

## Rise of the 5th Estate: How Online Public Discourse on Najib Razak's 1MDB Scandal Foreshadowed *Pakatan Harapan's* Win in the 14th General Election

NUR HANIZ MOHD NOR  
*Taylors University, Malaysia*

AMIRA FIRDAUS  
SURINDERPAL KAUR  
*University Malaya*

### ABSTRACT

Public discourse commonly takes place in public forums of free media. The 4th estate provides an external dimension to the democratic check and balance to the executive (1st estate), the legislative (2nd estate), and the judiciary (3rd estate). This paper discusses the rise of a social media 5th estate, as exemplified by online public discourse surrounding the 1 Malaysia Development Berhad (1MDB) scandal, and the country's ensuing electoral change of government. Drawing upon thematic analyses of 1MDB-related comments in the official Facebook page of Free Malaysia Today, this paper illustrates the rise of a social media 5th estate in the run-up to *Pakatan Harapan's* win in the Malaysian 2018 14th General Election. Since international public disclosure in 2015 of former Malaysian premier Najib Razak's purported siphoning of billions of ringgit from 1MDB, the scandal continues to be a trending topic on Malaysian social media. The online discourse of 1MDB evolved from heated posts discussing Najib's culpability and criticism of his *Barisan Nasional* administration, into support to the opposition *Pakatan Harapan* coalition, particularly in the run-up to the 14th Malaysian General Elections (GE14) that was held on 9th May 2018. *Pakatan Harapan's* win, following the social media support, exemplifies the power of a netizen-fuelled 5th estate.

**Keywords:** *GE14, Pakatan Harapan, 1MDB, Najib, Barisan Nasional.*

### INTRODUCTION

Since independence Malaysia has been ruled for 60 years by the *Barisan Nasional* (BN), however, the political landscape has changed after the 14th Malaysian General Election (Loh & Netto, 2018). BN a politically dominant party who won 13th Malaysian General Elections up till the year 2018 and 6 Malaysian Prime Ministers were from BN.

The 1MDB political scandal has changed Malaysia's political landscape where BN was ousted in the 14th general election. This is due to the 3 years of frustration Malaysian netizens experienced with vague explanations from the then Prime Minister, Najib Razak on 1MDB, only through elections they could realize their online dissatisfaction to real actions.

In the early stage of the expose, Najib was alleged to have siphoned RM2.6 billion believed to be from 1MDB into his personal accounts (Sarawak Report, 2015). Other allegations affiliated with 1MDB followed in the next two years, making Najib the 'First Malaysian Prime Minister' to be associated with serious international financial scandals.

Though various online expose on 1MDB had been made known to the public since 2015, Najib denied the allegations (The Guardian, 2018). His denial angered many Malaysians and they turned to the online platform to express their dissatisfaction. Our previous research on the online discourse found that any news item published by local online news portals on 1MDB attracted comment of discontent among Malaysian netizens unhappy with Najib (Mohd

Nor, 2019). In the midst of the commotion (2015-2017) on 1MDB, former Malaysian Prime Minister, Tun Mahathir Mohammad left UMNO (Najib's party) due to his discontent of Najib.

In 2016, Mahathir formed Malaysian United Indigenous Party, known as BERSATU. On 12 November 2016, Mahathir announced that BERSATU would be part of the opposition coalition named as *Pakatan Harapan* (PH), alongside People's Justice Party (PKR), Democratic Action Party (DAP), and National Trust Party (AMANAH) with Mahathir being elected as the chairperson of the coalition (Goh, 2016). The only opposition political party which did not join PH was the Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS) who felt that PH's policy was not aligned to theirs. PAS an Islamic based party contested the election on their own.

January 2018, Malaysians saw a window of opportunity to voice their dissatisfaction when the general election was rumoured to be held in May 2018. The online discourse particularly in Facebook from January 2018 to May 2018 portrayed that the majority of Malaysian were 'united' in wanting a change of government, acknowledging that Mahathir who was regarded as a credible Prime Minister candidate was 'the change and hero' that they 'need' to put an end to Najib and 1MDB (Mohd Nor, 2019).

This study portrays the rise of social media as the 5th estate and how the online discourse on 1MDB foreshadowed *Pakatan Harapan's* win in the Malaysian 14th General Election.

#### 1MDB (2015 TO 2018)

In relation to the background on how the Malaysian netizens put an end to the Najib and 1MDB, below is the brief timeline of how the events unfolded till Najib's charges in 2018;

According to Channel News Asia (2018), the state investment fund, 1MDB, was the first thrust into the global spotlight in July 2015, when the Wall Street Journal reported that up to US\$700 million were channelled to Najib's personal accounts from various companies linked to the fund. Since then, Switzerland, the United States and Singapore launched probes into the 1MDB-linked fund. The 1MDB scandal the biggest in Malaysian history involved more than US\$10 billion - was a key topic in the online discussion during the general election.

According to Mohd Nor (2019), in 2015, Sarawak Report and the Wall Street Journal did an online expose when it leaked details as to how 1MDB funds were routed to Najib's personal account. Many found the news shocking and if these allegations were true, affects his credibility as the Prime Minister. Since day one, Najib remained silent and the former Deputy Prime Minister, Muhyiddin Yassin, felt that Najib did not address the 1MDB matter transparently and demanded a clear justification to end the public's speculation which Muhyiddin addressed in one of his political rallies. A month later, Najib reshuffled the cabinet and Muhyiddin was removed from the administration. In Najib's statement during the cabinet reshuffle announcement (The Straits Times, 2015), he said as a Cabinet minister, differing views and opinions should not be aired in public which can negatively impact the perception of the government. It is also against the concept of collective responsibility. In the same day, a couple of ministers and the Attorney General, Gani Patail were asked to leave the administration. Najib had appointed a new AG, Apandi Ali, who subsequently cleared his association with 1MDB. Though that move was made to clear Najib's name, the public was not convinced.

