



INTERVIEW WITH YB TIAN CHUA, MEMBER OF PARLIAMENT FOR BATU AND INFORMATION CHIEF FOR PARTI Keadilan Rakyat

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

WKC: Tian Chua, when and why did you start blogging and what has the reception been?

TC: I think I started blogging in 2006, end of 2006, maybe earlier in 2007 – I'm not too (sure), remember at the moment. Ok, it was one of the communication channels that I can interact with people. Actually I started not so seriously, just as a means to write down some of my thoughts and



Yang Berhormat Tian Chua Chang, Member of Parliament for Batu

also to share my life activities with people who are interested in me, in my political activities. It has not been very easy, because timing and ... Actually I was a bit more, I worked a lot more on my blogs previously than now, because as a Member of Parliament it is getting quite time consuming to do both. Whatever it is it has been quite interesting. It was a very direct way to discuss issues and express my ideas.

VT: Tian, given your reputation of taking a keen interest in principles that embrace ethics, integrity and transparency, do you see new media having a significant impact on Malaysian society?

TC: Ok – first of all, I think the issues of new media, what we see as the new media, it means basically media which is not conventional like print, or newspaper, or TV. The reasons that there is significant impacts on Malaysia, or even there is an influence on Malaysian public opinion, the formation of Malaysian public opinion, is because the traditional, conventional media has been so tightly controlled under the ruling parties, indirectly creating a new market for the so-called new media. I must admit that people in their habitual life, they still prefer to go for the prints, and to watch TV, and to listen to radio. Unfortunately in Malaysia, the political and repressive climate in

the media space is so tight that there is no other opportunity. As a result it is a big challenge for us, people who want to argue the alternative views, people who fight for justice and to fight against repression, has to find other channels to bring out our message. And that indirectly contributes to a very fertile, very dynamic scenario for the new media, like Internet, blogs and SMS, and other forms of more creative ways of communication.

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

TC: As I said, the issues here is – because dictatorships is an old concept, you know, and it come from – especially in this part of the world, countries like Malaysia and South East Asia. It is based, built on a concept that we need development, and we cannot afford liberty, we cannot afford human rights, we cannot afford democratic values like transparencies and rules of law et cetera et cetera. So the assumption is that people in South East Asia need to fill up their stomachs first and therefore we need an autocratic regime to deliver the economic goals. Unfortunately this scenario has changed. So the old censorships that (are) trying to prop up this autocratic regime, now is inconsistent with the economic growth. We cannot claim that growth and economic progress can be sustained with the controlled situation. In that sense there is a new shift in thinking. At the same time we also see more political leaders growing out of the civil society movement, growing out of the social movements, political parties that challenge the regime. But at the same time, media that is conventionally controlled by the regime (is) now also being challenged by more dynamic and more creative forces, like bloggers, like people who use Internet, websites and all sorts of other new media player. So I think that dynamic is going on and it is exciting and at the same time, this form of media is also become a battlefield for democracy beside the more conventional ones like the street actions, more conventional things, like the fight in the Parliament, and like elections and so on. So it actually compliments those mobilisation with a new realm being created where the players can be much more democratic and can allow citizens, it allow individuals to participate in it without going through the formal structural control.

WKC: Tian, in your view is the influence of new media on the political system significant and has it altered the dynamics of the relationship between politicians and citizens?

TC: Yes, as I said earlier now the demand is for direct communication. You know, people, including voters are demanding that they want to see for themselves and they will, instead of being spoon-fed with all the information that is structurally arranged a selected group of people, and normally politically – politically sanctioned. And now they can go to the cyber space and decide for their own what they are interested in and what type of personalities that they are more attracted to them, and

that changes the whole scenario and the Malaysian political development really reflect that change and that transformation. Of course I think a lot of people in power, until today maybe, they are still not aware of what actually went wrong. They basically just interpret that there is a sudden swing of mood and people change their minds about some, about the usual rules, the usual rules of the game. And that's why they thought they lose out. And in – to some extent there is a sense that it has been carried out by, the change was enabled because of a shift, a transformation in the way of communication. So people are no longer going to accept what has been given so they want to judge for themselves. And the user of new media would you know is under – they would have to play a new role altogether. The user of new media would have been given the ability, given the capacity for them to search for information and to compare those information. And this contributes to a change, and people now see that what has been given to them in the newspaper and TV, may not be, and has most of the time not been the truth. So then that entice them to take a step forward further to demand for change and they got now partially successful and that further enhance their confidence with their own power. With their keenness and their initiative to seek for more information, ultimately they have the power to change their own life. And that has changed the political landscape of Malaysia.

