

# Facebook Use and Personalization among Malaysian Politicians during the 14th Malaysian General Election

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## **Abstract**

*Politicians today are very much reliant on Facebook to communicate with the public and promote their political ideologies. In an attempt to explore how the politicians use Facebook during election campaigns, this article explores official Facebook posts by three prime ministerial candidates during the 14th Malaysian General Election. Content analysis of the candidates' Facebook posts showed that they strategically use Facebook to create and maintain a positive image rather than promoting issues and engaging in discussions with the public. The candidates differed in terms of the amount of posts but had minor differences in the characteristics of their Facebook contents. All of them focused on promoting their personal image suggesting that Facebook is encouraging the personalization of politics.*

**Keywords:** Facebook, Malaysia, GE14, Political Communication, Elections

## ***Penggunaan Facebook dan Personalisasi oleh Ahli Politik Malaysia semasa Pilihanraya Umum Ke-14***

### **Abstrak**

*Ahli politik hari ini sangat bergantung kepada Facebook untuk berkomunikasi dengan orang ramai dan mempromosikan ideologi politik mereka. Dalam usaha untuk meneroka bagaimana ahli politik menggunakan Facebook semasa kempen pilihan raya, artikel ini meneroka hantaran Facebook rasmi oleh tiga calon perdana menteri semasa Pilihanraya Umum Malaysia ke-14. Analisis kandungan hantaran Facebook sampel calon itu menunjukkan mereka secara strategik menggunakan Facebook untuk mencipta dan mengekalkan imej positif daripada mempromosikan isu semasa atau terlibat dalam perbincangan dengan orang ramai. Hasil kajian juga mendapati walaupun jumlah hantaran adalah berbeza tetapi mereka berkongsi ciri-ciri kandungan hantaran yang senada. Mereka juga menggunakan Facebook untuk promosi imej peribadi masing-masing. Oleh itu, dapatan ini membuktikan Facebook telah membentuk keperibadian berpolitik.*

**Kata kunci:** Facebook, Malaysia, Pilihanraya Umum ke-14, Komunikasi Politik, Pilihanraya

### **Introduction**

The 14th Malaysian General Election was historic. It was the first time Malaysians voted for a new federal government. It was a change that took 61 years. Since claiming independence in 1957, Malaysia has had only one government coalition that was Barisan Nasional. There were many factors that enabled Barisan Nasional to stay in power for such a long time. Among others are its dependence on ethnic politics, its ability to provide economic stability, and stronghold over the freedom of speech and expression (Mohamed, 2017).

In Malaysia, the opposition is hindered and cannot effectively compete against the ruling government coalition, especially in terms of reaching

out to the wider electorate as most media outlets are owned by the government and are “restricted in circulating their own party publications” (Case, 2002, p. 7). Such limited democratic affordances can be exemplified by the way the government in Malaysia controls the electoral process. Although there is an independent election commission, called the “Suruhanjaya Pilihanraya”, it has become widely accepted that the commission works in parallel with the ruling elite (Lim, 2005). The commission was established in 1957 under Article 114 of the Federal Constitution. The intended objective of the commission was to allow for the transparent administration and conduct of the electoral process so that it was fair to all competing political parties. However, this does not mean that the credibility of the electoral system is entirely dependent on the performance of the Election Commission, for the electoral process can be controlled by the legislature and certain government practices. Legislative interference is not the only factor behind the government’s control of the electoral process. The ruling government has at its disposal a whole array of state resources, including the command of administrative apparatuses, control over economic resources, and the ownership and regulation of the mass media (Putuicheary & Othman, 2005).

The Internet brought democratic change to the Malaysian mediasphere. In the early years of the Internet, opposition parties opted for websites and blogs as a way to reach the population. However, the low Internet penetration at the time did not support the political discourse that was building online. It was mostly the rise of web 2.0 and the social media, together with the increase in Internet speed and penetration that online political discourse became mainstream and had since, considerably affected Malaysian politics (Mohamed, 2017). In the previous 2008 and 2013 General Elections; the opposition parties’ online popularity grew significantly and so did their electoral gains. This is because Malaysians finally had alternative sources of information. Previously, political news and information mostly came from government-approved sources and political discourses were limited to closed-door discussions. The Internet, notably the social media, allowed for all kinds of political news to be freely shared and discussed.