In 2016, several countries that are said to be involved in the 1MDB saga aided the investigation on 1MDB (Mohd Nor, 2019). The Federal Bureau Investigation (FBI) from the United States of America conducted an extensive inquiry and charges were made against

Najib's stepson, Riza Aziz, who funded a couple of Hollywood films using 1MDB funds, added Mohd Nor. The online discourse in various social networking sites among Malaysians intensified, accusing Najib and his family as 'thieves' robbing Malaysians their hard-earned money for their personal interest. In 2017, specifically on Facebook, the online discourse of 1MDB had on and off moments, as reported by the local media, as Najib was still holding the highest power in Malaysia. Netizens could only observe and wait, hoping that international assistance could intervene and solve the 1MDB political scandal (Mohd Nor, 2019). This was because they believed that Najib would not come 'clean and transparent on 1MDB' based on his response to the allegations made before the media. Due to this long-awaited frustration, mainly on Najib and 1MDB, Malaysians decided to hand over the government to *Pakatan Harapan* in the 14th Malaysian General Election.

After BN's loss, Najib was first charged in July 2018 for the SRC International case (Free Malaysia Today, 2018). In October 2018, the Malaysian High court charged Rosmah (Najib's wife) to 17 counts of money laundering. Though the charges were not 1MDB related, the online Malaysian public believes that eventually she too will face charges on 1MDB. Meanwhile, Riza Aziz was charged by the United States department of justice for using the 1MDB funds to produce his Hollywood film ventures, *Wolf of Wall Street*, *Dumb and Dumber* and for his leisure.

Low Taek Jho is another key person associated with the allegations. Jho Low is regarded as the 'mastermind' of the scandal as he was said to have been entrusted by Najib to organize 1MDB investments for Malaysia (Mohd Nor, 2019). Yet his name did not appear in the online discourse as to Malaysians, 1MDB was more of a local political scandal.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### *Online Discourse and Facebook*

According to Elareshi, Alsirdi and Ziani (2020), the growth of the Internet has enabled many people to communicate and engage in different manners and it is easier than ever now to obtain news and information content via different online settings. Taibi and Na (2020) agree that the rise of the Internet and social media have provided alternative ways for people to access information. Communication technologies have given a new platform for ordinary people outside of the journalism profession to become content creators instead of content users. These avid content users of the Internet are known as netizens. Where Hauben (1997) defined netizen as somebody who has demonstrated a devotion to being a good citizen of an online community. In today's digital age, commenting on various issues are part and parcel of being a netizen.

Netizens' comments are part of a political conversation as identified from the literature on deliberative democracy (Held, 2006; Koch, 1991) and the public sphere (Dewey, 1991; Habermas, 1974). According to (Allen & Light, 2015) a political conversation is a conversation between two or more people on matters of common interest. In defining a political conversation, an emphasis is placed on two criteria (1) the conversation should be focused on common issues and (2) there should be a mutual commitment and responsiveness, for instance, a genuine interest in listening to other participants. In exploring the netizens perception of the 1MDB scandal, the discourse could be interpreted as a part of a political conversation occurring in the online sphere.

Numerous online discussions of political and social issues have occurred over interactive channels including the Usenet (Davis, 1999), bulletin boards (Brundidge, 2006; Holt, 2004), emails, and chat rooms (Brundidge, 2006). Several scholars argued that Internet communication serves as an excellent portal for debate among persons of varied opinions and beliefs. Holt (2004) stated that,

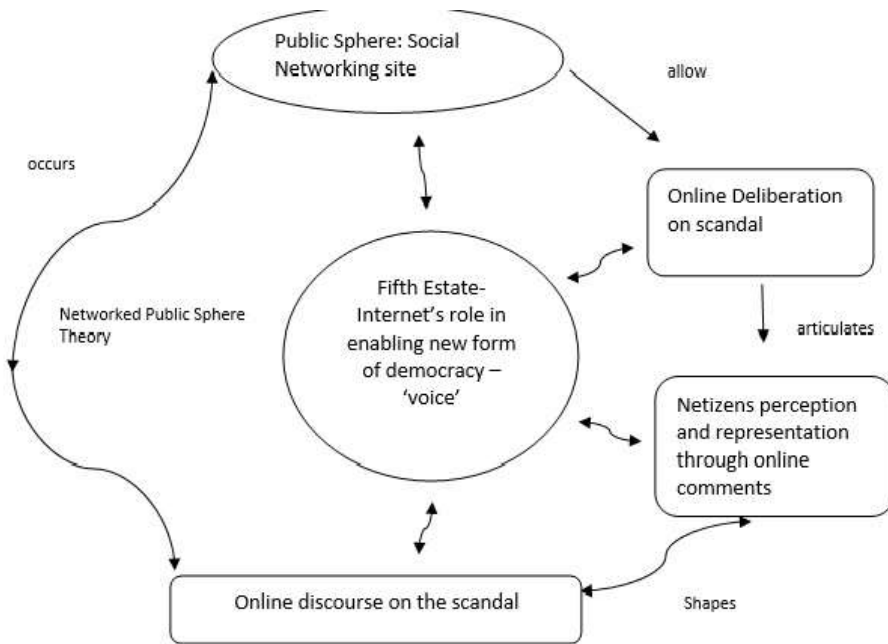
The ability of the Internet to unite those of disparate backgrounds has great potential for fostering debate and discussion of issues in the civic arena. In many cases, differences of opinion about, for example, political issues arise from lack of familiarity with the perspectives of other people.

Since Facebook is an online space where political expression occurs on profiles through friend associations with candidates and associations with groups and political applications (Williams & Gulati, 2007), there is likely potential for users to receive political information about friends in their network, such as their political stances, affiliations, and membership in political Facebook groups. Abdolreza, Hamedi and Sedigheh (2019) argued that the big difference of social networking site and other media is where the citizens are allowed to interject their opinions into the political atmosphere, to reach out in the way that is not possible before. These unique push features of Facebook may lead to increased inadvertent exposure to dissimilar viewpoints and ultimately lead to disagreeing parties to interact in a common discussion space. Such an occurrence may enhance the prospects for online political discussion to move beyond its described role of 'reinforcing pre-existing views'.

