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FREDERIK HOLST

Cyberspace – A Better Place?

Ethnicization in Malaysia's Online Media

Long gone are the optimistic days when the Internet was seen as a haven of all things good – a place where, in the process of exchanging ideas and arguments, the most rational would prevail and where empowering access to information would eventually bring down authoritarian regimes. Cyberspace – a ‘better place’? A sphere where people would be free from the constraints that the ‘offline’ world imposes, especially in authoritarian societies?

Nowadays, the Internet doesn't look quite so utopian at all, when, for example, censorship measures are becoming more and more en vogue even in countries that are deemed rather liberal, such as Germany; indeed, the Internet does not really seem to constitute the ‘killer app’ to tackle authoritarianism. As early as a decade ago Kalathil and Boas (2001: 2) noted that “authoritarian regimes are finding ways to control and counter the political impact of Internet use”.

Nevertheless, it has to be acknowledged that communication and – maybe equally important in the light of the recent protests in the Arab world – the coordination of large groups has become significantly easier with more widespread access to Information and Communication Technologies (ICT). Over the years, a number of these services, from e-mail and mailing lists to Short Message Services (SMS) and the more recent developments of Facebook and Twitter, have made an impact in this respect. However, the regimes that came under this kind of pressure were not only pushed towards adjusting their overall actions and policies, but also did so in regard to the ways and means in which they themselves made use of ICT.

In this respect, Malaysia makes for a rewarding case study: for one thing, the state shows significant authoritarian features, such as a strong executive combined with a weakened legislative and judiciary. Never-

theless, a limited space for political competition exists and allows for controversial debates to a certain extent, for example on the World Wide Web (WWW), which the government has so far not subjected to direct censorship. Levitsky and Way have termed this configuration a “competitive authoritarian regime” (Levitsky/Way 2002). However, what is in my opinion an even more important aspect are developments in which the government itself has recently been making more and more use of electronic media in order to advance one of its core ideologies: ethnicization. So far, analyses of the role of ICT in Malaysia have been characterized by a rather optimistic perspective on the impact of ICT (Abbot 2004; Tan/Zawawi 2008); thus, a critical inquiry is required that stresses the interconnectedness of the ‘online’ and the ‘offline’ world, a relation that has so far been given little attention, at least regarding Malaysia. More specifically, in the context of this paper, I argue that Malaysian cyberspace, after a decent honeymoon period, now reveals the same kind of ethnicized contestations that can also be found in the offline world, possibly even to a larger extent, for reasons that I shall discuss below.

1. Ethnicization in Malaysia

Eder et al. (2002: 17) define ethnicization as “chain[s] of events through which objective conditions of economic or political grievances become the basis of political claims justified by reference to a collective identity”. In this definition, a process character becomes evident that constitutes an important distinction to other models: ethnicized identities are no longer seen as something inherent, but rather as based on an external ascription that can be used in political, cultural and economic contestations. This perspective provides a viable framework for the analysis of the configurations of ethnicization in Malaysia, as these contestations are a fundamental characteristic of the country’s socio-political system.

In a nutshell, the origins of this configuration can be found in British colonial policies that implemented a *divide-et-impera* system by advancing ethnicized stratification, reinforced by group-defining processes such as censuses. However, after independence the government made no attempts to dismantle this structure: The Alliance Party (later transformed and

renamed as Barisan Nasional, BN), an elite-based coalition of ethnicized parties reflecting more or less the stereotypical ethnicized groups of Malays, Chinese and Indians, instead did all it could to maintain these stratifications.¹ An important and for long time convenient self-ascribed *raison-d'être* of this coalition is to negotiate ethnicized contestations on an elite level, thereby supposedly preventing large-scale ethnicized conflicts. This is often done by raising and subsequently blacking out so-called 'sensitive issues' – ethnicized discourses rather than issues connected with identity politics, for example ethnicized affirmative action policies, language policy decisions or matters of religious freedom. All these are used not only to negotiate and define relations between majorities and minorities, but also to maintain a level of tension and unease that is aimed at reinforcing a sense of belonging to the respective ethnicized groups.

In the context of a competitive authoritarian system, this model of government has worked well, at least for the ruling coalition, which has governed the country since independence in 1957. The only setback so far was the election in 2008, where the electorate denied it a two-thirds majority for the first time in history. This success for the opposition has been partly accredited to the emergence of alternative media in the Internet as well as a growing discontent with ethnicized policies (Saravanamuttu 2008; Tan/Zawawi 2008).

When analyzing the configurations of ethnicization in Malaysia, I argue that it is important not to limit the approach to a perspective of instrumentalization. This perspective may have a bias towards a central or dominant power which is not only seen to have a clear-cut goal, but also to know the ways stringently leading to it. As I have laid out in greater detail elsewhere (Holst 2012) and based on Eder et al. (2002), a more refined approach is necessary in order to also capture the ambiguities that result from processes of ethnicization, by taking into account different layers of ethnicization, most notably the layers of manifestation and implementation. In short, manifestations of ethnicization shall hereby comprise the fields where ethnicized identities have become dominant reference points and constitute core pillars of a societal sub-system which in turn provide fertile grounds for implementations of ethnicization which shall be defined as the modes and circumstances under which ethnicization is put into practice.

