



INTERVIEW WITH TUN DR MAHATHIR MOHAMAD, FORMER PRIME MINISTER OF MALAYSIA

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

SLG: Tun Dr Mahathir, in many ways, you have lead Malaysia for decades and still hold a significant role in shaping the nation. From this privileged perspective, do you see new media as having had a significant impact on Malaysian society?

MM: Well at different times it has different impact. When the people perceive that the print media is reporting what they believe is correct then they tend to read the print media and to follow news on the television. But when the people believe that the print media and the government controlled TV are not really reporting what is happening then people turn away from them and their next resort is of course to access the Internet and what they can get on the Internet.



Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad

VT: When and why did you start blogging under the pen name of Che Det?

MM: Well it has been slightly over a year now. I started in May, and – well it's now June, so it is more than a year, and I started this because I found myself cut off from the people because there appears to be a government directive that any news, any statement by me should not appear in the media, especially the main media. So because of that I decided that I would use the blog.

WKC: Tun Dr Mahathir, how many blog site visitors have you had since the inception of Che Det and how has it been received?

MM: I think it has been quite well received considering that in one year's time I managed to have almost 20 million visitors. By now I think it will be more than 20 million, so it has been, well, for me, a success.

WKC: Thinking about social networking in particular, do you view the role of such applications positively or negatively?

MM: It can be positive, it can be negative, because some people abuse the blogs, the Internet, by well, using bad words or spreading rumours and publishing lies, and things like that. But the people are usually able to discern when somebody is abusing the media. But for the most part the media is – the blogs have been very useful, for providing alternative source of news and for them to compare with what they see in the print media and the television.

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

MM: I think it has. It has played a very significant role especially as I said when the perception is that the government is controlling the media and not allowing certain views to be aired. At such times then the alternative media and the blogs become extremely powerful because people tend to believe now everything that is said in the blog, which may not necessarily be always true, but still people turn to the blog for another view of things, for alternative news.

SLG: When the Malaysian government was setting up the Multimedia Super Corridor and other infrastructure to support Internet based technologies in Malaysia, what were your expectations in the long run? Have these been met or have there been some surprises for you?

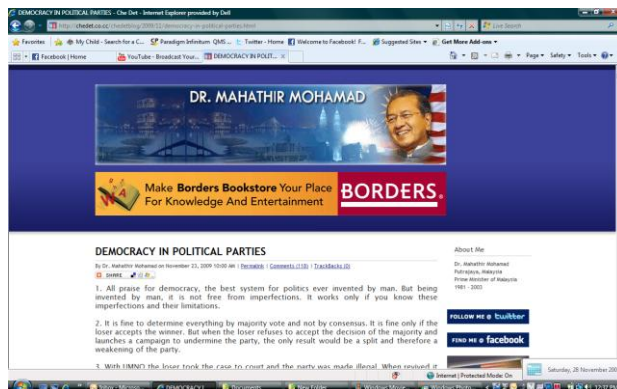
MM: My expectation was that more and more people would be able to use – find reason to use the computer because we saw the computer as playing a very big role in our lives. And it is important that people become familiar with the computer and therefore the Multimedia Super



The New Media and the Informed Citizen Project Team interviewing Tun Dr Mahathir

Corridor. And we have found that people take to the computer and the Internet much more than we expected them to and today they are using Facebook, they are using the blogs, they are reading all the information they need from the computer rather than going to the encyclopaedia for example, so this has played a great role in shaping even the thinking of the people.

VT: What was the purpose of the Bill of Guarantees Tun, which is provided for in the Multimedia Act of 1998? Were there are benefits of the Bill of Guarantees?



Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad's blog: [Che Det](http://www.che-det.com)

MM: Well we felt that with provision of this Bill of Guarantees more people would come to invest in Malaysia to start their business in Malaysia and we of course did not anticipate any abuses of the Internet for example, but of course we found later that the Internet that is open to abuse also. But by that time I think the Bill of Guarantees had been signed and we cannot go back on our word.

VT: Are the Bill of Guarantees still relevant today, Tun? From policy standpoint do you think it is wise to deviate away from the Bill of Guarantees?

MM: It is not wise to deviate from whatever promise that you make but as to the relevance I think – sometimes I feel that we should not have given that guarantee or it should be qualified. For example we see on the Internet a lot of pornography and this has lead actually to crimes. People on

drugs for example looking at pornographic pictures and all that might just go out and commit crimes. So that we cannot exclude now but I believe that some countries like Germany they have tried to put a stop to pornography getting into the Internet.

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

MM: No, I don't think so, I think he – you require a little bit of knowledge and comprehension about the power of the new media. If you don't understand it, it is difficult for you to counter abuses committed on the new media. So the government I'm afraid does not fully understand the significance and the spread of whatever gets into the new media because – whereas a newspaper published in Malaysia would probably be read only by Malaysians but what goes on the Internet reaches the whole world and on my blog for example I get responses from about thirty or forty different countries including Israel.

SLG: Prime Minister Najib has taken a very public leadership role in engaging with new media, as have you. What is your view of his approach given that Prime Minister Najib is actually a serving Prime Minister?

MM: Well it is good, it is a good move and it should have been done. But of course you must be able



The NMIC Project Team present Tun Dr Mahathir with a didgeridoo, a token of appreciation for his invaluable time and insightful comments

to speak to the people through the media in a language that they will understand and you must have the backing of the truth – if you tell something that the people cannot believe then they will still find that you are not making use of the media properly.

VT: Looking back at your time in Government, Tun, and looking forward to the future of new media in Malaysia, are there any issues that strike you that perhaps needed to be addressed, or currently needed to be addressed?

MM: Well I said just now there are some abuses particularly – where I am concerned, the easy access to pornography through this new media and this is destroying the morals of a lot of young people and I believe it is connected with an increased crime rate in many places and in Malaysia also. Because imagine a young person looking at pornography – he will get excited and he will do things which otherwise he would not do, and if somebody is on drugs it is even worse. We think that many crimes are related both to drugs and pornography.

WKC: Dr Mahathir, one of the hypotheses of this report – this project – is that political engagement via new media is more advanced in Malaysia than it is currently in Australia. Do you agree with this hypothesis, and if so, why do you believe this to be the case?

MM: I think there is ground for saying that it is much more – well the impact is much more in Malaysia, but I wouldn't be able to compare it with Australia. It is because of the perception of the people that the newspapers and the other media are not providing the correct information. They

see things are going wrong and yet they are told that everything is fine – once you do that, I mean if you do that repeatedly people will desert you and go towards the new media. So in Malaysia during elections a lot of data, facts came through the media and the politicians are not able to just dismiss them.

WKC: Tun Dr Mahathir, thank you so much.



The NMIC Project Team with Tun Dr Mahathir