#### *Networked Public Sphere*

Habermas in 'Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere' (1989) explained that the classical concept of the public sphere is rooted in a framework of an emerging conventional state and economy and specific structures of civil society. The classical public sphere theory captures a dynamic of history, a point where reasoned discussion of politics is both possible and normative among certain groups. Friedland, Hove, and Rojas (2006) conceptualized public sphere as a mean to help the public to measure the gap between facts and norms in political life, the degree to which we act according to either the empirical dictates of power and strategy or a normative orientation towards the public good. In addition, Boyd (2010) quoted Ito (2008) who claimed that networked publics as a set of social, cultural, and technological developments had accompanied the growing engagement with digitally-networked media. Boyd asserted that though it paid particular attention to the networked media, the latter believed that scholars need to focus on ways in which this shapes the public, both in terms of space and collectives. In short, Boyd (2010) briefly highlighted that networked publics are publics that are restructured by networked technologies; they are simultaneously a space and a collection of people.

This study proposes an in-depth examination of Benkler's (2006) argument about the networked public sphere as it is substantially related to the study.



This conceptual framework will aid in this discussion of Malaysia's networked public sphere. Later it will examine how netizens shaped the online discourse on 14<sup>th</sup> General Election and affected the emergence of a Malaysian 5<sup>th</sup> Estate.

Figure 1: Fifth Estate- New Form of Democracy

### *The Fifth Estate*

In light of the development of information, communication, and technology, many scholars had initially doubted the potential of the Internet or how it could be used as a democratic tool. With the rapid changes that the Internet has brought to political transformations in many countries, it appears that the Internet is an important platform to facilitate public discourse, affect change and function as a 'Fifth Estate.'

The Fifth Estate concept evolves throughout the years, where the Internet has created a 'social trend' in emphasizing what kind of platform on the Internet is mostly being used by the netizens at that point of time. The idea of a 'Fifth Estate' dated to the 1960's counterculture when the influential *The Fifth Estate* was an underground newspaper that was first published in Detroit, the USA in 1965. Web-based technologies had enhanced the scope and power of the Fifth Estate far beyond the modest and boutique conditions of its beginnings. It started with Nimmo and Combs (1992) who claimed that political pundits constituted the Fifth Estate. Nimmo and Combs stated that political pundits are a small and elite group of persons who comment on and analyze politics in newspapers and news magazines, radio, and television through lectures, books, and all other forms of political media. Later in the year 2006, media researcher Stephen D Cooper, claimed that bloggers are the Fifth Estate. This is relatively true as it happens in Malaysia where from the year 2006 to 2009, a majority of Malaysians own blog accounts. This social trend of blogging was so popular among Malaysian netizens from 2008 to 2009, where everyone blogs their opinions on any particular issue.

In 2009, William Dutton arrived at a different concept of the 'Fifth Estate'. He argued that the Fifth Estate is not simply reserved for the blogging community nor is it an extension of the media, but 'networked individuals' who are enabled by the Internet (e.g., social media) in ways that can hold the other estates accountable. In Dutton's 'Inaugural Lecture Through

the Network of Networks-Fifth' (2008), it was emphasized that the Fifth Estate was designed to critically examine the Internet's role in enabling new forms of democratic social accountability and voice to be addressed, comparable to the Fourth Estate which is widely known as the press, enabled by the press in an earlier era.

In the context of the current study, the 'voice' could be assumed as means to examine whether the Dutton's argument of the Fifth Estate can be interpreted as a medium for the 'people's voice'. In a world where traditional media had to conform to the government's policies, there is no room for the mass to respond to the issues with their voice. Thus, netizens seek a platform that allows them to express their voices regardless of the issue. The very heart of democracy is the ability of the people to raise their voices (Smith, 2013).

#### METHODOLOGY

The online news portal, Free Malaysia Today (FMT) Facebook page is used in the study to explore the online discourse by netizens throughout the 14th General Election, that gave rise to the emergence of the 5th Estate (social networking sites). Netizens' comments attached to a news item posted by FMT on their Facebook page which has either of these following keywords on their headlines: "1MDB" and "GE14" were examined. There was various local online news portal that reported similar issues yet Free Malaysia Today's news reports and netizens comments attached to the news item contained varied perceptions compared to the other three, making it ideal to gather comments from FMT.

In previous research using FMT by Mohd Nor (2019), a total of 62,159 comments on the online discourse of the 1MDB political scandal from 2015 to 2017 were collected. Malaysian netizens continued to intensify the online conversation from the beginning of 2018, with the hope that they could engineer their own change that they longed for through voting.

Using the qualitative content analysis approach, we invested a duration of 4 months and 9 days, from January up till 9th May of 2018 to collect a total of 20,924 comments using the keywords "1MDB" and "GE14". The period was particularly significant as it was the initial mention of the 14th Malaysian General Election in the online news portal up till the voting day.

To gather the perceptions of the netizens, the corpus of comments was thematically analysed using NVivo Pro 11 and NVivo Plus 12, where it was found that the themes of the online conversations on 1MDB and GE14 emerged and overlapped throughout the comments, resulting in the construction of the main themes of this particular study.

Out of 20,924, 9 comments were being randomly selected and highlighted on how the online discourse on 1MDB foreshadowed *Pakatan Harapan's* win the 14th General Election. These 9 comments are being portrayed in the analysis of posts related to 1MDB and the two themes of perceptions emerged from the online discourse. The researcher could not include all comments as it would be too overwhelming for the paper. Since FMT Official Facebook page is on "Public" mode, the extraction of comments was ethically conducted with no guidelines breached. No names or profile of netizens would appear throughout this study.

## RESULTS

*Brief analysis number of posts related to 1MDB.*

Table 1: Free Malaysia Today Facebook news postings on 1MDB

Month/Year	No of FB news postings on 1MDB	Total comments
January/2018	13 postings	478 comments
February/2018	9 postings	679 comments
March/2018	31 postings	2641 comments
April/2018	17 postings	1750 comments
May/2018(until 9 <sup>th</sup> May)	22 postings	4009 comments

Table 1 itemizes FMT Facebook linked news postings extracted from January 2018 to May 2018 that has the “1MDB” keyword in the news headline. From the start of 2018, the online discourse of 1MDB continues in January with 478 comments attached to 13 news postings. Though the postings lessened, the discourse continues with 679 comments attached to 9 postings in February and 2641 comments attached to 31 postings in March. In these 3 months, issues related to 1MDB continued, particularly focusing on how Najib still avoids answering his involvement in the scandal and denying allegations, and how *Pakatan Harapan* still questioning issues on 1MDB.