VT: Tian Chua, what is your perspective on the Bill of Guarantees under the Communication and Multimedia Act of 1998 which guarantees non-censorship for the Internet? What do you think is its legal and political status?



Tian Chua during the interview with the NMIC Project Team

TC: See, when they make a new Bill, there were no locals, domestics in mind – they were not thinking about Malaysian people's access of information. They're just thinking that Multimedia Super Corridor, this Internet, is a new very exciting tools to attract foreign investment, to bring you know some foreigners to come here to invest, and in order to make sure that they enjoy these freedoms, we are willing to give such

concessions. That's about all. I think the authority were not, they did not foresee the implications of the Internet because they basically don't understand new media. Basically they treat it like a new free trade zone. When you have a free trade zone, there is a lot of demands from the foreign company, they want this, they want that, they want certificate, they want to have certain guarantee. So the bureaucrats who make such law basically just said, 'yeah, ok, is you want all these things, and

in exchange you will bring billions of dollars come into the country, we're willing to give you that.' So that is why after such law being made you still see from time to time political interventions, as well as persecutions, of people who use Internet. *Malaysiakini* has been raided a few times, many of our bloggers have been charged in courts. Our famous Raja Petra's been sued, and you know. So intimidation, political persecutions against freedom of speech continue despite the guarantee. Because – precisely because their interpretation is that this is only a guarantee for commercial transaction, commercial activities, but it doesn't cover political activities. Yeah, I mean we can go to courts to fight it out, but as long as the authority holds such position and they will pick people up and they will use the police force and they will use their power to intimidate activists, this law is not an effective law to cover everybody. So finally it requires the authorities to understand how to keep an open and liberal mind towards critics, towards activities within the cyberspace and there is no way they can control. So this is what I think (is) lacking in our entire judiciary structure and there is no real law to ensure, first, freedom of information, where citizens have the rights to get information from the authority, there is no law that ensure that media in whatever form including the print and the broadcast are free from censorship and has the autonomy to report news, to report factually, so these are not there. There is no freedom from laws such as University and University College Act, Internal Security Act, Police Acts, and you know those – the acts that prevent people who gather more than four persons and all these things has to come hand in hand. Then civil liberties can be assured.

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

TC: Definitely, I think without that probably the civil society and the social movement will not be able to move at all. Since I say that the conventional media is so tightly controlled. You know rallies are organised and demonstrations are organised through the Internet's political campaign for any causes whether it is environmental issues, residents issues, it has been organised – what's it called – it's been organised through Internet, through the new media. You see even – in Malaysia any association including a small thing like a residents association, a neighbourhood centre, if they want to print a newsletter they require printing permit from the Ministry of Home Affairs. So it is almost impossible, I mean the bureaucracy to go in to getting a permit and those printing permit are renewable every year. And the censorship board will go through their magazine or newsletter and if anything critical they will be stopped. So how do you define critical? Again it's arbitrary, there is no objective measure to decide what is critical and what is subversive and what is anti-government. So it makes even a residents association impossible to issue a newsletter. So that's why the – like e-groups, Internet, including my neighbourhood centre is very useful. We get to know about, you

