INTERVIEW WITH SENATOR TUNKU ABDUL AZIZ IBRAHIM, DAP SENATOR, DAP VICE PRESIDENT, FORMER DIRECTOR OF COMMONWEALTH SECRETARIAT, FOUNDER OF TRANSPARENCY INTERNATIONAL MALAYSIA

1 July 2009, Home of Tunku Aziz, Damansara

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

VT: Tunku Aziz, when and why did you start blogging and what has the reception been?

TA: Well, I'm not a blogger in the traditional sense, in that you know – although I blog, if you like, I write two articles every week, one for *Sinn Chew*, which is a Chinese newspaper. Of course I don't write Chinese nor speak Chinese but it's translated into Chinese and they also then put my article in English on their own blog – it's called *MySinChew*. And I also write for the *Malaysian Insider* and what happens is a lot of other blogs take my articles and put on theirs as well, treating me as a 'guest columnist' because that's how I started writing to begin with. I used to write for the *New Sunday Times* weekly article for more than two years. But when I joined the DAP which is an opposition party in this country, I decided of my own volition that perhaps I had lost my independence as a non-partisan, non-political person. So I offered to withdraw from the *NST* and was then invited by *Sinn Chew* to write this weekly column for them and also by – ... So that's how I got into blogging which I found in fact extremely interesting, and fascinating.

Tunku Abdul Aziz, a highly respected leader in Malaysian business, NGOs, and now politics

VT: How has the reception been, your audience, your target audience? Do they receive you well?

TA: I think so, I think on the whole – because I touch on issues that are of real concern to this country. On corruption, on unethical public behaviour, which is not surprising, because you know I am a member of the International Institute of Public Ethics. And I write about good governance,

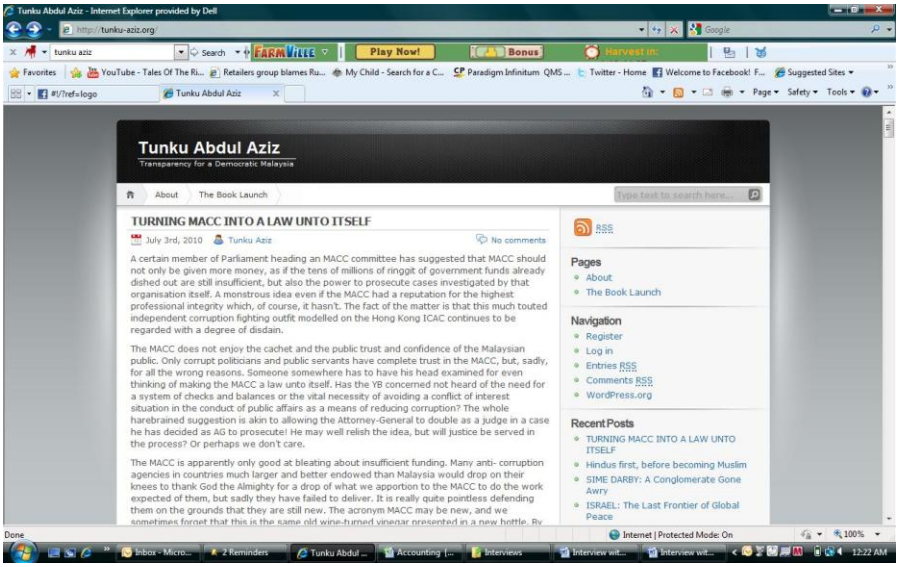
write about competitiveness in global terms and what do you have to do to be competitive. So you know it all comes back to the whole issue of good governance because if you have good governance you will have less of a problem with corruption.

WKC: Tunku Aziz, given your reputation for taking a keen interest in principles that embrace ethics, integrity and transparency, do you see new media as having a significant impact on Malaysian society?