Among the netizen’s comments is one made by Netizen 1.

Netizen 1: But Mr. MO1 said there are no problems with 1 emdeebie??? It's making so much money....why shut it down?

Interpretation: This particular comment shows that Netizen 1 is well aware that Najib is being implied as Malaysian Official 1 due to the FBI charges that indicate funds used by Red Granite Pictures to produce the Hollywood movie, “Wolf of Wall Street” are from the 1MDB funds. Red Granite Pictures, a Hollywood film production company is owned by Riza Aziz (Najib’s stepson) and Jho Low (the mastermind of 1MDB). The FBI charges are made known to the public in an international media conference and the main perpetrator behind Malaysian Official 1, is Najib Razak himself as he was the current Prime Minister during the time charges were made known to the public.

“Emdeebie” is a lingo that Malaysian use in the comments mocking it by typing a word that sounds similar but spelt differently. Netizen 1 mocks the statement made by Irwan Serigar, the former chief treasurer of the country, as he issued a public statement saying that 1MDB is to shut down. However, Malaysian netizens want to make their views heard because they are angry with 1MDB.

Netizen 2: 1MDB was the brainchild of MO1, as a well thought out “*cepat kaya*” scheme to enrich himself and family with the help of the Jho Thief. And the rest is all the workings of the plan according to schedule until it was found out by eagle eyed patriotic people. Today, it is Malaysia's biggest financial scandal and the USA's biggest money laundering case.

Interpretation: Netizen 2 illustrates his extensive knowledge about the background of 1MDB. As stated in this comment, Netizen 2 implies and taunts that 1MDB is a multi-level marketing scheme to enrich Najib and his family with the help of Jho Low. It implies that the netizen knows that Jho Low is closely associated with Najib and viewed him as a thief as well. Netizen 2 said Najib's plan is going according to plan until Mahathir got to know about it.

Netizen 3: Sudahlah Najib, bagitau saja apa sebenarnya yang berlaku...

Translation: Enough Najib, please come clean.

Interpretation: This netizen's comment represents the voice of the majority of Malaysians tired of watching Najib denying all the allegations made against him. Due to the detailed investigations by credible sources on 1MDB, the Malaysian public believe that these 'allegations' have some truth to it. If "he" didn't do it, the allegations would not have surfaced. Netizen 3 urges Najib to stop "lying" and stop avoiding questions on 1MDB.

In April 2018, 1750 comments attached to 17 news postings were recorded. This was when the Malaysian government had dissolved Parliament and the 14th Malaysian General Election campaign was just initiated. In the Facebook news postings by FMT, the news revolved around how *Pakatan Harapan* promises to the public that they would resolve 1MDB and put an end to Najib's kleptocracy. While in the news, Najib's political party, *Barisan Nasional* were busy announcing policies to attract the Malaysian public's interests; one of the offers were the offer to upgrade of monthly incentives like *Bantuan Rakyat 1 Malaysia* (BR1M) and creating more job opportunities and incentives for the younger generation. It can be witnessed through the comments that Malaysian netizens did not want to support BN although their offer to the public was very appealing. In the online discourse, it could be seen that netizens were keen to end the 1MDB political scandal and Najib's administration by voting *Pakatan Harapan*, regarded as the only choice and hope for Malaysia to be 'good' again.

In May 2018, 4009 comments were found linked to 22 postings. This happened during the period when Malaysian netizens experienced euphoria, where their 'unity' in the online discourse turned to offline action after the 14th Malaysian General Election results announced that *Pakatan Harapan* ousted the long-time government, *Barisan Nasional* for the first time in Malaysian history. It can be argued that 1MDB is one of the dominant factors that contribute to the historical win.

#### *Brief Analysis of news postings related to the 14th Malaysian General Election.*

Table 2: Free Malaysia Today FB News postings on GE14

Month/Year	No of FB news postings on GE14	Total comments
January/2018	30 postings	1636 comments
February/2018	45 postings	1770 comments
March/2018	43 postings	1803 comments
April/2018	70 postings	3713 comments
May/2018	30 postings	2445 comments



Approaching the year 2018, the hype of 14th Malaysian General Election appeared in the online discourse by Malaysian netizens as it was rumoured at the end of 2017 that the general election was going to held anytime n in the middle of 2018. News postings linked to Facebook from various news portals were publishing politicians' comments about the general election, hence resulting in an increased number of comments on GE14, complementing the Facebook news posting on GE14. From January 2018 to March 2018, the number of comments increased from 1636 to 1803; similarly, in March 2018, the announcement of the Malaysian parliament to be dissolved was rumoured to be in April 2018. Malaysian netizens are united in their online discourse portraying their support for '*Pakatan Harapan*' to put a stop to Najib.

April 2018 was the month where all political parties in Malaysia introduced their policies to the Malaysian people in the run-up to the elections. The online discourse saw *Pakatan Harapan's* promises attracted the interests of Malaysian netizens by promising to put a stop to the '1MDB scandal', abolishing GST and student debt. It was seen that Mahathir was one of the major factors that made the Malaysian public supporting PH. This was clearly stated in the majority of the netizen's comments in relation to the GE14. With Mahathir's reputation of being the most credible Malaysian Prime Minister, netizens placed their trust in him through their votes to PH.

May 9th 2018, marked a change for Malaysia where *Pakatan Harapan* won the 14th General Election. Though the number of news postings was not high, netizens expressed their joy in the 2445 comments. From the massive corpus of comments that have been extracted for this particular study, two themes were developed based on the overlapping theme in the discourse. NVivo could not quantify the number of comments as it could only portray what kind of keywords caused overlap between one with another in the data. When processing the comments, NVivo indicated how many comments stated a particular 'keyword. There were comments that do not have the particular 'keyword' but applied the same meaning to a particular theme that has the 'keyword'.