Malaysians are generally Facebook savvy. With a population of 31.2

million, the country has some 16 million Facebook users (MCMC, 2017). The popularity of social networking sites (SNSs) such as Facebook was made possible by the improved Internet backbone, increase in Internet penetration and overall better utilization of Information Technologies in terms of mobile phones, computers and Internet access (Wok and Mohamed, 2017). All Malaysian states have experienced a significant rise in Internet usage. Overall, Internet usage amongst individuals in Malaysia increased from 57% in 2013 to 71.1% in 2015, although the digital divide between rural and urban areas remains significant in states such as Sarawak, Sabah, Negeri Sembilan and Perak (Lee, 2017).

A 2016 study on the usage of social networking sites conducted by the Malaysian Communication and Multimedia Commission (MCMC) found that Malaysians access Internet very frequently (86.6 % at least once a day) and is very participative in social networking sites (84.3%) most primarily, Facebook. The study found that 96.5 % of Internet users surveyed owned at least a Facebook account and 53.8% of the Internet users accessed Facebook on a daily basis.

The survey by MCMC also found that some 18.3 % of social media users share political views. While the %age of social media users sharing political views may not be that high, it is still a significant source of information for those who access it (90.1%). 86.9% of those who surveyed identified that social media is one of the main online information portal for them. Manaf, Taibi and Manan (2017) indicated that the impact of social media could be more significant as traditional mass media such as radio, television and newspapers are increasingly referring and sharing the contents and discourses that permeate from the social media.

### **Facebook and the 14th Malaysian General Election**

The 14th general election was set to be more interesting as politicians from both sides were very much aware of the power Facebook have on politics. Prior to the elections, many prominent Malaysian politicians were already engaging with the electorate via Facebook. Lee (2017) studied the presence of Malaysian politicians on Facebook by exploring the number of Facebook followers Malaysian political parties and several

prominent Malaysian politicians have. His study found that the use of Facebook for politics is clearly more intensive at the individual politician level than at the political party and political coalition level.

When comparing politicians, Lee (2017) further discovered that the level of social media presence when measured by the number of followers was uneven within coalitions and parties. For example, within Barisan Nasional (BN) and UMNO, the then Prime Minister Najib Razak has clearly invested a lot to maintain a high social media profile. With the exception of Khairy Jamaluddin and Hishammuddin Hussein Onn, other UMNO politicians appear to lag behind in social media presence. A similar problem is observed in the Pakatan Harapan coalition – a few politicians have a very high number of followers, especially Mahathir Mohamad (PPBM), Anwar Ibrahim (PKR), Wan Azizah Wan Ismail (PKR) and Muhyiddin Yassin (PPBM). Political leaders from PAS have relatively fewer followers compared to political leaders from PKR. The social media presence of other political parties and politicians from East Malaysia that are part of BN is even weaker.

Although Lee (2017) found that the level of Facebook adoption among Malaysian politicians varies, he noted that most prominent politicians from the main coalitions were active on Facebook. In response, this study took a step further by investigating how these politicians actually used Facebook by focusing primarily on election campaign. This study looked at how the politicians used Facebook as part of their campaign media; scrutinizing the ways and strategies the politicians adopted and the issues they promoted when using Facebook. This study also probed into whether there is a coordinated strategy among politicians of the same political party/coalition. Results from the study can help political strategists further understand the relationship between Facebook and political communication.

## **Methodology**

Data were collected during the campaign week that lasted for two weeks to the night after the election starting from April 28 to May 10th, 2018. Malaysian election law dictates that all parties are only allowed to

campaign in the specific timeframe stipulated by the Election Commission. As such any form of election campaign such political rallies, gatherings and even media coverage can only be done during the given timeframe. Three Prime Ministerial candidates were chosen for the study based on 1) candidacy in the election 2) prominence in Malaysian politics such as the level of power they have within their respective parties and 3) Facebook activity which requires the selected politicians to be active and have a significant number of followers. These politicians represented the three main coalitions that ran during the election. These coalitions composed of the then incumbent government, Barisan Nasional; the biggest opposition coalition, Pakatan Harapan and; the smaller Malay-Islamist coalition Gagasan Sejahtera that was led by the Islamic party PAS. Each of the politicians sampled was a well-known figure as well as leaders within their own political parties. For example, Najib Razak was the Prime Minister of Malaysia while Mahathir Mohamad was the ex-Prime Minister who is running against Najib in this election. Abdul Hadi Awang is the leader for PAS. The three politicians were:

Table 1: The number of the candidates' Facebook followers

| Politician Name      | Political Party  | FB Followers |
|----------------------|------------------|--------------|
| Mohammad Najib Razak | Barisan Nasional | 3,400,000    |
| Mahathir Mohamad     | Pakatan Harapan  | 2,600,000    |
| Abdul Hadi Awang     | PAS              | 354,000      |

\*the number of followers listed in the table were recorded on April 28th 2018, the first day election of campaign

In order to capture how effectively the politicians used their Facebook accounts, this study employed both quantitative and qualitative methods. Content analysis was used to collect the data while qualitative analysis was applied using the thematic approach. Content Analysis is a common method used in electoral studies (Idid, 2017) especially when looking at Facebook usage among politicians. Shafi and Vultee (2018) content analyzed Facebook posts of presidential candidates Barack Obama and Mitt Romney during the 12th American presidential Primaries. Bronstein,

Aharony and Bar-Ilan (2018) content analyzed the Facebook pages of 10 candidates in the 2015 Israeli general election. Content analysis was also used to study political issues on Facebook during the 13th general election that was held in 2013 (Manaf and Manan, 2017) (Zanuddin, Sern, Ahmad, Hassan, Zawawi, Hashim & Ishak, 2017).

A standardized code book and code sheet was designed to suit the Facebook functions and categories. The codebook consists lists of the different categories that the coders can refer to when coding the data. For example, in order to code the different kinds of Facebook postings, the researcher need only to refer to the codebook that had listed all the available and relevant categories such as photos, videos and live streaming.

Each Facebook post was the unit of analysis while details of the post such as the type, length and issues shared were the variables. Therefore, every post that was shared by the politicians during the study period was coded.

Three undergraduate students were coders trained on the materials by the researchers. The coding task was done using personal computers. All the data that were recorded and analysed using the statistical software IBM SPSS software provided the study with descriptive results. In addition, thematic analysis was done to get better depth out of the data. All the data were carefully compared in order to identify the themes that were similar as well as contradictory among the three Prime Ministerial candidates.

## **Findings**

### **The Number of Facebook Posting**

A total of 297 posts were analysed throughout the study period. There was quite a discrepancy in the number of postings by the candidates. Table 1 depicts this discrepancy.

Table 2: The number of Facebook postings according to date.

| Politician's Name | Date      |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           | Total      |
|-------------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|------------|
|                   | 28 Apr    | 29 Apr    | 30 Apr    | 1 May     | 2 May     | 3 May     | 4 May     | 5 May     | 6 May     | 7 May     | 8 May     | 9 May     | 10 May    |            |
| Najib             | 10        | 13        | 11        | 9         | 9         | 7         | 13        | 11        | 13        | 15        | 24        | 11        | 4         | 150        |
| Hadi              | 8         | 5         | 0         | 12        | 6         | 4         | 8         | 11        | 4         | 9         | 9         | 5         | 1         | 82         |
| Mahathir          | 4         | 1         | 5         | 3         | 4         | 6         | 6         | 5         | 6         | 4         | 6         | 9         | 6         | 65         |
| <b>Total</b>      | <b>22</b> | <b>19</b> | <b>16</b> | <b>24</b> | <b>19</b> | <b>17</b> | <b>27</b> | <b>27</b> | <b>23</b> | <b>28</b> | <b>39</b> | <b>25</b> | <b>11</b> | <b>297</b> |

Najib Razak was the most active politician on Facebook with 150 posts, followed by Hadi Awang of PAS with 82 posts. The least active candidate was Mahathir of Pakatan Harapan who posted 65 times. The result showed that the candidates do not necessarily use Facebook the same way. In fact, these politicians were running their social media on their own without any guidelines or shared practices proposed by their political parties. Facebook, like other social media privileges personal campaign over group or in this sense, political parties. An observation of the political parties' Facebook also indicate that with exception of Hadi Awang, the other two candidates (refer table 1) had more Facebook followers compared to their party. Barisan Nasional Facebook page had 473K followers (<https://www.Facebook.com/barisananasional/>), Pakatan Harapan (<https://www.Facebook.com/pakatanharapan.my/>) only had over 273K followers while PAS had the most followers at 521K (<https://www.Facebook.com/paspusat/>).