know, Chinese New Year celebrations, some's neighbourhood programme, some security issues, all get distributed and discussed through the e-group. So is has changed and there is no way anyone can monitor it. Of course they can but it will be a lot more resources. So that just means that the whole scenario has been opened up, that the old centralised system is no longer able to monitor and scrutinise activities of everybody. So in that sense it also enables civil action, whether it's a protest or handing out a memorandum – the drafting of that memorandum can be put on the net and let people have an input on it until you work out something that everyone agrees. Previously it was different – if you call a public meeting of your neighbourhood the police can come in and say that this is illegal, even if you want to talk about simple issues, about security, you know, the child safety on the roads. If the authority deems as threatening, they can always stop you. And gathering like this sometimes can be quite intimidating because many people do not dare to participate because there would be special branch police going down, taking pictures, you know, if public stand up to speak in a much more angry tone, they might be recorded by the special branch and they – people got a bit reserved and did not dare to participate and speak openly. With Internet this has all changed, this has seen a new dynamic develop which enable a much more – what shall I call – effective and efficient way of collecting public opinion and also to organise the communities.



WKC: What are your perspectives on social networking applications and sites from a socio-cultural and political standpoint, for example Facebook, Twitter, blogging etc?

TC: The new media is very challenging and the new wave of new applications coming all the time. It also gives room to creative people to devise new ways of communication. So, you know, just over ten years ago we have email and that was very exciting, you know, you can go through email, and then you have the website, and that has been improvement very quickly, and within a very short time you have blogs and now you have Facebook, you have Twitter, you have all sorts of new things that are coming out. And it is challenging and it sometimes can be exhausting, because there are so many forms and so it requires a lot of energy to catch up because things change so fast. If I don't surf for three months I think I look like a stone-age person when I return – return back to the cyberspace. This is the situation. It is also I think – all these new forms may eventually evolve into catering for different lifestyle, or different age group, or different niche groups. So – and that may

stabilise it a bit, otherwise there will be new waves of things coming in. So – but whatever it is, this is just the beginning. I think for a whole communication evolution, we – I mean I consider myself quite fortunate that in my lifetime you can see communication undergoing very rapid revolutionising process. You know from people get a mail with fax machine in my lifetime, before you know, getting fax machine was such an exciting thing that you can go through to send it, to Internet, and then from Internet to more and more really new horizon all the time in a very short time space. I think the pace is going to be much more getting faster and faster. I'm not saying this is all good, because there is quite a large number of people are going to be left behind, and I won't glorify the revolution as there will be no victims, it is not necessary because a lot of people could not catch up and lose their jobs. They going to (endure) lower qualities of life, and all other things that also entail with it. But at the same time it is really very substantial, very major social transformation that we are undergoing. And like it or not, while we still have the capacity we have to learn how to cope with it, learn how to survive the wave.

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

TC: Well, let's leave aside about how politicians communicate. Politicians do not communicate anything new. Politician is like a mirror, it just mimic what is in people's heart, right? Whoever can capture the majority's voice, they will get the popular support. So you can even treat politician as a brainless person! I mean, that's a bit exaggerated, but in that sense, it just trying to reiterate public opinion. So it's not so much how politicians communicate, because when people talk about politicians communicate, it is still an old model, as if like, there is a source of ideas, one brilliant politician who has a grand idea, a grand design for society, and he communicates. He or she communicates and then more people are convinced because it was a good idea. Then this person need to race against time to convince a larger group of people that these ideas work. Ok, to some extent it looks as if that way, but new media expose that actually it is not that way. It is not necessarily that way. The new media expose it is what I said just now, that everyone has real life experience, seeing something wrong in the society. And they have their own ideas about how things should change. But in the previously they had no choice, they will probably have two big parties which they have to choose, and each of them talk on rhetoric that they may identify, they may not identify, they choose the closest to what they want. So that's about all. So the society polarise into two party system, or three party system, or racial based party. Today with new media, it's not like that. So people don't mind politicians that may not be able to be very smart, but they want to see a politician who can speak what is in the public's mind. Young people will say 'I want to choose

someone like me, what they say is what I want to be said in Parliament, what they say is what I think is a solution for the problem'. So now communication is probably more of two ways, but more from the bottom up, because politicians have to find out what those voters want, what's the old people want, then trying to synthesis it, trying to come up with things that people can identify with. So in that sense it is like a mirror, if you can accurately identify what people likes, what people wants, then you have that mandate. If you fail in your mandates, if you fail to carry out those programmes that people want, then you fail in your mandates. The new media enable that very rapid communication from bottom up and then also very rapid from the up to bottom to show that they are sensitive and are in touch with what is on the ground.