In this section below, the study will be discussing the two themes emerge from the online discourse of Malaysian Netizens.

#### *1st theme – Criticism of Najib and ask him to step down*

This particular theme was the most highlighted theme, criticising Najib and asking him to step down. It initially started in 2015 since the 1MDB expose. Up till 2018, during the stint of study, the majority of netizens continued to criticise Najib in various ways, on his, his family or associates denial of involvement in the 1MDB scandal. Thorough observation on the corpus of comments revealed that 95% of the comments were critical of Najib's administration and pleading for him to step down for the betterment of Malaysia.

Netizen 4: We Malaysians should Vote Now, As None Confidence on the Leader and Najib. An election date must be set. Its the international Law. Then the government will be overthrown by the citizens of that country. Then the UN body, will come in, have a New election they will oversee the elections run smoothly, without any problems. I am very sure, most of you have seen and happened in other countries. Najib and his family, his UMNO buddy's will Run into hiding.

Interpretation: Netizen 4 provokes other netizens on the platform to vote *Pakatan Harapan* and oust Najib immediately. This is due to the media exposure on the 1MDB scandal. Due to the local media coverage indicating that Najib is delaying the 14<sup>th</sup> Malaysian General Elections, Netizen 4 expresses a strong opinion that elections should be set without further delay. Netizen 4 continued to express his rage by predicting that in the future, the Malaysian public will unite and oust Najib. This particular netizen believes that due to international historical events, the unity of the citizens could oust the government similar to the Arab Spring incident. This particular commenter believes this too could happen to Malaysia. Due to the unity of Malaysian citizens, Netizen 4 believes that then finally Najib will eventually realize the trouble that he is in when he is no longer in power.

Netizen 5: I am ready to vote a brand-new clean government.

Interpretation: This indicates that Netizen 5 perceives Najib's administration (*Barisan Nasional/UMNO*) is corrupted and declare his vote for PH.

Netizen 6: What nonsense is this? Why need to hint or wait for \"spark\" and act so coy about the election date? Just man up and announce so stop behaving like a 64-year-old about to lose virginity.

Interpretation: On the other hand, Netizen 6 expresses anger and frustration about the media coverage of the delay in the announcement of the 14<sup>th</sup> Malaysian General Elections and toying with the public's anticipation of the general elections. Netizen 6 demands Najib to man up and implies Najib is indecisive.

### *2nd theme – Support for Pakatan Harapan*

Due to the massive corpus of comments in this study, the researcher will provide an estimated percentage of comments based on the total comments of this particular research. Out of 20,924 comments for both keywords 1MDB and GE14, it is safe to say that 90% supported *Pakatan Harapan*. This is because the majority of netizens showed their long-suppressed dissatisfaction on how Najib dealt with the 1MDB issue in the discourse for the past two years, and they felt the next best option was to vote for PH to end their “misery” of lies and economy. During Najib's administration (2015), the Goods and Service Tax (GST) was introduced to at a 6% rate. This had angered Malaysians as they will have to pay more. Hence PH promised their voters if they were to be elected, one of their main policies would be abolishing the GST. Hence, with the weight of GST policy and anger caused by the avoidance of answering the 1MDB scandal, Malaysians unite to vote PH as a new start for Malaysia, ousting Najib administration and his political party for the first time in the last 60 years.

Netizen 7: ...giving any month, me still vote PH...

Interpretation: Netizen 7 states that at any time without no hesitation, his/her vote would only be for *Pakatan Harapan*.

Netizen 8: Are we ready!!! Tomorrow Tsunami Rakyat!!!

Interpretation: This comment is extracted from the particular posting before 9th May 2018. Netizen 8 shows the excitement and hope that Malaysians will unite as a big wave, Tsunami to vote for *Pakatan Harapan* during voting day.

Netizen 9: SPR failed to realize that they are making rakyat hate BN more for this coward action. If they don't cut it, rakyat will love what is being offered by *Harapan*. Like it or not, PH will win this psychology war. It's a well-played game by PH.

Interpretation: SPR is an acronym of *Suruhan Pilihanraya Malaysia* (Malaysian Election Commission). This particular comment was attached to the news posting that indicates SPR has chosen Wednesday, as a voting day that makes all netizens furious because it will be during a working day. This gives the impression to the netizens that the *Barisan Nasional* does not want to have a massive number of voters during Election Day (9 May 2018), so they (BN) could win. In previous general elections, the voting day would only be on a weekend so that everyone could have a chance to go back to their hometown to vote for their respective political parties. The decision on the voting day has angered many netizens, and Netizen 9 represents many Malaysians who are furious with SPR. Due to SPR's decision on this particular matter, Netizen 9 feels that this would only make Malaysians vote *Pakatan Harapan*. Concurrently, PH played this issue by issuing public statements about their stand that SPR is in favour of BN, making the netizens support PH. Netizen 9 is sure that this issue will make PH a more favorable party to vote for compared to BN.

#### *End of Findings and Analysis*

As seen in the discussion, it is clear that Malaysian netizens were collectively furious on how Najib dealt with the 1MDB scandal; by avoiding all questions regarding 1MDB, making the public's suspicion about the connection between Najib and the 1MDB money. This is partly due to all the official statements and news postings linked to the Free Malaysia Today Facebook Page that the netizens read, and analyze themselves before making any conclusions. Malaysians were in need of clarification, justification, and transparency from Najib on 1MDB yet he failed to convince the public about his involvement. By justifying that the RM 2.6 b found in his personal account was a donation from the Arab royalty, it worsens his public image. These Malaysian netizens were hoping the truth from Najib and with increased anger since 2015, Malaysian netizens saw a window of opportunity where they hoped to put an end to the scandal that tainted Malaysia. Approaching the 14<sup>th</sup> Malaysian General Elections in 2018, the online discourse increased with the majority of Malaysian netizens voiced out their support for *Pakatan Harapan*, and showed their hatred towards Najib and *Barisan Nasional*. The collective voices of the unity of voice of Malaysian netizens helped PH to emerge as the new government of Malaysia.