TA: Well absolutely, I mean there is no question of that. The new media as you call it, you know was a totally ignored by the government to their cost because the recent elections – 8th of March I think – prove that the new media in fact had much greater impact than the mainstream media both electronic as well as the print media. A lot of that I think had and still has to do with the way people in this country perceive the government. They don't fully trust the government and for a very good reason and because of that they have tended to turn to an alternative source of information. So I think when you talk about the new media and the impact on the country as a whole then we are talking about something which is really revolutionary in the sense that people now have an alternative source whereas in the past it was basically listening to the government propaganda and the mainstream media including television and what have you, were and are still are owned by the major political parties in this country, you know the components of the Barisan Nasional. So from that point of view the government I think has lost its credibility – no one trusts the so called mainstream media anymore.

SLG: What is your perspective on new media freedom and censorship?

TA: Well I think the government is obviously not terribly happy because you know this is something that they cannot control although they, I am sure, would want to do it. Because they have passed a law – I think Raj knows all about this – with a promise that, an undertaking that there would be no interference, partly for commercial reasons because they wanted multimedia companies from abroad to locate



[Tunku Aziz's blog]

their operations here and they have had to give this assurance in order to give some comfort to those people who are investing in this country. But I think the government itself would rather not – I think they have regretted this freedom which they have extended to people using the Internet and what have you in this country.

VT: Tunku Aziz, 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?

TA: Certainly, the dynamics have changed – people look at politicians very differently from what they used to because there is a lot more scepticism, there are a lot more questions being asked. So people are not taking things for granted anymore, they are not taking things lying down, and people are writing, you know to – rather to the blogs or they are posting a lot of things nowadays, but also write to the mainstream media. If you look at letters to the editor for example, you find that there is a degree of openness you will notice this compared to the time when Mahathir was in power. You know the people are much more – they feel they are much more free to express their opinions even if they are dissenting opinions, they get published and I think that is again because of the impact of the new media because without the new media they would have total control of the mainstream media and therefore nowadays you know politicians cannot get away with their unethical behaviour as they used to be able to in the past. So that in itself is a major constraint which is good for the country.

WKC: Tunku Aziz, what is your perspective on the Bill of Guarantees under the Communication and Multimedia Act 1998 which guarantees non-censorship for the Internet and what is its legal status?

TA: I'm not quite sure about the legal status but it has now become part of the Malaysian law and therefore I think that guarantee, you know, should be accepted as a guarantee under the law. And so far I must say although the government has from time to time expressed unhappiness about the way the blogs are being run, but they feel that you know legally the blogs are out of bounds and therefore what they have to do is in fact to counter the blogs by setting out their own blogs – the Prime Minister has his own, but also supporters of BN have their own blogs etc. So obviously they are taking blogging seriously because I think they have learnt a bitter lesson in the last election because they failed to recognise the importance of blogging as a way of changing perceptions and changing the mindset.

SLG: Have you utilised new media applications yourself for your organisations or for your own personal activities, in order to organise any activities or lobby for certain causes?

TA: Yes in fact through my articles, my articles are in fact all about issues – national issues to do with race relations, to do with equality of opportunity, to do with discrimination. And all these have become I think very important features of my blogging if you like, although I don't really have a blog which is interactive and that kind of thing simply because I haven't got the time. You know doing two articles a week does take up a lot of time. In fact I just finished sending off one article to *Sinn Chew* before you came. But I think yes, the blog is certainly a wonderful means of advocacy, is certainly an important means of articulating issues which you regard as important, and which people regard as important, because otherwise there is no other avenue for expression of these views.

VT: Tunku Aziz, what are your perspectives on social networking applications and sites from a socio-cultural and political standpoint, for example applications like Facebook, Twitter, blogging etc?

TA: Well I am not very up-to-date on these new innovations. But I am sure they will make an impact in terms of social networking etc but you know, as I said I am not too familiar with Twitter for example – I don't know what it is. But a lot of my friends are into it. So there might be something in it.

