peaceful mass protests. In turn, the popular resentment loosened the BN's hold on the Malay vote that had been retrieved by Abdullah's "de-Mahathirizing" administration, and on the Indian vote. No "Chinese" rally of any size was organized. But, ironically, the Chinese support that had saved Mahathir and UMNO from the Malay voters' revolt in 1999 was fast fading, too. By 2007, UMNO had so brazenly expressed its disregard for non-Malay sensitivities—summed up by its leaders' open boasts that *ketuanan Melayu* (Malay supremacy) would be upheld, that the New Economic Policy would be retained, and that the Malay Agenda was timeless[15)]—that Chinese voters were ready to punish BN, especially by drubbing its Chinese-based parties that would not—or could not—curb UMNO's excesses. From then on, the opposition and its dissident allies exploited further advances in ICT to produce more penetrative Internet-based audiovisual media and maintain more densely linked dissident cyber-networks to disseminate the messages and appeals of the opposition and extend its public reach.

As a ruling coalition of ethnic parties, dominating a severely gerrymandered electoral system, BN used to profit from an asynchronous pattern of ethnic opposition,

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14) Jeyakumar Devaraj (2007) made a notable case for urging class solidarity with the "marginalized" while criticizing an ethnic appeal to Indians. For a different view of the political significance of HINDRAF, see Khoo (2007).

15) Officially replaced by a National Development Policy in 1991, the NEP, originally scheduled to end in 1990, was never terminated in practice. But with a difficult recovery from the 1997–98 financial and economic crises, Malay political and business elites wanted to keep, and even extend, NEP's "restructuring" that discriminated against non-Malays. As for a Malay Agenda, no one really knew what it meant beyond a chauvinistic assertion of the special position of Malays in the country.

whereby extensive Malay and non-Malay voter disaffection tended to emerge in different elections. Moments of Malay and Chinese electoral revolts converged only once, in 1969.[16] Critically, they did not in 1990 or 1999, when anti-regime sentiment ran very high (Khoo 2003, 160). But by the beginning of 2008, BN's electoral coalition had frayed as never before. As rumors swirled of an early general election, the all-important question was whether a new dissident coalition could form to do serious battle with the BN.

"At certain historical moments and under specific political, economic, and communicational circumstances," it has been suggested, "a certain node attracts many links and becomes a hub, which in turn tends to attract more links" (Hau and Shiraishi 2009, 335). By that imagery of network formation, Anwar Ibrahim, an isolated node upon his release from prison in late 2004, returned to the political scene at the 2007–08 juncture, as a hub "connecting communities of links (i.e., people of sometimes different political persuasions) across time and space, in ways that create the potential for people within the network (who [might] not necessarily know each other) to link up with each other" (*ibid.*). Several factors made Anwar the ideal hub of spreading networks of opposition. He had spent much of his political career leading networks and coalitions of dissent—as a student leader during the Baling protests of 1974, as president of Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia coordinating the anti-Societies Act movement of 1981, and as the icon of Reformasi in 1999 (Khoo 2003, 86–96). In 2008, he was strategically placed to act as the fulcrum about which would turn the opposition parties, the BERSIH coalition, HINDRAF, and the cyber-networks. It was obvious to partisans and observers alike then that only a new second coalition of opposition parties might take advantage of BN's fraying coalition. Not only did Anwar resume formal politics, but in doing so he retrieved for the imagined community of dissent the combative spirit and purpose of Reformasi and supplied the link that BA missed in 1999 precisely because he was in prison. Finally, if ever different tendencies and programs went in search of an ideological hub, those associated with PAS, DAP, PKR, and HINDRAF's political offshoot that called itself Makkal Sakhti (People's Power) found one in Anwar, who now proffered a more inclusive "New Malaysian Agenda" of institutional reform, multiculturalism, and social justice for all.

