

**Title:** Opening windows to 'e-democracy' in Malaysia  
**Author:** Dr Eric Loo  
**Affiliation:** Graduate School of Journalism, University of Wollongong  
**Address:** University of Wollongong, New South Wales, 2522, AUSTRALIA  
**Email:** eloo@uow.edu.au

**Abstract**

September 1998 marks a watershed in Malaysian politics with the arrest of the Deputy Prime Minister, Anwar Ibrahim on corruption and aberrant sexual activity charges. Street protests by Anwar loyalists found its way to the Internet with unexpected proliferation of pro-Anwar reformation (*reformasi*) sites and alternative online news outlets, such as *Malaysiakini* and *AgendaMalaysia*. This paper surveys the Internet environment in Malaysia and examines how the medium's influence on the democratisation process in a nation where citizens and their representative, the mainstream media, are fundamentally apprehensive in challenging the authority, which is inclined to use its punitive powers to circumscribe what is politically correct discourse in the public sphere.

This paper is written in a journalistic commentary format supported by extracts from email interviews with key Internet players in Malaysia. The commentary overviews current efforts by the Malaysian government to enhance its 'e-government' status and examines why, in view of the country's restrictive media and ambivalent citizenship culture, current 'e-government' efforts reek of paradoxes. It examines the currency of 'e-government' efforts in Malaysia and its corollary, 'e-democracy', in the context of recent studies and underscores the need for researchers to develop clear benchmarks to gauge the Internet's capacity to enhance the 'democratic' process in Malaysia. This paper repudiates the deterministic notion that high Internet usage necessarily leads to high democratic practices in the public sphere, particularly in parts of Asia.

## **E-government: rhetoric and reality**

"E-government" refers to the extent that governments are currently utilising the Internet for delivering government information and services to its citizens. Essentially, the state of 'e-government' represents the level of interactive online communication between the government and its constituents. The United Nations Online Network in Public Administration and Finance in collaboration with the American Society of Public Administration (UNPAN/ASPA) in a global survey from May to July and October to December 2001 of 190 UN member states' online networking status defines five progressive stages of "e-government".<sup>1</sup> They are:

- Emerging : an official government online presence is established.
- Enhanced: government sites increase; information becomes more dynamic.
- Interactive: users can download forms, email officials and interact through the web.
- Transactional: users can actually pay for services and other transactions online.
- Seamless: full integration of e-services across administrative boundaries.

"E-democracy" refers to the extent that the Internet is used by the government, business and private sectors to empower ordinary people with opportunities to be heard on community issues in the public sphere. It encapsulates the notion of "freedom of expression" and "freedom of enterprise", alluded to by Senecal (1995:6) as "a seemingly indispensable freedom for the production and dissemination of information" and the citizens' "freedom to know" (ibid.:12). Essentially, this paper perceives "democracy" as a form of government that allows space for its citizens regardless of race, class, gender or wealth to engage in public life and be heard, through the aid of communications technology, on important public issues which impact on their status in life; where every citizen, at least theoretically, has equal access to the structures of opportunity to realise their full political, economic, cultural and social potential. These elements are clearly embodied in Article 19 of the UN's Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which notes that "Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes the freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media regardless of frontiers."

Thus, in the context of this paper, regardless of the cultural relativistic argument by the Malaysian Prime Minister Dr Mahathir Mohamad,<sup>2</sup> for an "e-democracy" to evolve certain functional features must at least exist in the public sphere and occur as part of the political process. They are:

- A range of community voices must be represented.

- Those who are traditionally not heard are given the opportunity to voice their concerns and seek redress either through their political representatives or independently through the media.
- The media must meet its obligations to the community by investigating into social justice issues.
- The media must facilitate public debates and dialogue between or among the community and the state via its news pages, air time and through interactive mechanisms on the Internet.

To date, the rhetoric for an 'e-government' in Malaysia has at least been supported by local government online projects. These online initiatives are generally guided by the principles of making local governments more accessible to the community via the Internet, and hopefully in the process, to deploy its human resources more efficiently.