May 8th, 2018, the day before the election, recorded the most number of postings. On that day, the candidates posted 39 times with Najib Razak posting the most (24 posts). This was only logical as the politicians were making the most of the remaining time they had before campaign period ends at midnight the same day. The number of posting dropped drastically on Election Day and the least number of posting was recorded on the day after the election, which was May on 10th. All the candidates posted on Election Day. They all posted the same materials, photos of them placing their votes at their respective constituencies accompanied by captions and messages of hope. The number of postings probably dwindled on May 10th simply because the candidates and their machineries were

making sense of their victory and loss. Dr. Mahathir who was initially among the least active, posted the most on May 10th. This is due to Pakatan Harapan's victory in the election, which saw, for the first time, a change in the Malaysian government, a change that took over 61 years in the making. Mahathir who led Barisan Nasional for more than 25 years and was the 4th Prime Minister of Malaysia made not only Malaysian history but also world history by reclaiming the Prime Minister post of Malaysia for the second time. This time as the chairman of Pakatan Harapan; and at the age of 92, he became the oldest Prime Minister in the world. All of his posts that day were live coverage of his press conferences in which he claimed victory and restated his stand for political reform. Despite losing to Pakatan Harapan, Najib Razak did not keep quiet. He posted four times on his Facebook and had graciously accepted defeat.

### **Types of Facebook posting**

Generally there are three types of posts on Facebook. They are texts, photos and video. The users can creatively design each type of post. Text could be in simple black typeface or could be designed with colourful background and animated gifs. Photos could be shared via albums, slides, carousels and canvases. In 2014, Facebook introduced auto play that allowed videos to be automatically streamed on users' Facebook timeline. This development was monumental as it catapulted the rise of video content. It became so much easier for users to make and share videos. It also made it more effective for political communication as it created an alternative to television. On April 2016, Facebook launched FB live that allowed users to share live broadcast. FB live further changed the dynamic of media usage as broadcast media is no longer owned only by big media corporations. Anyone can now become a broadcaster. This proved to be an advantage for political communication, especially to those who do not have access to the mainstream media.

Caton, Hall and Weinhardt (2015) indicated that what politicians post on their FB tells a lot about the kind of politician they are and how savvy they are when managing the media. As such, this study also looked at the types of post. Table 3 lists the types of Facebook posts shared.

Table 3: Categories of Facebook posting

| Politician's Name | Video     | Photo      | Live Streaming | Status Update | Text      |
|-------------------|-----------|------------|----------------|---------------|-----------|
| Najib             | 41        | 72         | 24             | 3             | 10        |
| Hadi              | 1         | 36         | 41             | 1             | 3         |
| Mahathir          | 14        | 31         | 20             | 0             | 0         |
| <b>Total</b>      | <b>56</b> | <b>139</b> | <b>85</b>      | <b>4</b>      | <b>13</b> |

Altogether, 139 photos were shared by the candidates making it the most common type of posts followed by 85 live streams and 56 videos. The least popular were text-based posts, which accounted for 13 posts only. When it comes to text-based post, the candidates mostly provided either short status updates or lengthy articles that support their candidacy. Although Facebook was already significantly used in 2013 during the 13th General election, it was only in this election that the live streaming function was made available to politicians. And it appears that all the candidates in this study, especially the ones from the opposition parties, were exploiting its use. Hadi Awang used it 41 times followed by Najib Razak (24) and Mahathir (20). Live streaming allowed the opposition candidates to match the media access previously only available to government candidates. These politicians were sharing press conferences, live broadcast of their campaign trails, and speeches as they were ongoing. It has always been a tradition that on every night before the election, the head of Barisan Nasional will go live on television to give his last mandate. The opposition leaders would not have the option to address the whole nation. But on the eve of May 9th, 2018 both heads of oppositions, Dr. Mahathir and Hadi Awang used Facebook to live broadcast their final mandate and call for votes to a worldwide audience.

What made these live broadcasts more interesting was that it allowed for users' feedback and interactions. Users could express emotions, comment and even share these live broadcasts, making campaign speeches more engaging. This study focused on looking on how election candidates made use of Facebook. It did not look at users' feedback.

However through the researcher's general observation, it was obvious that Mahathir Mohamad was the most popular Prime Minister candidate on that election eve. His final election address had 2.7 million views and over 100K shares (refer image 1).