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

TC: I think there is always attempts. You see all repressive countries also scratching their heads trying to think about how to control these new media players and these newly emerged democratic forces. Unfortunately this is the whole point about revolution you know, the old aristocratic class is



unable to cope because they don't have the truth. Even if they have the truth, you see, like UMNO's fellows in the ruling regime now saying, ok why they lose? Because they don't have Internet, they don't have enough bloggers, and they don't have enough website. So they start putting money into building pro-ruling party website, pro-ruling party bloggers. But that's not the point – people don't go to them because they have no ideas. They have nothing original, they are not talking about anything exciting, and they are not reflecting the reality on the ground. So there is no point you set up lots of – what it's call – blogs. And they even employ lots of what we call 'cyber-troopers' to go

down and make public opinion and so on. But there's no use because the whole point about social change, social transformation, is the contestation of ideas. You know the new and old, the autocratic versus the democratic. So that conflict cannot be (ignored), it is something that is real. It can take place in any form of media – the media is only the platform. The old media is a terrain that has been controlled by the conventional force. They have the conventional troops occupying the terrain, and we cannot fight them. So now you have the new guerrillas, going into the war, going into the new area. But they are subversive, they undermine the conventional media, and to some

extent it demoralise it and to start to shift them. So you also see the conventional media too have to change. If they don't change, I think they are going to have problem. So I think this is the core of the issue. It is not the issue about the tools, it is not the issue about who has the technology. So now I don't think, even if they try to introduce various measures to curb, or trying to curtail freedom of expression, it's not going to be successful. You know, and even they could afford to buy the technology, but they don't understand the nature of the technology, they don't understand the nature of the market. So in that sense, yes, we might face some risks, we will probably be facing some arbitrary persecution and so on, but it's not going to hold the tide. It's not going to avoid the fate of eventuality where authoritarian regime, autocratic culture will eventually submerge and (be) swept away by this new wave of democratic culture.

SLG: I understand what you are saying, but say if the Government was able to find a way to stop blogging and new media sites and so on, what would your response be to that? And what do you think the affect of such a crackdown might be on Malaysia's future?

TC: I think – it's very hard to conceive that possibility. It will – it depends on what will happen because currently the genie is out of the bottle. Or you can say the Pandora box has been opened. If they want to close the box it is not the hope that they are keeping but a fat chance they are getting. So then they might still think that it might work but it might also mean that people will grow so fed up that without information they might still act in the way that the Government don't want them to act. And you already see that even amongst the general public. A lot of people who do not have access to Internet, especially the middle and older age people, they will just say 'I don't trust anything I read in the newspaper', they say, 'I just stop watching TV.' Does it mean they suddenly become pro-establishment? No they're not. It means they will become even more rebellious. They just say 'I don't care, I'm not going to vote for the Government. I go in, I just vote whoever is not from the Government.' They will have that irrational reaction. So by trying to control those media, it's not very helpful, in fact it will even harden the confrontation, and speed up the downfall of the Government.

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

TC: No I don't think that –see the whole problem is that the ruling elites have been so complacent, they have been in power for 50 years. They understand very limitedly what's new coming in. The new media, or the new political culture, the new desire and aspirations of the people. They understand very little. Abdullah Badawi trying to be a bit more liberal in some of his policies, yet,

the whole regime were unable to synchronise and he also did not have – he was not what I call determined enough to implement much more open policies, and that perceived as ruling party has no political will to carry out reforms. So I don't think they adequately addressed the issue of the needs of the people. That's why I said it is not a question about addressing the media. It is not a question about ruling parties or Government getting involved and using the new media as a channel. It's not like that. Because Government information, you can pick up everywhere. Everyone knows that. But the confidence in that information, whether they are truth or not, is in question, so it's – if you think the information channelled through the conventional method and we don't believe, and now we translate it to Internet, trying to channel the same information products to the public, I don't think the public will buy. So it is difference. So the question is you have to really look at your products. Is it marketable, those products and those ideas, are they still relevant to Malaysian society? And unfortunately Abdullah Badawi is not critical enough to evaluate that, and that unfortunately is his failure, and that is why when he was appointed Prime Minister, there was so much hope, and there was a lot of enthusiasm, but it fizzled out because he was unable to transform the ideas. He was unable to bring out the change that people have been longing, that people have been aspiring.