For example, in the Selangor suburbs, the Municipal Council of Klang has developed an e-portal (<http://portal.mkplang.gov.my>); Subang Jaya has started its five-year pilot program *SJ2005* ([www.sj2005.net.my](http://www.sj2005.net.my)) to link the public, private and community sectors in transforming the suburb into a "smart knowledge-based society". In Sabah, *Des@Net* has started a mobile computer training scheme in the rural areas schools where 1,000 schools are estimated to lack electricity and where illiteracy rate hovers at around 14%. The National IT Council is sponsoring *Kaynet* ([www.kaynet.nitc.org.my](http://www.kaynet.nitc.org.my)) for "Asian youths to participate in national policy formulation". And the National Internet Literacy Campaign (NILC) has established telecentres in urban and rural areas around the country, charging residents a nominal fee for a week of Internet-based training. (<http://www.e-trainingsite.com/nilc2u/index.asp>).

Currently on the local government's list of Internet initiatives is *Local Agenda 21* pilot project, an offshoot from the UN Conference on Environment and Development (the Earth Summit) in Rio de Janeiro in June 1992. The *Local Agenda 21* is aimed at forging partnerships between local authorities, communities and businesses in sustainable development. (For details, visit the Ministry of Housing and Local Government web site: [www.kpkt.gov.my/jkt/la21](http://www.kpkt.gov.my/jkt/la21). Other pilot online community projects are accessible from [www.interasia.org/malaysia/e-community\\_projects.html](http://www.interasia.org/malaysia/e-community_projects.html)).

On the national level, the Ministry of Information began in September 2002 a public online information site. But like most government web sites, the new online facility is set up to only

receive public views to help government information officers administer their work. This means replies by government information officers to email enquiries from the public is not guaranteed. The Ministry of Information online facility clearly represents the general picture of how government web initiatives have actually fallen short of being citizen-centric, which is central to the "e-government" process as defined earlier.

A casual browse through the many Malaysian government web sites will show that they are generally strong on state protocol and public relations but weak in providing an interactive mechanism to enhance direct engagement between the state and its constituents. Thus, the question: If the Internet is to ensure a sanctified citizen-centric public space for critical dialogue, what kind of intellectual and civic values must at least exist in theory?

#### **Pre-requisites of an 'e-democracy'**

Discussions on "e-democracy" in the academe (CID, 2002; NITC 2001; Shariffadeen 1995, 2000) and democracy online sites such as *E-Democracy Home Page* ([www.edemocracy.gov.uk](http://www.edemocracy.gov.uk)); *Democracies Online Newswire* ([www.publicus.net](http://www.publicus.net)); and *The Commonwealth Centre for Electronic Governance* ([www.electronicgov.net/](http://www.electronicgov.net/)) generally take the view that the values to be integrated into a public culture, which includes the conventional media fulfilling its moral role as the people's representative, are:

- \* Easy affordable community access to government information and the media.
- \* Online interaction across multiple levels among civil society groups and the State, which effectively means creating a practical and clear structure for the people to access government websites to lodge their support or protests on issues that affect their daily lives.
- \* Online access to Parliamentary Hansard reports to promote transparency in governance where political representatives will be held accountable for their views.
- \* Politicians actively consulting with their constituents on policy development and recommendations.
- \* Civic-minded public conscience founded on proactive grassroots participation in dialogues on public issues.

\* Community-oriented media mindful of its responsibility to question, analyse and inform on critical public issues.