#### DISCUSSION

Since July 2015, collectively Malaysian netizens had a very dominant stand in their online discourses that they wanted Najib out of the government if he were to be found guilty of the 1MDB political scandal. The credibility of Najib Razak as a Prime Minister was deeply shaken in 2015 after the expose by Sarawak Report and Wall Street Journal. The majority of the comments attached to any news postings on 1MDB linked to FMT Facebook Page demanded

Najib to step down. Yet, with all the allegations were made against him, Najib did not take substantive actions that would convince the public that he was not involved. Public statements and actions that he issued through the media from 2015 to 2017 (reshuffled cabinet, changed Attorney General) convinced the public that he had something to hide. These sequences of actions had contributed to the downfall of Najib and *Barisan Nasional*. In the online discourse, most Malaysian netizens were highly disgusted with the name 'Najib and BN' and these were stated clearly in the comments attached to the news postings on the keyword of '1MDB'.

During the 1MDB chaos, Mahathir Mohammad (4th Prime Minister of Malaysia) became a prominent figure that continues to question Najib on his involvement in the scandal. Though Mahathir was persistent in questioning Najib, Najib kept silence about Mahathir's questions through official media statements. In 2016, Mahathir together with Muhyiddin (former Deputy Prime Minister) formed a new political party, Parti PriBumi Bersatu Malaysia (BERSATU) which joined alliances with all the opposition political parties in Malaysia (PKR, DAP, AMANAH) under the name of *Pakatan Harapan*. *Pakatan Harapan* became more relevant and significant with the existence of Mahathir as he was the longest serving Prime Minister of Malaysia. Mahathir's reputation as the most highly respected political figure in Malaysia made Malaysians trust *Pakatan Harapan*.

From 2016 to 2017, there was no window of opportunity to put a stop to the 1MDB political scandal. Malaysian netizens were relying on international authorities to investigate the scandal, yet nothing could be done locally as Najib was still in power. The 14th Malaysian General Election was the only hope to put an end to Najib and the 1MDB scandal. As stated in the Findings and Analysis section, Malaysians went euphoric as seen in their collective online comments and went offline to vote for *Pakatan Harapan* to be the new appointed Malaysian Government.

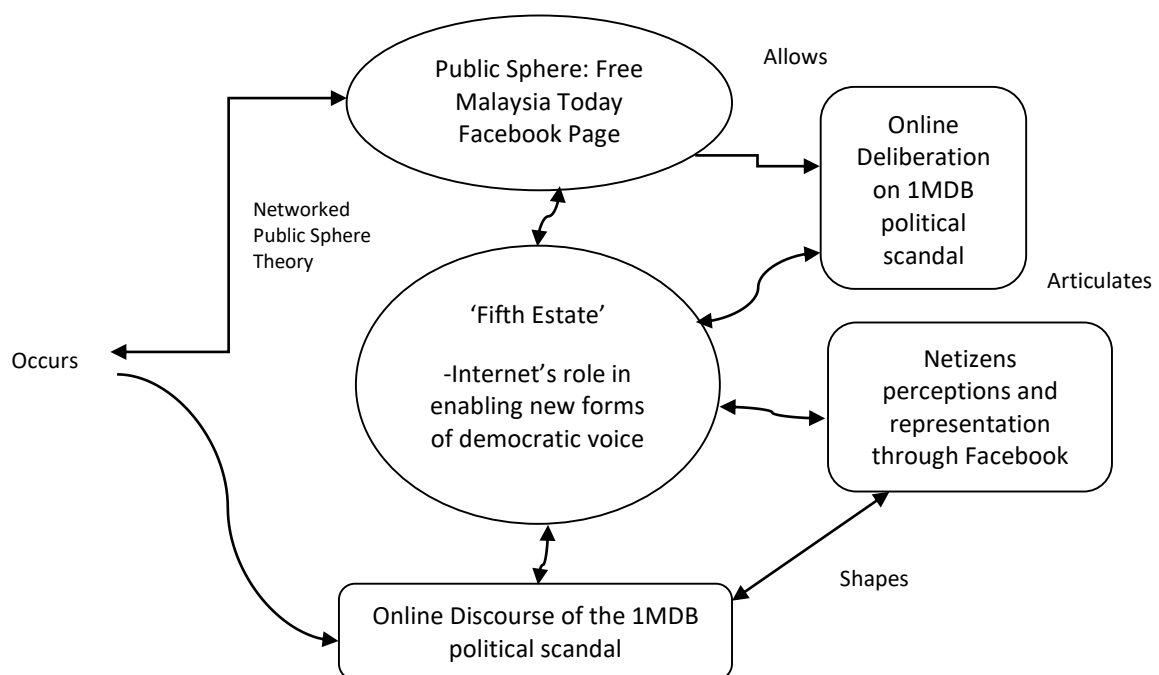


Figure 2: 1MDB and The Fifth Estate

Referring to the figure above, Free Malaysia Today served as a public sphere for Malaysians to have deliberations on 1MDB political scandal. With the comments section that a social networking site such as Facebook caters, it brings an increase of freedom to the individuals for information, knowledge and political expression (Benkler, 2006) that traditional media fails to cater. By reading the posting on 1MDB linked through FMT Facebook Page, netizens could apply three types of reading as suggested by Stuart Hall (1973) which are dominant, negotiated and oppositional reading and interpret the readings according to their perceptions in the comments section. Netizens' perceptions and representations of key personalities have an interdependent relationship with how FMT depicts the scandal. Thus, making the elements of a discourse interconnected with one another.

With the perceptions and representations of the key personalities by the netizens through the online discourse, it could be said that an online discourse serves as one of the elements in the emerging of the 'The Fifth Estate'. Smith (2013) argued that at the very heart of democracy is the ability of people to raise their voice. Through an online discourse, it provides voice and democracy to the nation. The 3 contrasting viewpoints that Dutton (2008) suggested were a combination of what the Fifth Estate is. Firstly, it is an emphasis on technical novelty. Secondly, a technically deterministic debate about whether the Internet is a technology fostering greater freedom or control.