WKC: How about Najib? Prime Minister Najib has taken a very public leadership role in engaging with the new media. What is your perception of how he's doing?

TC: I think Najib is being cornered, then he has to do something better than Abdullah Badawi. So he went a bit further than just dealing with the channel, the communication channel. He went into a bit trying to improve content of his message, you know, including things like 1Malaysia. Unfortunately this is not a very good slogan, if people remember One Australia, One Britain, it doesn't mean – I think someone sell him a cheap product that has been reused by people. However, that 1Malaysia concept, trying to convey a slightly new, slightly fresh idea, which gives the impression that there are concessions on multi-racialism, on plural society, but then you seen he also attempt to liberalise part of the economy. That is a substantial shift from the old method. However, we do not see the party and the ruling elites



Tian Chua's Facebook Page.

moving along with that. So it would easily fall into purely a public relations exercise, and until now, I see it as more like a public relations exercise, because whatever he announced to public was never brought back to the ruling UMNO's policy making body. You know, he has never brought 1Malaysia to UMNO and say 'please endorse this and we are going to shift away from this old racist type of policy to something more open and more plural.' He's not getting the backing from them. Again, out of the spur, he announced there will be new regulation that did not require protectionism and things like that. But again, he did not first get the support from his party. So I am not sure how long it will last, because if you cannot convince your own team of people, that this will be the way to go, then it is not going to last as policy. Just like Abdullah Badawi, he throws out a slogan of Islam Hadhari, which roughly translated to a moderate, civilised Islam. When he stepped down nobody mentioned Islam Hadhari. There will be nothing anymore. So it's become a personality centred slogan, it will not be transformed into policies, social structures, or political structures. It will not be translated into the ideas for programmes for the implementation units to reform itself. I will expect it's going to be very ad hoc, a lot of knee jerk reactions, a lot of empty populist promises, but eventually it will go if Najib decided to change his direction.

VT: Tian Chua, one of the hypotheses of this report 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 is the case?

TC: We are forced to. That is a simple reason. People don't – I mean, creativity comes from the survival instinct and there is no other channel. As I said, the conventional media is totally controlled and people has to change their reading habits to find out news, or you choose to be ignorant, that's the only two choice. When people are longing for information, they have to go for, they have to explore new terrains, that's why it works better for us. We are probably be the first ones to have Internet daily, that is purely daily, and to come up with innovation which in Australia or many other country wouldn't be possible, because it would be too costly and no market because people remain the habit to pick up a copy of the newspaper before they go to work, sit in the train and read through it and go to the office, you know. They have a whole department for cutting newspaper for them and all the relevant important news of the day will be all on the table, and they will add to that information. And of course they don't need – it will probably be a compliment to what they already had, some SMS messages to tell you the stock indexes or to tell you a bit of something major crisis that happen. And then you have the TV that is going on every thirty seconds, you repeats the news that some news editor has had cut for you. So when you go online you probably look for where you get the best restaurants after your work, you know, or recreation, how do you get a good class for

your pottery lesson and things like that. I really do not know! So that Internet space is not for political activity, it is not for people who want to know news and what happen in the country, and they just want to know something more personal. Unfortunately in Malaysia it is reversed. People only read sport in the newspaper because the rest is not true. So they get recreation, they get TV on their newspaper. So when they go online they are not going to read recreation, they are going to find out political news. They are going to look out for what the Prime Minister actually said. What happened to the Opposition, and what happened to the NGOs. And that is why it's a different habit altogether. So that enable bloggers, and especially political bloggers to have a bigger market and utilise it. I think that is because we are under pressure to work creativity and more dynamically and indirectly we contribute to the advancement of the new media in Malaysia.

VT: Thank you very much Tian Chua.



Tian Chua with the NMIC Project Team including sound technician Mark Dass of DSN, and local constituent Ms Jenny Chia