Image 1: Mahathir's final election address that recorded 2.7 million live views and 107K shares (the image was captured on May 9th, 2018 at 12.25 am)

Facebook users were actively commenting on and discussing his mandates. The ability to provide live feedback was substantial. The users could feel that they were part of the election. They were not passive audiences; they became part of the discourse. This probably pushed the sentiment for government change even stronger.

Najib Razak gave his last address on television. He could have shared it via live stream on Facebook, but he did not. Najib has been using Facebook live quite frequently during the election period; 24 times to be exact. He had full control of the mainstream media, but was still actively using Facebook. This showed that he was fully aware of the impact of live broadcast. He could have reached a bigger audience that night via Facebook and TV. If Najib went live that night, it would have been very interesting to be able to compare how the users responded to the different Prime Ministerial candidates. Such comparison could provide significant indication to the people's sentiment and their voting intention. The election result could have been predicted with more confidence.

### Characteristics of Facebook Posting

Looking only at what was posted may not give enough information about how these candidates were using Facebook. Thus this study further observed the contents of the postings. Table 4 lists the different characteristics of the candidates' Facebook postings.

Table 4: Characteristics of Facebook Posting

| Politician's Name | Selfie   | Personal activities | Object/ Things | Profesionally-produced campaigning material | Campaing activities | Infographics | Repost    | Poster    |
|-------------------|----------|---------------------|----------------|---|---------------------|--------------|-----------|-----------|
| Najib             | 0        | 25                  | 16             | 23  | 40                  | 1            | 18        | 1         |
| Hadi              | 0        | 25                  | 0              | 4   | 38                  | 7            | 1         | 1         |
| Mahathir          | 2        | 7                   | 10             | 20  | 13                  | 0            | 1         | 8         |
| <b>Total</b>      | <b>2</b> | <b>57</b>           | <b>26</b>      | <b>47</b>                                   | <b>91</b>           | <b>8</b>     | <b>20</b> | <b>10</b> |

The study found that the candidates were sharing the same kind of contents and they could be grouped into eight general categories. These categories were listed based on the broad observation of the most commonly shared Facebook postings among politicians. The postings range from public and political postings such as campaign activities and infographics to more personal postings such as the politician's personal activities and selfies. These contents were mostly formal and campaign-focused. This could be because the study was conducted during campaign week. All the candidates were very careful in their postings. There were no obvious attacks or heavy criticism against their opponents. They were more focused on their own campaign and manifestos. The most shared content were campaign activities such as photos and videos that depict the candidates in action like going on their campaign trails, giving speeches, meetings and socializing with voters. Najib Razak was the most active when it comes to sharing his campaign activities.

Profesionally-produced campaign materials is another category that specifically revolved around the candidates' campaign and manifestos. There were 47 of such posts. One of the most prominent examples of a professionally-produced content was Dr. Mahathir's 10 minutes short

film titled 'Harapan' or hope based on Pakatan Harapan's name and agenda which was a hope for new a Malaysia. In the film, Dr. Mahathir presented himself as 'atok' or grandfather who was having a conversation with two little children and explaining to them why he had to still work for Malaysia even at his old age. Among others Dr. Mahathir talked about how he had to save the country and also to correct the mistakes he might have made during his previous tenure as the Prime Minister. The film also showed a very emotional Mahathir who was moved to tears as he explained the need for all Malaysians to love and save Malaysia (Refer image 2 below). Dramatized content is powerful as it triggers user reaction. Studies (Shafi and Vultee, 2018), (Bene, 2017) have showed that emotional and personal contents tend to get more user interaction and engagement compared to more serious and formal posts.



Image 2: A clip from Dr. Mahathir's 10 minutes short film titled 'Harapan' (the image was captured on April 31st, 2018 at 10.20 am)

The politicians also shared personal activities and this refers to content that are not related to the election such as photos of food and daily routines. Hadi Awang shared quite a number of posts that revolved around his personal activities such as going fishing and performing prayers. Other types of contents include objects (26), infographics (8), posters (10) and selfies (2). The candidates probably posted these contents in smaller in numbers because they were not related to the election. 47 post were 'reposts' where the candidates chose to share other people's content rather than their own.