In this study, the public is engaged in a big debate about a major issue and not merely conducting a conversation with one another. There are certainly some contestations between netizens on the perceptions and the representations of social actors along with the discourse, which resulted in the themes suggested in this study. With these themes, people can easily follow the development of the 1MDB issue and join existing members who had been part of the debate. Online discourse also has a bandwagon effect. With the existence of the Internet as the Fifth Estate, netizens have the power to express themselves and to influence and shape how people think.

The Internet is not a one-dimensional technology nor is it static. Instead, it merges several media into one medium. A set of current and imminent changes creates possibilities – social affordances – for how the Internet can influence everyday life (Wellman et al., 2003). With interactivity and a sense of anonymity, netizens are even stronger as a whole in voicing out their perceptions online.

Dutton (2007) stated in his inaugural lecture;

It is true that the Internet's broad social role in government and politics may have many similarities with that of traditional media, and it opens up other institutional arenas to greater social accountability – from everyday life to science.

Many assumed that the Internet may be just a 'trend' and will fall out of use someday. A fad can be briefly defined as an intense and widely shared enthusiasm for something. Looking at the evolution of the Internet and its usage, it is safe to say that the Internet is not just a passing fad as our society is becoming more dependent on the Internet in their daily lives. From sending emails at work to expressing one's thoughts on social networking sites, people are using the Internet on a day to day basis from all parts of the world. Meanwhile, on technologies of Freedom versus Control, Dutton continued to gather various inputs from

various communication scholars on whether the Internet is a technology of freedom or control in his summary below:

The optimistic view is that the Internet will tend to democratize access to information and undermine hierarchies. For example, the late Ithiel de Sola Pool (1983) viewed computer based-communication networks like the Internet as inherently democratic 'technologies of freedom. Dutton (1995) agreed with Pool and he stated that individuals can network with people, information, services, and technologies, in ways that follow and reinforce their personal self- interests.

The Internet is a space where both freedom and control is exerted. Internet users can express one's thoughts and that thought can also form a control. In the online discourse of the 1MDB political scandal leading to the general election, netizens are free to express their thoughts on the issue of 1MDB. It is seen that most netizens were unhappy with Najib's administration since the 1MDB expose in the year 2015. Approaching the polling day of the 14th Malaysian General Election, it was seen that the netizens expressed their votes for the opposition. This was because they felt that by voting *Pakatan Harapan* in the GE14, they could stop Najib and the 1MDB political scandal. On 9th May of 2018, history was made as Najib's *Barisan Nasional* lost their position as the federal government after ruling Malaysia for 60 years. That showed that the 'Voice of the People' had made an impact. The internet had become a platform for unity, giving power to PH to emerge as Malaysia's new government. This act of unity that Malaysians, specifically Malaysian netizens had in the last general election forms control.

Through an online discourse of the 1MDB political scandal, it is proven that it fosters both freedom and control depending on the individual's preference in tabling out their comments. Thirdly, the Internet is a technology network of networks that are being interconnected and shaped by netizens to reinforce the interests of Malaysian netizens on what they have to say in the 1MDB political scandal.

### CONCLUSION

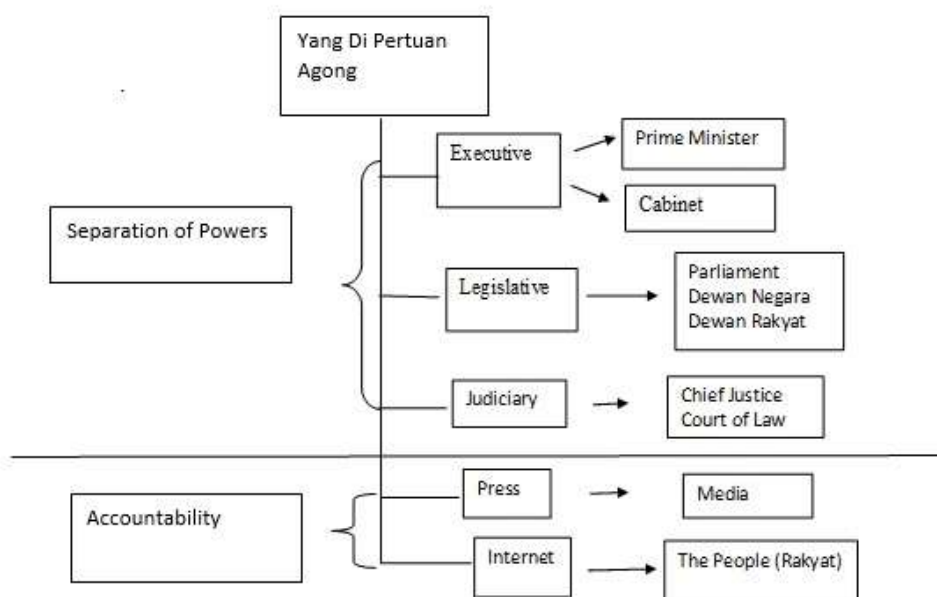


Figure 3: Social media as the 5th estate providing check and balance

The developed model in Figure 3 illustrates and proposes that Internet, or precisely, social media, could provide check and balance to the other existing four estates which are executive, legislative, judiciary and the press. For every democratic country, it is a convention to have separation of powers so that it limits any one branch from exercising the core functions of another. That separation of powers refers to the executive, legislative and judiciary. These powers that we termed 'estates' are monitored by the Fourth Estate which is the 'Press'. Though the 'Press' is not in the list of the 'Separation of Powers', it is being recognized as a form of power that holds the other previous three estates accountable for their actions.

When *Barisan Nasional* was in power, an ordinary citizen is not able to voice their concerns through these estates (executive, legislative and judiciary) because there were no rooms for them to do so. Hence, with the advent of the Internet, specifically social media like Facebook that Internet, freedom of speech is afforded to them and that freedom often translates into 'responsibility' that encourage them (Malaysian netizens) to 'do' something about an issue that bothers them, using the platform of the Internet. The online discourse of 1MDB by Malaysian netizens allows them to unite based on their 'dissatisfaction' about the issue. They have galvanized tremendous changes in choosing a new government for Malaysia, after 60 years of being governed by *Barisan Nasional*. Hence, this study proposes that the Internet (Social Media) emerges as a strong power of the 'People' that provides check and balance to the remaining four estates so that the power of the 'People' could not be undermined.

