



INTERVIEW WITH ROCKY BRU (AHIRUDIN ATTAN), PROMINENT BLOGGER AND PRESIDENT OF THE MALAYSIAN PRESS CLUB

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Interview conducted by panel members Shona Leppanen-Gibson (SLG), Vicknaraj Thanarajah (VT), and Wai Kiong Chan (WKC)

VT: When and why did you start blogging and what has been the reception thus far?

RB: I started blogging three years ago, that's in May or June – May 2006. Well not by choice, but out of – I suddenly found myself to be out of journalism, a career that I've had for 21 years til that point of time. Of course there was a story to my going out of journalism was because I fell out of favour with the administration then, so going back to newspapers at that time out of question. So blogging,



Ahirudin Attan, who blogs under the pen name of 'Rocky Bru'

blogging provided sort of a window for me to send my message across and I think I was lucky because the reception the first or second postings has been very good, it has been better than I ever expected. I have now collected over 11 million visitors, unique visitors over the three years, which is considered good for Malaysian standards.

SLG: Given your reputation of taking a keen interest in principles of ethics, integrity and transparency, do you see new media having a significant impact on Malaysian society?

RB: Yes, especially with the urban population. The more, what you call, the more affluent members of the society, those with the Internet, and Internet penetration in this country is quite good. I think it is more than 50 per cent and so the impact is quite widespread. And I think actually it's just going to grow because the Government is committed to achieve a I think 80 or 90 per cent Internet penetration by 2011 or 2012. The Government is spending about 12 billion Ringgit on this high speed broadband project, so one of the beneficiaries of this project would be the new media and those who depend on new media.

WKC: Rocky, what is your perspective on new media freedom and censorship?

RB: Thanks to Dr Mahathir Mohammad – the former Prime Minister we had for 22 years, very well known for his dictatorial tendencies, so people tell us. By – I don't know by what inspired him, but one day in the early 90s, he created, he made a promise that the Internet will not be censored by the Government of Malaysia. And that promise, with great difficulty, the Government of Abdullah Badawi, and now Najib Razak, have been, are compelled to keep that, they are compelled to keep that promise. So there is a lot of freedom on the Internet in Malaysia. I think a lot more than our neighbouring countries. A lot more also compared even with some developed countries. So I think that is something, something that even among Malaysians we don't realise that there is great freedom. There is great media freedom, new media freedom in Malaysia.

VT: Rocky, in your view is the influence of new media on the political system significant. Has it altered the dynamics of the relationship between politicians and citizens?

RB: I think that was answered in March 2008, the 12th General Election of Malaysia, when the new media was said to have been responsible for helping the opposition record an unprecedented performance. That the ruling coalition Barisan Nasional did so badly because they ignored the new media, especially the blogs. Yes, I think the impact of new media and blogs on politics in this country and on the way politicians go about their business especially in relation to the people, it has great impact and it has created a lot of changes there. For example you see now – I haven't the numbers but I think about half the members of Parliament in Malaysia blog or Tweet or are on Facebook or blah blah blah. I know of a couple of MPs who use blogs, who use their blogs, to make sure that their political rivals lose sleep. One is Wee Chee Kiong who started a weekly question by your people right using his blog. And there he used a lot of comments to come in, put pressure on his rivals, on Government agencies and he has been very effective. In fact he was part of the campaign against the construction of a new low cost airport. But of course his shtick is different from the rest of us. He was looking at why should the Government give this project to their cronies for example. But yes, it changed this politician's way of dealing with issues and dealing with his constituencies.

SLG: You've already alluded to the Bill of Guarantees under the Communication and Multimedia Act of 1998 which guarantees non-censorship of the Internet. What is your perspective on that Bill and what do you think is its legal status?

RB: I think it is there, it has not been challenged. I think the Government has tried very hard to be faithful to the spirit of the Bill of Guarantees and that is one of the things that the Government has

done right so far. The only way to go is for us to encourage the Government to improve the Bill of Guarantees.

WKC: Have you utilised new media applications to organise any activities or to lobby for certain causes?