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

TA: Well I think this is probably one of the key values the.. not just the shaping but the reshaping of political behaviour because I think politicians – whereas in the past they completely ignored the new media saying that they were irresponsible, they were not ethical in what they write, and so on and so forth, or in what they wrote. But today I think politicians take the new media seriously. They listen to what is being said and – For example, again we are talking about unethical behaviour, we are talking about corruption. The main issue now is the Port Klang free zone which is a huge scandal which will run out to more than 12.5 billion ringgit – it started off as a one point something billion project. So now this is now all over the blogs and they have to take this seriously. They have to take this seriously unlike in the past they could just sweep the whole thing under the carpet. They can't do this anymore because there are any number of blogs in Malaysia – I think Malaysia is one of the few countries which has taken full advantage of this new – if you like – new weapon for democracy.

Tunku Aziz and the NMIC Project Team during the interview at Tunku Aziz's home

SLG: 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?

TA: Well they might try but I think they won't succeed. First to do that would mean going against the undertaking they have given in legal terms and that would you know, that would create a lot of problems for them, loss of public confidence and what have you. So for now at least we hope they will have the sense not to trifle with the new media but to use the new media to their advantage in that. A lot of the criticism which appear on the blogs etc, many of them are legitimate criticism and I think they should do their best to reverse all this negative comments about how they run the affairs of this country. It is entirely up to them what and how they want to use the new media but certainly I do not believe they are stupid enough to bring in new laws to curb the blogs.

SLG: Going on from that question, if did occur, in the unlikely event that it did occur, what would be your stance on the matter? How would it affect Malaysia's future?

TA: Well I think it would affect Malaysia's future in very you know, what should I say, in very dramatic ways. First I think there would be a loss of public confidence within the country in the government and the government cannot afford that after the 8th of March. And secondly, it would be a minus point as far as foreign investors are concerned because if they can see that the Government cannot tolerate the blogs within their borders, there is something wrong. There is something wrong with the system. So, you know, it will work against them. You see they got a few brownie points when they put in this law not interfere and to give complete freedom et cetera et cetera and many companies, cyber companies from America and other places come to Malaysia and set up their operations in Cyberjaya et cetera. Because they believe that – this is the thing if you – if you want to get have cyber, get involved in cyber business, you cannot control – it's all out there. Let everybody have their freedom.

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

TA: No, but then Badawi I think never realised that there were challenges not just the new media. But there were challenges – there were economic challenges, there were social challenges, there were political challenges et cetera. But he seemed to take the view that Malaysia was on track and everything was going well and as long as he could promote his 'Islam Hadhari' everything would be fine, but he himself did not know what 'Islam Hadhari' was all about. Just as now we have the 1Malaysia concept, and I have asked the Prime Minister for his definition and he hasn't been able to

come up with anything. And in this case it is the new media that is forcing the government to focus on key critical issues. Now as far as Badawi was concerned, he didn't – I think he was very badly advised. He was probably told don't bother with this sort of side show if you like, and these are run by these irresponsible people and so on. And as I said, they learnt about the impact of the new media a bit late in the day. But now they are going to do something about that.

VT: Following from that, Prime Minister Najib has taken a very public leadership role engaging with new media. What is your view on his approach?

TA: Well, I think like everything new Prime Minister, he would like to be seen to be engaged. He would like to, if you like, to find new allies particularly in the media and you know his first visit to any newspaper company was *Sinn Chew*, the largest Chinese newspaper in the country, newspaper group in the country. No I think it is good, I think he should try to do this a bit more and try to understand what the papers are trying to do, what the media is trying to do, what the new media are trying to do. Because, we all function differently. The government has its own preserve if you like and the thing is don't interfere with the media because they have a job to do.

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

TA: I agree with that. I think in Malaysia, it is a function of need. Australia is a much more democratic society and people don't feel that there is such a strong need to start using the new media et cetera. So I think in Malaysia there is a need for that and people feel that there is no other way to get their views across, to articulate their concerns accept through the new media. It is nothing to do with Malaysians being more savvy in cyber technology or anything like that. But really it has a lot to do with the fact that there is a need in this country.

The NMIC Project Team with Tunku Aziz