#### BIODATA

Dr. *Nur Haniz Mohd Nor* is currently a Senior Lecturer at the School of Media and Communication Studies (SOMAC), Taylors University Lakeside Campus. Her PhD thesis is on Netizens Perceptions on 1MDB in Free Malaysia Today. She is a UM graduate. Email: nurhaniz.mohdnor@taylors.edu.my

Dr. *Amira Sariyati Firdaus* is the Deputy Director at Academic Development Center (ADeC) University Malaya and holds the position of Senior Lecturer at Department of Media Studies, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, University of Malaya. Email: amira.firdaus@gmail.com

Assoc Prof. Dr. *Surinderpal Kaur a/p Chanan Singh* is the Deputy Dean (Postgraduate Studies) at the Faculty of Language and Linguistics, University of Malaya. Email: surinderpal\_kaur@um.edu.my

## REFERENCES

- Abdolreza Alami, Hamed Mohd Adnan, & Sedigheh Shakib Kotamjani (2019). Examining the impact of using social networks on political knowledge and political attitude by Iranian university students. *Jurnal Komunikasi: Malaysian Journal of Communication*, 35(3), 125-140.
- Allen, D., & Light, J. S. (2015). *From voice to influence*. Chicago: University of Chicago
- BBC News Online. (2013). Malaysia vote: PM Najib Razak's Barisan Nasional wins. Retrieved from <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-22422172>
- Benkler, Y. (2006). *The wealth of networks*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Boyd, D. (2010). Social network sites as networked publics: Affordances, dynamics and implications. In Z. Papacharissi (Ed.), *Networked self: Identity, community and cultures on social network sites*. NY: Routledge.
- Brundidge, J. (2010). Encountering "difference" in the contemporary public sphere: The contribution of the Internet to the heterogeneity of political discussion. *J. Commun*, 680-700.
- Brundidge, J. (2006). *The contribution of the Internet to the heterogeneity of political discussions network: Does the medium matter?*. Dresden, Germany: International Communication Association.
- Channel News Asia. (2018). 1MDB scandal: A timeline. Retrieved from <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/asia/1mdb-scandal-a-timeline-10254406>
- Chin, J., & Harding, A. (2015). 50 years of Malaysia: Federalism revisited. Singapore: Marshall Cavendish International.
- Davis, R. (1999). *The web of politics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Dewey, J. (1991). *The public and its problems*. Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press.
- Dutton, W. H. (2008). The fifth estate emerging through the network of networks. *Prometheus*, 27(1), 1-15.
- Free Malaysia Today. (2018). Najib may face over 10 CBT charges linked to SRC International. Retrieved from <https://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/nation/2018/07/03/najib-may-face-over-10-cbt-charges-linked-to-src-international/>
- Elareshi, M., Alsirdi, H., & Ziani, A.-K. (2020). Perceptions of Online Academics' and Al Jazeera.net's News Coverage of the Egyptian Political Transformation 2013-2014. *Jurnal Komunikasi: Malaysian Journal of Communication*, 36(1), 124-146.
- Friedland, L. A., Hove, T., & Rojas, H. (2006). *The networked public sphere*. Javnost: The Public.
- Goh, M. (2016). Malaysia's opposition band together under new Pakatan Harapan alliance. *Channel News Asia*.
- Habermas, J. (1974). The public sphere: An encyclopedia article (1964). *New German Critique*, 3(Autumn), 49-55.
- Habermas, J. (1989). *The structural transformation of a public sphere*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Hauben, M., & Hauben, R. (1997). *Netizens: On the history and impact of usenet and the Internet*. Los Alamitos, CA: Wiley-IEEE Computer Society Pr.
- Hauben, M., & Hauben, R. (1998). *Netizens: On the history and impact of usenet and the Internet*. *First Monday*, 3(7). <https://doi.org/10.5210/fm.v3i7.605>
- Held, D. (2006). *Models of democracy* (3rd ed.). UK: Polity Press.
- Holt, R. (2004). *Dialogue and the Internet: Language, civic identity, and computer-mediated communication*. Westport: Praeger.



- Ito, M. (2008). Introduction in networked publics. In Koch, H. (Ed.), (1945/1991), *Hvad er demokrati?* (5th ed). Copenhagen: Gyldendal.
- Loh, F., & Netto, A. (2018). Regime change in Malaysia - GE14 and the end of UMNO-BN's 60 year rule. Selangor, Malaysia: Strategic Information and Research Development Centre.
- Mohd Nor, N. (2019). *Netizens perceptions on 1MDB in Free Malaysia today* (PhD. Thesis, University of Malaya, Malaysia).
- Nadzri, M. (2019). The 14th general election, the fall of Barisan Nasional, and political development in Malaysia, 1957-2018. *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs*, 37(3).
- Nimmo, D., & Combs, J. E. (1992). *The political pundits*. USA: Greenwood Publishing Group.
- Sarawak Report*. (2015). Sensational findings! - Prime minister Najib Razak's personal accounts linked to 1MDB money trail Malaysia exclusive! Retrieved from <https://www.sarawakreport.org/2015/07/sensational-findings-prime-minister-najib-razaks-personal-accounts-linked-to-1mdb-money-trail-malaysia-exclusive/>
- Smith, C. (2013, September 13). Strengthening voices for democracy. *Our world - United Nations University*. Retrieved on September 13, 2018, from <https://ourworld.unu.edu/en/strengthening-voices-for-democracy>
- Taibi, M., & Na, T. Y. (2020). The changes of media landscape in Malaysia: How citizen journalism poses threats to traditional media. *Jurnal Komunikasi: Malaysian Journal of Communication*, 36(1), 369-380.
- The Guardian*. (2018). 'I know what's right and what's wrong': Najib Razak denies responsibility for 1MDB scandal. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jun/21/najib-razak-denies-1mdb-scandal-i-know-whats-right-and-wrong->
- The Straits Times*. (2015). Najib sacks DPM, four ministers and A-G. Retrieved from <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/najib-sacks-dpm-four-ministers-and-a-g>