RB: Yes, but I'm confined to – I'm very much confined to the blog, ok. I use the blog to, among other things, to help a group of other bloggers to change the Government in 2008, I think that is pretty well documented. There were several bloggers who just got together and said that – you know there were PAS bloggers – bloggers from the Islamic party – there was Raja Petra, there was me, there were pro-UMNO bloggers, who got together and said we need to change this Government. And then we use our blogs, and at the time we used *Malaysia Today* which belonged to Raja Petra to try and reach to the people and say that hey, this is the way to go. We told the people that we should not be afraid to change. But we did not go – we were not partisan in that sense. We did not say vote the Opposition, bring down the Barisan Nasional, no. We said that we should change the leadership back then, and we were promoting change in a non-violent way using the blogs.



The interview with Rocky Bru conducted by the NMIC Project Team

I also headed campaigns against the construction of 2 billion Ringgit airport, low cost airport, because of certain reasons, not political or anything, but because we thought that it was a waste. There was not enough study done into it. And we also defended – no, we also went against the takeover of National Heart Institute. Because the parties that wanted to take over this Institute were looking at it for very commercial gain, and this Institute has existed for over 20 years and it has saved the lives of many people who could not afford otherwise medical treatment anywhere else. So we to continue to look for campaigns such as this to try – this is a way of giving back to the people.

VT: What are your perspectives on social networking applications and sites from a socio-cultural and political perspective, ie Facebook, Twitter, blogging etc?

RB: What do I think of that? Well I am on Facebook, I am very interested to be on Twitter, and if I had the time I would, and my kids are all on MySpace. I think these are networks that have great

benefits to people individually, as well as society. Of course we see a lot of negativity, negative elements in it, people try to politicise – you know politics will try to get into all aspects of your life. But there are enough good things in these applications for me to recommend it to anyone even kids.

SLG: In terms of the democratic process, how has new media shaped the manner in which politicians communicate and the environment in which they operate?

RB: Before the election, before the General Election, the 12th General Election – we're talking about politicians? Ok, politicians divided into two categories as I see, as I see it. One, those who blog and read blogs, and two, those who don't blog and thought bloggers were evil, you know bloggers were negative elements, not good for democracy and blah blah blah. But after the election everything change. There is only one – well two ok, politicians who blog and they're from both divides now, Opposition and Government, and politicians who are going to blog. They will blog in one year, two months or whatever, but they will blog. They will adopt social applications like Twitter, Facebook, and things like that. So that's, basically everyone has embraced new media now, and new media since there is no control, Government control over new media, I can see it is only going to, this is the media that is going to spearhead changes on the democratic process in this country. For good or for bad we have yet to see, you know.

WKC: Taking into account the results of the 12th General Elections in 2008, and its new media participants, do you think the Malaysian Government is likely to introduce measures to curb or to limit the effects of new media on the political process?

RB: No, I don't see that happening, at least not under the current leadership. I know after 2008, even before, slightly before that, there were attempts to intimidate the new media even to a point where the Government was quite threatening, but I think we have passed that. I think the Government is not going to meet the new media participants head on. I think what the Government is doing now, and I think they are doing the right thing, is to engage the new media, and to be part of the new media, itself, and of course to engage the new media and to use some of its (*inaudible*) as their own propaganda tools, which is to be expected, because government's have used the media, the old media if you call it that, for decades, for a hundred years. So they have turned around and they have seen that this is something that could benefit them, and the Government is now using the new media for its own purpose. Which is where the danger lies – not the danger, where the whole play comes in. Now you have both Opposition and Government fighting for control over the new media, which means that the people, the citizens will have to be more judicious when they surf blogs, when they read news on the new media, because if the people see the mainstream media or

the traditional media could not be trusted back then, now they will have the same problem with the new media.

WKC: However unlikely it might be, if the Government found itself in a very desperate situation and did try to clamp down on the new media, what would be your perspective on the matter and how do you think that would affect Malaysia's future?