Realistically, these communicative values are practically non-existent in the Malaysian public sphere. Secondly, these values are generally considered to be somewhat insignificant to the average Malaysian, whose life's priorities are defined more by tangible socio-economic imperatives than political and intellectual pursuits on the Internet. To test my assumption, an email interview was conducted with seven key Internet practitioners in Malaysia from May to June 2002. They are: a) MGG Pillai, a veteran journalist, civic advocate, and listowner of *Sang Kancil* at Malaysia.net; (b) Kiranjit Kaur, chair of the civic group committee in the Communication and Multimedia Content Forum ([www.cmcf.com.my](http://www.cmcf.com.my)); (c) Sean Ang, policy technologist in digital governance at the National IT Council; (d) KS Chin, principal consultant of Stratfos Consulting, Sarawak. ([www.stratfos.com](http://www.stratfos.com)); (e), Azam Aris, editor of a *The Edge* ([www.theedge.com.my](http://www.theedge.com.my)); (f) Anil Netto, civil society advocate with Just World Trust, Penang; (g) Steven Gan, editor-in-chief of *Malaysiakini*.<sup>3</sup>

Part of the interview includes a 7-point Likert scale form which sought to gauge perceptions of how far the Internet has led to freer open discourse in the Malaysian public sphere. With 1 being "non-existent" and 7 being "already happening" the average total mean value for the 11 positive statements on the democratisation process in Malaysia is 2.6, which indicates a low level of confidence. The statements and rankings by five of the seven respondents represented by their initials are as follows:

**On a scale of 1-7 with 1 being Non-Existent, and 7 being Already Happening, please rank the following statements:**

• The government should support the development of independent news organisations in both the traditional and new media.

MGG	KK	SG	AA	AN	(Mean)
5	2	1	1	1	(2)

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The government must ensure that all citizens have equal opportunity to access and use the Internet for the purposes of political speech and participation .</li> </ul>	MGG	KK	SG	AA	AN	(Mean)
	2	3	2	1	2	(2)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Government departments must take special steps to engage with communities that have been marginalised from participation in community life.</li> </ul>	MGG	KK	SG	AA	AN	(Mean)
	2	2	4	3	1	(2.2)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Government departments and businesses should pursue Internet partnerships with civil society organisations to promote greater democracy.</li> </ul>		MGG	KK	SG	AA	AN
(Mean)	1	1	1	2	1	(1.2)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Political parties should use the Internet to engage the public in interactive dialogues in shaping their agendas.</li> </ul>	MGG	KK	SG	AA	AN	(Mean)
	5	2	6	4	5	(4.4)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The government should move beyond the one-way provision of services to creative interactive and participatory opportunities for its citizens.</li> </ul>	MGG	KK	SG	AA	AN	(Mean)
	1	2	2	2	3	(2)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The government should protect its citizens' right to free speech and resist the temptation to apply censorship in the MSC era.</li> </ul>	MGG	KK	SG	AA	AN	(Mean)
	2	3	6	2	4	(3.5)

- Parliamentary discussions should be made more accessible to the general public via the Internet.

MGG	KK	SG	AA	AN	(Mean)
1	2	1	2	1	(1.4)

- Current laws in Malaysia are restricting Internet's role as a tool of empowering the citizens.

MGG	KK	SG	AA	AN	(Mean)
1	3	1	4	1	(2)

- Current Malaysian intellectual and political culture are ripe for maximising the democratising aspects of the Internet.

MGG	KK	SG	AA	AN	(Mean)
3	2	4	4	4	(3.4)

- The Internet has broken the government's monopoly on information dissemination.

MGG	KK	SG	AA	AN	(Mean)
5	6	7	4	4	(5.2)

---

**Average Total Mean    2.6**

---

MGG Pillai says that "e-democracy (and 'e-government') is a non-starter in Malaysia so long as there is a disinterest about it amongst the citizenry and, despite its promise to be at the cutting edge of technology, the government. In a society where the citizenry is not interested in making himself heard, when newspapers, radio and television is owned and operated by a member of the governing National Front coalition, and when important public issues are never, as a rule, articulated in public, the coming of the Internet cannot lead to freer and more open critical discussion of public issues."