### Issues Shared on Facebook

One of the main purposes of the study was to uncover issues shared by the candidates' on their Facebook. List of related issues were made available in the codebook for the coders to refer to. These issues were listed based on the general observation of the different issues often discussed by politicians in their Facebook pages. Among these general issues are economy, politics and leadership. For example, every time a politician talks about the lack of good leadership or whenever they comment about the leaders in the rival parties, they are categorized as leadership issue. However the chosen period of study that was during the campaign weeks proved to be a limitation to the study. This is because it appeared that the candidates were mostly focused on sharing about their campaign activities and election manifestos rather than discussing on issues. Because of this, almost all, amounting to 251 of the posts shared, revolved around the election. Table 5 lists the issues shared by the political candidates during campaign week.

Table 5: The issues according to the political candidate

| Main Issue       | Najib      | Mahathir  | Hadi      | Total      |
|------------------|------------|-----------|-----------|------------|
| Election         | 110        | 62        | 79        | 251        |
| Economy          | 4          | 3         | 0         | 7          |
| Leadership       | 2          | 3         | 0         | 5          |
| Religion         | 0          | 0         | 1         | 1          |
| Politics         | 2          | 0         | 0         | 0          |
| Education        | 1          | 0         | 0         | 1          |
| Missing of MH370 | 1          | 0         | 0         | 1          |
| Foreigners       | 0          | 0         | 0         | 0          |
| Health           | 0          | 0         | 0         | 0          |
| Patriotism       | 1          | 0         | 0         | 0          |
| Unity            | 0          | 0         | 0         | 0          |
| <b>Total</b>     | <b>123</b> | <b>65</b> | <b>80</b> | <b>268</b> |

This significant focus on election is related to the types and contents of post discussed above. Since most of the contents were campaign materials, not many non-election issues were put forth. Election issues here primarily focused on the candidates' and their parties' promotion of credibility, call for votes, proposal for change, promises and mandates. Even in their manifestos, the candidates hardly touched on specific issues. Rather, they took a general stand by highlighting their campaign activities and broad promises of better governance. It was somewhat discouraging to see issues that were popular running up to the election such as 1MDB, corruption and the Malay rights were not openly discussed by the candidates. It could be that the candidates were playing it safe by not triggering the sensitivities of any particular groups or be in trouble with the election commission. Hence, Facebook was mostly used for image building rather than issue sharing. This lack of focus on issues concur with Shafi's and Vultee's (2017, 21) study that found:

*“The nature of the Facebook posts suggests that the candidates use Facebook as a strategic public relations tool, rather than as a source of information. The candidates mostly attempted to show their presence, uphold their personality, appeal to the audience or engage in cyber-rallying, rather than debating and discussing about their issue policies.”*

The economy was the second most shared issue. But 11 posts were still very small compared to the number of total post, which were 268. Only Najib Razak and Mahathir Mohamad touched on the economy. Again, this is rather dumbfounding as the troubled economy had been the oppositions' main argument against Najib and his government. Leadership was the other issue touched upon by the candidates. Issues of leadership primarily focused on Najib Razak. In his posts, Najib Razak defended his leadership and questioned Mahathir's age and credibility. On the other hand, Dr Mahathir also posted about leadership three times and in his posts he criticized the weaknesses of Barisan Nasional's leadership and proposed for change. Hadi Awang posted issues on

religion and this was justified by his party’s identity that was embedded in political Islam. Other examples of issues that were also discussed but not significantly were issues of health, unity, patriotism and education.

**Target for Facebook Posts**

The study found that when the candidates post on Facebook they were targeting four groups of audiences. These target groups were the government, Barisan Nasional, the Opposition Parties and the voters. Table 6 lists the candidates’ target audience.

Table 6: Target Audience

| Politician's Name | Government (in general) | Barisan Nasional | Opposition Party | Voters     |
|-------------------|-------------------------|------------------|------------------|------------|
| Hadi              | 0                       | 1                | 40               | 41         |
| Mahathir          | 0                       | 7                | 21               | 37         |
| Najib             | 4                       | 45               | 35               | 66         |
| <b>Total</b>      | <b>4</b>                | <b>53</b>        | <b>96</b>        | <b>144</b> |

All the candidates were primarily focused on the voters. More than half or 297 posts were directed to the voters (41). This is again in line with how the content and issues highlighted in the candidates’ posts were all focused on campaign activities. Hence, the candidates were mostly using Facebook to target the general voters. There were 4 posts targeted to the government. For this study, the government was categorized differently from Barisan Nasional because in some posts the candidates were referring to the government in general such as certain ministries, bodies or groups. On the other hand, Barisan Nasional represented the political coalition that was running the government at the time and during campaign week, they were seen more as a political coalition. When Najib Razak referred to members or supporters of Barisan Nasional, he was targeting the party and not the government. When Najib Razak posted to his supporters, he was considered as targeting Barisan Nasional. 45 out of the 53 posts on Barisan Nasional came Najib and only 8 posts were coming from the opposition. It was only Najib who seemed to also be targeting his opponent. He targeted the other parties 35 times.