RB: I think people will remember, or we will make people remember that, this is a Government that has broken its promise to the people as well as to the world, that we will not ever censor the Internet, that's one. Two, I don't think the Government can ever win the hearts and minds of the people if they were ever to get desperate and resort to clamping down the Internet. If you look at



the way the Opposition now, the growing, the more powerful Opposition that we have now, they are clamping on the tradition media, they're clamping on newspapers that they said are controlled by the Government , you know. They are not winning any sympathies from the people because they are still clamping on the media. So they are losing a lot of good will there. So if the

Government is, the Federal Government, or the State Government that is governed by DAP, or PAS, or UMNO, irrespective, any of them clamp down on the media, they are not going to win any points. Because this is no longer a Malaysian – the field of new media is not just confined to Malaysia, it is a global field, so they will not just have to answer to the people but the rest of the world as well.

VT: Rocky, in your view, under Prime Minister Badawi's leadership, did the national Government deal with the challenges of new media adequately?

RB: I call him Pak Lah, we call the Prime Minister Pak Lah whether we like him or not, it is a term of endearment. But what Pak Lah did with regard to the new media is to teach, or to tell his successor, or to tell other leaders, whether you're leaders of corporations, whether you're leaders of the community, how not to deal with the new media. Because, I think in my mind Pak Lah's greatest mistake was to make the new media his enemy, ok. He confronted the new media, he accused the new media, he wanted to black out the new media because the new media was not supportive of him. What his Government did not realise then was that the new media was a monopoly back then, was dominated by the Opposition. What he should have done was engage the new media, use the

new media for his own, his Government's own purpose but he did not do that. He fought the new media and I think he did very badly as a result of that.

VT: Also following from that, Prime Minister Najib has taken a very public leadership role in engaging with new media. What is your view or perspective of his approach?

RB: I think he has, what he has done so far, he learned from the mistakes of his predecessor, but in terms of really engaging the bloggers for example, he hasn't done much PR, he hasn't gone down to meet the participants of the new media. Of course, there was one time when he did his briefing to the top editors in this country, his first briefing, he invited me along, and I got the invitation, and it was to the shock of everyone because I wasn't part of the mainstream media, I was a blogger. That gave out a bit of 'hey', people in the bloggersphere got excited over that, but of course he did not follow up on that. But yes, but if you see, if you take into consideration that Prime Minister Najib had been so maligned by the media even before, long before he become the Prime Minister. You know the accusation about he was involved in the purchase of submarines, Altantuya, all appeared in new media, and the one good thing he has done, is that he has not taken any of these blogs or portals to court. He has not done that and he has not even given out the warning that 'I will sue you if you...'. No, he did not do that, which is a good thing, and he did not, the Government has not taken action against any of these blogs that are said to have fabricated news about him on these accusations. So in a way this is good. But what he really needs to do is he needs to find a way to get to the individual bloggers, because these are all citizen, these are all citizen journalists, get them to understand his policies, because these are the people who if they can be convinced that Prime Minister Najib policies will do good to the people, they will spread it without having to have the Government start any propaganda machine to control the new media. That is my opinion.

SLG: One of the hypotheses of this report and project will be that new media engagement, political engagement is more advanced in Malaysia than it is in Australia currently. Do you agree with this theorem –

RB: Is it?

SLG: Well, that is our hypothesis.

RB: Ok!

SLG: Do you agree with this theorem, and if you do, why do you think that might be the case?

RB: I think, one, perhaps one reason why that could be true, is because the Australian media, the mainstream media, are freer than the mainstream media here. You see, one of the theories, and we

bloggers, and I'm also part of the mainstream media, I was a journalist for 21 years before I became a blogger. One of reasons why blogs are so influential, the new media is so influential in Malaysia, is because the mainstream media are so restricted, are so still repressed. So that is one of the things I was hoping Najib would do is to liberalise the old media. You know I think we have over two dozen regulations governing newspapers, television stations in this country, including you need to renew licence annually and blah blah blah. I think this is the best time for a Prime Minister of Malaysia to do away with all that and allow the journalists, allow them this state, to really embrace the freedom that is already available, really enjoy the freedom that is available in the new media and in the bloggersphere. One of the reasons, or perhaps the only reason, why the new media and the blogs in Malaysia are so more influential compared to the Australian blogs and new media is because of how the mainstream media are in their respective countries.

SLG: Rocky Bru, thank you very much for your time.