"All it provides is a forum for the disenchanting, the NGOs, the political parties and, after the Anwar Ibrahim affair, the *reformasi* groups to air their views. They could not before the Internet because the mainstream newspapers, radio and television would not give them the time of day. Now they can. This does not lead either to free or more open critical discussion of public issues. It

is just another venue for them. Because they now have a voice, the Internet is seen as a saviour. But all it has done is to provide another means to talk to those to whom they already do." (Email interview, May 2002)

Pillai's view of the Internet's influence or the lack of it on the democratisation process in Malaysia is shared by other key Internet practitioners. Sean Ang, from the National IT Council, which advises the government on ICT development policies, says: "Sensitive issues especially those related to race could be a hurdle towards open discourse in Malaysia. However, there are no evidence at the moment to suggest that open discussion via the Internet has led to or stirred greater racial conflict. If we assume that most ethnic conflicts occurred within the marginalized groups then it is unlikely that e-democracy will lead to greater conflict given that e-democracy users will come from the lower middle income group and above. The new conflict will be between those who are 'connected' and those who are 'not connected' - hence the digital divide. E-democracy is viable only when all Malaysians are connected." (Email interview, op cit., 2002)

Steven Gan, editor-in-chief of *Malaysiakini* says: "The government does not want to encourage e-democracy. E-commerce, yes. E-government - in terms of reducing bureaucracy paperwork, yes. But e-democracy - whether viable or not, the fear factor is there to retard open discussion. The writers normally use pseudonyms. The fear is there. Subscribers (to mailing lists) are also afraid so they use the anonymous email. Fear is there - may slow down the e-democracy project but will not be able to starve out the open discussion." (Email interview, op cit., 2002)

#### **Integrated community, yet necessarily differentiated**

Active engagement between the Malaysian government, the intelligentsia, the NGOs and the community is circumscribed by a socio-political history of political sensitivities, media clampdowns, inter-racial suspicion and distrust, which is further exacerbated by religious and cultural differentiations, the latter often politicised by candidates campaigning on racial issues at each state and federal elections.

As of 2000, the population of about 23.3 million with a literacy rate of about 84% comprises three major groups - the "Bumiputeras" which literally means "prince of the soil", Chinese and Indians. About 43% of its population are rural. Bumiputeras are further segmented into sub-groups such as the Malays predominantly in West Malaysia; and the Melanaus, Bajaus, Kadazans, Ibans and Meruts in Sabah and Sarawak. The Chinese likewise have their subgroups based on clan identities such as Hokkien, Cantonese, Teochew, Hakka and Hainanese. Subgroups in the Indian community are the Malayalees, Punjabis, Tamils and Bengalis. Other minority groups are the Eurasians and Sinhalese.

The Malays and other indigenous communities account for about half of the population. The Malays, all of whom are Muslims, are historically agrarian and, as a result of British colonial distribution of powers, have been dominant in state and federal politics. Bumiputera communities in Sabah and Sarawak practise different religions and have their respective dialects.

The Chinese constitute 37% of the population and Indians 11%. The Indians are mainly Hindus and speak Tamil. The Chinese are much more diverse in their religion and dialect, arriving from China in the late 19th century to work the tin mines, small cottage industries and restaurants. Chinese currently dominate the business sector. Entrenched in the older generation is a perception that they are "guests" of the country, thus the opposition's politicised notion of "second class citizens". The older generation still retains strong ties with China. Many still choose to send their children to independent vernacular schools where the curriculum is influenced by Confucianistic teachings.

The Indians migrated to Malaya during British rule as indentured labour from South India. They mainly worked in the rubber plantations and railways. Pockets of Indian Muslims, locally known as "mamaks", today dominate the Muslim food and "*teh tarik*" (tea) eateries. However, today's Indian intelligentsia have carved a niche in public administration and in the professions of medicine, engineering, law and academia.

Differences in religion, ethnicity, language, and structural imbalance remain a dividing force despite the government's attempt at communal integration since the race riots in May 1969. The government instituted a series of affirmative action New Economic Policies (NEPs) in 1971 to raise