III   Missing Links

In the run-up to the 12th general election, the cyber-networks and the physical coalitions

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16) On the whole, Indian voters had been loyal to BN despite the presence of many outstanding Indian oppositionists in the nation's electoral history; by the beginning of the twenty-first century, BN had come to take Indian support for granted.

of dissent campaigned with the full array of tools available in cyberspace—mobile phones, e-mail, blogs, Web sites—and the interventions of an enlarging corps of Web site managers, online professional journalists, bloggers, netizens, commentators, and, simply, mobile-phone owners who were simultaneously angry voters. Between them, these networks and coalitions deployed text messages, e-mail lists, Internet postings, and video clips to overcome the controlled media's reflexive shutout of the opposition. People who had not previously imagined themselves to be dissidents sent appeals for funding, relayed notices of opposition events, forwarded campaign materials, and transmitted calls for volunteer workers and polling observers. Old-school networks were activated and diasporic contacts established through cyberspace. The cyber-networks and physical coalitions converged. At times the meetings were tangential; they merely linked people on the margins of politics to activists they knew personally. For most people, the convergences were brief, as when they attended the opposition's election rallies and events during the campaign period. Nor was it unusual for contacts to remain mostly within cyberspace: many discreet supporters of the opposition transferred campaign contributions via their ATMs to the special bank accounts of specific candidates.

The electoral outcome was startling for a political system used to finding that BN's structural advantages, institutional powers, and incomparably greater resources would somehow end high opposition aspirations at the close of a short but relentless campaigning period. As it turned out, not even *Malaysiakini*'s redoubtable Steven Gan expected anything close to the final results. Overnight, PKR stopped being the one-seat party that UMNO had threatened to send into oblivion after the 2004 general election. Instead, PKR added 30 more to the sole seat held by its official leader, Wan Azizah, and held the highest number of seats within PR. Nor was PAS beleaguered any longer with a precarious one-seat majority in Kelantan (which PAS had ruled since 1990). Not only did PAS have 38 of the 45 seats in Kelantan, but now the party ruled Kedah for the first time, led the PR government in Perak (despite the DAP's larger representation in the state), and formed part of the Selangor government. For the first time, too, DAP (which had contested elections since the mid-1960s) took power in Penang by completely defeating its rivals for the non-Malay votes, namely, the Gerakan Rakyat Malaysia (which had ruled or led the government in Penang since 1969) and the Malaysian Chinese Association. With PKR having 31 seats in Parliament to DAP's 28 and PAS's 23, it was even possible to imagine, further, that a second coalition was in the making that could cooperate on less inequitable power-sharing terms.

As such, it would be pleasant to end this account on a euphoric note reminiscent of the night of the tsunami! After all, it took a decade of cyber-activism and coalition building to produce and sustain the cyber-networks and the physical coalitions that reaffirmed

on March 8, 2008 that "the potentials of the Net are realized in articulation with other spaces and flows—the flow of money, goods, and bodies, for example—rather than in a struggle that constructs itself solely through some cyberreality" (Froehling 1997, 304). The realities of political contestation and state power, however, demand that dissent must go beyond imagining and even realizing. Dissent lasts and can be defended to the extent that it is socially and deeply rooted, which requires other networks, too.

Over more than five decades of uninterrupted rule, BN, and especially UMNO, has used state power, resources, and channels to penetrate all strata and areas of society, including all forms of official and semi-official institutions, voluntary societies, business associations, youth clubs, community bodies, etc.[17] The breadth and depth of BN's presence and influence in society has been such that UMNO leaders used to say, complacently, that they might not draw large crowds at election campaign rallies but their supporters would deliver at the ballot boxes.

By comparison, it might be summarily noted, PR's parties generally lack deep or extensive networks that bind them to stable structures in physical communities throughout the country. Among them, PAS has had the strongest and most disciplined party structures and membership. More than half a century of political organization and contestation and about 40 years of experience in state government have given PAS well-developed ties to rural communities, religious schools and related institutions, associations of *ulama*, Islamic NGOs, and university student groups. Most of PAS's networks used to be localized, in Kelantan and Terengganu notably, but in the past two decades they have spread to other states and some of the larger urban centers. In contrast, DAP has always been a cadre party dependent on mass support of a largely unaffiliated kind.[18] Moreover, until the failed experiments with Gagasan Rakyat in 1990 and BA in 1999, not even the staunchest DAP supporters expected the party to take power anywhere. Being a party of protest, therefore, DAP has had a pendulum pattern of fortunes—rising with torrents of dissident Chinese voter sentiment at some elections, and slumping when the sentiments turned pro-regime at other elections. Without mass card-carrying members, and finding that its links to the associations, guilds, and societies of the Chinese communities, once the fixed repositories of dissent, have weakened, DAP would have to construct new and extensive networks if it is to remain a serious contender for power.

