

The new social media legislation in Malaysia i.e. 'Anti-Fake News bill' was approved after a heated debate with 123 lawmakers voting for it and 64 against. The bill originally proposed a 10-year jail term and a fine of up to 500,000 ringgit (\$128,000) for offenders, but the government later reduced the maximum prison sentence to six years. - **Dr Vignesh Ram\***

Malaysia is gearing up for its general elections scheduled to be held on May 9, with a tight race between incumbent Prime Minister Najib Razak and former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad. In the run-up to the elections, there have been a number of moves made by the ruling party which analysts around the world have contended, including manipulation of voters. While most of these exercises take place all around the world, the recent focus in Malaysia has been on the back of serious allegations of the current PM Najib Razak who has been entangled in one of the most serious scandals in the world. The 1MDB scandal has been actively pursuing frauds in the United States as well.



Malaysia's Prime Minister Najib Razak (left) and former prime minister Mahathir Mohammad. Photo: REUTERS, EPA

Domestically, however, the scenario is much different. The opposition has not left any stone unturned to indicate the complicity of PM Najib in the scam. Malaysian Press, for instance, has been actively reporting or in some cases staying away from controversy in implicating the PM in the case. The advent of social media has changed the way in which news is transmitted and elections are won. The race to influence voter sentiment ahead of the polls has become now easier. The impact of new media is quite visible in Malaysia's election process. Every interested party seems to be in the fray of influencing their propaganda on social media. There has been suspected cyber warriors employed by political parties to counter and also influence social media users on platforms such as Twitter and Facebook. Similarly, new age voters mainly youth disillusioned with both political parties are spearheading the #undirosak (spoil votes) movement. GE14 for all practical purposes is a 'social media' election.

For a long time, democracy in Southeast Asia has successfully 'adapted' to the local conditions. In many cases, strong men such as Lee Kuan Yew and Dr. Mahathir Mohammad built their countries with a strong grip on power and control over society and dissent.

All the ingredients of democracy existed but largely on paper, with local media and press resorting to 'self-censorship' to remain outside trouble. Nevertheless, those who did challenge the ruling establishment were faced with hefty libel cases which financially drained out coffers forcing them to shut down. The Far Eastern Economic Review was famous for its case lodged by the Singapore government leading to its closure. In the current context, in the age of social media, the historical tight grip over media is seldom possible. The decentralized nature of the internet has made everyone an active participant. However, challenging the government still remains out of fashion. Many bloggers criticising the government have been put behind bars, while writings critical of the government are attacked and taken offline. Some have even fled the country fearing jail.

The downside of social media based information dissemination has been fake news which has the ability to spread fast and without warning, possibly attaining an enormous momentum with a low reaction time to top it. This type of false information dissemination can cause chaos in a democratic society. The paradox of this information is that it works positively in case of authoritarian regimes where there is information restriction and negatively in democratic societies where it may lead to restriction of freedoms due to fear of regime instability.



However, there is always the third way. Semi-democratic or in fact even established democracies often see the media as a threat to political power. Therefore, though the fears of fake news are genuine, the suppression of it for a fairer internet may be just one of the objectives. The new social media legislation in Malaysia i.e. 'Anti-Fake News bill' was approved after a heated debate with 123 lawmakers voting for it and 64 against. The bill originally proposed a 10-year jail term and a fine of up to 500,000 ringgit (\$128,000) for offenders, but the government later reduced the maximum prison sentence to six years.

This move has been severely criticised by social media users and activists who have seen this as an effort to silence the opposition and people from raking up

the 1MDB issue ahead of the polls.

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In the passing of the bill on 2 April 2018, the PM was quick to get on to twitter to clarify that the freedom of speech will not be curtailed and the government will not decide what constituted 'fake news' as stated earlier. This contradiction was seen as being problematic where previously the Information and Communication Minister was seen to have given a categorical statement that what was 'true' with regards to news pertaining to 1MDB would be decided by the government and everything else would be just fake news.

As Malaysia heads to the polls the biggest threat to a fair outcome at this point is the chance to cast votes and voice opinions. The palpable fear within the ruling class is steadily taking shape in the form of multiple bans on different ways in which dissent can surface. The toughest outlet of these fears and expressions seems to be the media. At best censorship on the internet has been highly unsuccessful in many of the countries around the world. However, the hallmark of a democracy remains the free press which is able to reflect the mood of the population. Nevertheless in the age of sensationalism and 24/7 news, 'producing content' versus 'creating content' has stirred the debate on fake news.

However, the real danger now lies in the likes of data theft and manipulation of voter sentiment in the form of a new 'psychological warfare' instituted by political parties on their own citizens to retain power and favor. Cambridge Analytica revealed its ugly head identifying Malaysia as one of the clients.

The political blame game now swinging between Mukhriz Mahathir and PM Najib on the services used by these organizations points to only one possibility. The ruling party manipulated votes in the previous elections as both were under the same BN/UMNO umbrella back then. In so far there has been no substantial disclosure in public hearings about how Cambridge Analytica operated in Malaysia but what is clear now is that the new threat to democracy is freedom of expression. Multiple ways have been tried but will it all boil down to an opposition advantage. It could very well be anybody's game at this point but Malaysia is surely in for a substantial shake-up of its consciousness in GE14.

[Read: The Dawn of New 'Hope': Will Malaysia See Change in GE14?](#)



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