'Opposition Parties' refer to all the opposition parties that were running in the election. They were all grouped into a single category because it was uncovered during the study that most opposition parties did not target one another, rather they were more focused on garnering the support of their own members and followers. For example, 40 of Hadi Awang's posts were targeted to PAS members while 21 of Mahathir's posts were targeted to the supporters of Pakatan Harapan. As such, the researchers found that there was no need to name each party as a target because when opposition candidates focused on their party members, they were targeting the same category of audiences- supporters of the oppositions. Dr. Mahathir was the only opposition candidate to have significantly targeted Barisan Nasional, 7 times to be exact. This is quite a number since Dr. Mahathir only posted 65 times throughout the study period. This indicated that the candidates were mostly focused on strengthening their support rather than bringing their opponents down. As such they were giving particular attention to their own members and the general voters.

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

This research explored new forms of political communication enabled by Facebook. Focusing specifically on how three Malaysian Prime Ministerial candidates used it during election campaign, the study found that there was a significant personalization in the ways the candidates communicated on Facebook. This was expected due to Facebook's socio-technical convention of centralizing individual style, looks and visual performativity (Ekman & Wildhom, 2017). Just like any other social media platform that lacked gatekeepers, Facebook allowed the candidates to uniquely design their own approach and self-image hence personalizing their campaign during election.

As a tool of political communication in Malaysian politics, Facebook is more prominent at the individual than at the party level. One of the most important characteristics of Facebook is that attention is directed toward candidates rather than toward their parties (Enli & Skogerbø, 2013). The study found this to be true. The result showed that while all the candidates were using Facebook for the same purpose, that is to campaign and garner votes, there were discrepancies in their approach. The candidates

appeared to have their unique styles when using Facebook.

Personalization is not entirely the candidates' choice, it is also the consequence of adopting social media. Facebook is ultimately a personal platform that depends on social networking. As such, how users use Facebook depends on the friends or followers they have. For a politician who uses Facebook for political communication, the ability to balance the personal, the public and the political is vital. Bene (2017) explained that on Facebook, a politician's post will appear between the flow of everyday content by their followers' friends in their news feeds and as a result, politician's posts have to struggle for attention and reaction not only with other political content but with all types of contents. This 'contest' may incline the politician to perform more like an everyday person rather than like a politician. This may be the reason why the majority of the candidates in this study appear to be very civil and focused only on their own campaign. They conformed to the demands of the social network that required them to become an everyday politician. One that is friendly and will flow well on the followers' Facebook timeline.

The significance of Facebook in political communication is no longer a question; it is a reality. This study has showed that Malaysian politicians are accepting this fact. They have extensively used Facebook in their election campaign. While some are savvier than others, they were all trying to make the most of what Facebook can offer. If in the previous elections, it was the opposition candidates that were using Facebook extensively, this election saw the then elected politicians from Barisan Nasional equally active on Facebook. Najib Razak who had all the mainstream and broadcast media at his disposal became notably active on Facebook. In fact, it was Najib who had the most interesting approach to Facebook.

The study also found that when it comes to efficiently using Facebook as political communication, quality overpowers quantity. While it is important for the candidates to constantly post and be visible on the followers' timeline, the ability to attract users' reaction and engagement requires strategy and effort. A politician's post can simply drown within the many other posts that are never ending. Therefore, strategic production and

placement of Facebook posts can prove to be profitable.

The main limitation to this study would probably be its inability to also include and measure the users' response towards the politicians. While it is interesting to look at how politicians exploit the affordances of Facebook in designing their own online image, the effectiveness of Facebook in helping the politician cannot be proven until it is compared and related to how the public in general and the Facebook users in specific, positively or negatively respond to the politicians' postings. Manual content analysis like the one used in this study will not be able to collect the user response mainly because of the speed and amount of comments politicians often get. Therefore there needs to be a more focused method that can measure both the politicians' usage as well as the users' response to that usage.

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