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17) Many more networks operate at the same time, but there is no space to discuss others, including, say, networks of non-representative institutions of power, such as the nine Malay rulers, the uniformed forces, and the senior ranks of the bureaucracies, with all of whom the regime has long been intimately associated.

18) DAP began as a Peninsular Malaysian offshoot of the People's Action Party (PAP) of Singapore. Yet, on this issue, the two parties could not be more different today. The PAP is, arguably, more rooted in Singaporean society than, say, UMNO in Malay society.

Meanwhile, PKR has had too little time to organize its party structures. For certain campaigns in the past, PKR had to rely on PAS for organizational and other forms of assistance. Anwar's six-year absence and the constant state repression of the PKR leadership left the party without much time to organize itself on a nationwide basis.

From Reformasi to the tsunami, PR resorted to mass protests to reach the populace. It has had considerable success with that strategy. Yet, if PR's strategic goal is to liberalize the political system so that regime change becomes possible on the basis of a two-coalition system, PR suffers from the lack of a third type of network that maintains stable links between party structures and social bodies, including trade unions, community organizations, and civic associations. Missing those links up to the tsunami, PR depended overly on its cyber-networks and physical coalitions. That dependence contained a weakness exposed between 2009 and 2010. For example, detentions and harassments split HINDRAF's leaders and Makkal Sakhti into pro-BN and anti-regime components, with the latter not even clearly pro-PR any more. Then the defections of one DAP and two PKR elected representatives—accompanied by BN's use of royal, bureaucratic, police, and judicial interventions—toppled the PR government in the state of Perak. Additional (mostly PKR) defections at parliamentary and state levels in 2010 threatened to undo PR's 2008 achievement, and to recover for BN a two-thirds majority in Parliament.

It has been observed that a network "does not imply any uniformity of ideas or consistency, let alone equal intensity, in the level of political (or even personal) commitment," but it can create links with "*minimum* motive[s]—not necessarily ideational, but personal, professional, and even financial" (Hau and Shiraishi 2009, 336). If so, PR's overall pre-tsunami network might have relied on links created out of "minimum motives." The motive of the dissident voters was to teach BN a lesson. That of the opposition parties, especially PKR, was to contest, even with candidates they hastily or injudiciously picked—because there was no one else to stand in an election not many thought they could win. But as the defections showed, links with minimum motives, unexpectedly effective in one circumstance, can be predictably severed in another. More attempts to break links and dismantle networks were to come. Just before the Sarawak state election of April 16, 2011, cyber-attacks crippled *Malaysiakini* in what was surely a dress rehearsal in cyber-war for the next general election.[19] At about the same time, the state-controlled television broadcast an interview with the exiled RPK that some said had been heavily "doctored" to show RPK's "turnover" to BN's side (Teoh 2011). And, since June 2008, the hub that is Anwar has been ruthlessly weighed down by renewed

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19) See "Malaysiakini Down, Hit by Cyber Attacks," *Malaysiakini*, April 12, 2011, http://malaysiakinicom. blogspot.com/, accessed April 13, 2011.

prosecution for sodomy.

For all that, the regime remains uneasy. The coalition of PR is intact despite many provocations to split the parties and their bases of support along antagonistic ethnic and religious lines. The dissent unleashed by Reformasi and renewed in the tsunami has not abated, and now new possibilities in the dissident use of social media abound. In the end, any further progression toward the realization of dissent might not depend so much on the permanence of particular nodes and hubs and networks, but on their persistence and reinventions.

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