Taking into account these distinct yet interconnected layers of ethnicization facilitates identifying actors and actions beyond a centre-focused perspective. This is necessary as ethnicization has become so manifest and condensed in a number of societal sub-systems that it is impossible to 'remove' it by simply identifying and getting rid of a central power that may control certain instruments of ethnicization. It is rather a multitude of actors that incorporate ethnicized policies in their agendas while their immediate aims and goals might not even appear to be clearly ethnicized. They realize that ethnicity is a major reference point in the context of achieving or remaining in positions of power – and power again not in terms of any kind of central power, but widespread across societal sub-systems. Therefore, these actors implement policies based upon ethnicization, partly knowing that there are solid manifestations to build upon, but also at times unaware of the extent. With numerous actors and various levels of ideological fervor, the impact and direction of these policies is often unclear. In the Malaysian case, this has often led to contradictory approaches and flip-flop policies that need to be topped with layer after layer of reinforced ethnicized policies in order to conceal the inherent inconsistencies.

A perspective on manifestations and implementations of ethnicization therefore takes into account the obvious as well as the subtle occurrences of ethnicization, and analyzes actions that intend to secure positions of power on the basis of ethnicization while noting the fields and circumstances in which they are implemented and localized. This multi-layered perspective on ethnicization is important for the analysis of this paper as it will help to explain occurrences of ethnicization in the Malaysian cyberspace that do not always clearly benefit the well-known proponents of ethnicization in Malaysia.

2. (New) media policies

In the 1990s, the boom years of ICT, their policy role was mainly seen as a catalyst for growth. The most well-known case is one of former Prime Minister Mahathir's (1981–2003) brainchild, the so-called Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC) project that started in 1996. Its aim was to provide the technical and educational framework in order to leapfrog Malaysia into leadership in a knowledge-based economy by the year 2020. Although

it can be conceded that the relatively early focus on a knowledge-based society was a visionary approach at a time when many western countries didn't pay much attention to this matter, economic requirements were the central motivating factors. In advertising this 50 x 15 km sized area of former palm oil plantations near the capital, Kuala Lumpur, "advantages" like "[c]ompetitive costs of doing business", "[r]eady access to Asia-Pacific markets" or "[f]irm commitment from the Malaysian Government" (Ronchi 2009: 297) were emphasized. In addition to this, an investor-friendly environment was provided, and, apart from modern IT infrastructure, the government also offered "secure cyberlaws, strategic policies; and a range of financial and non-financial incentives for investors" in order to woo foreign and multinational companies. To a certain extent this has been achieved, as companies like Intel, AMD, DHL and Infineon have either set up their regional headquarters or major factories to make use of these benefits, and the government hopes that, through spill-over effects and cooperation, local companies will be able to strengthen their position.

The side effect of this mega project was a distinct change in the way electronic media were regulated: while investors do not necessarily care about the level of freedom of expression as long as the investment climate is not adversely affected, they do worry about the confidentiality, integrity and reliability of their own communication streams and worldwide access to relevant data. Therefore, any censorship measure or interference would be detrimental to investor interests and could thus amount to a locational disadvantage.

In the Malaysian context, the media system and policy is more complex than in fully authoritarian states, where it is evident what can be printed and transmitted and what not. Malaysia does not have a censorship agency that controls newspapers on a daily basis or the TV news before transmission. It is rather a combination of several measures that allows the government to claim to guarantee freedom of speech and press (at least formally) and still have effective control over what is published and transmitted through the press and TV. Almost all major TV stations and publishers are – directly or indirectly – owned by government parties (Wong 2000). The law requires companies to obtain a license from the Home Ministry before publishing anything and have it renewed every year. Since the risk of not having the license renewed poses a substantial economic risk, most media companies won't dare to cross the invisible line of what can and cannot be said. From

time to time someone will inevitably cross this line and the subsequent repercussions in the form of temporary or permanent revocation of licenses are meant to serve as a lesson for others. For a long time, this licensing system and the resulting self-censorship have ensured that the mainstream media do not publish anything that runs contrary to the government's interest.

This, however, does not apply to publications on the WWW; in the 'Bill of Guarantees' – a commitment given by the government to ICT-investment companies – it is clearly stated that there will be no Internet censorship (MSC 2011). Although it is quite possible to implement censorship measures through Internet Service Providers (ISPs) in order to limit access to unwanted content (as practised in China, with Google and Yahoo being the most prominent examples), to do so would damage the government's credibility in international business matters and therefore reduce Malaysia's attractiveness as an IT-hub.

One reason why the government did not push for the same restrictions on the WWW as in the print media and on TV may have been the limited impact the WWW had in the mid-nineties. With few people owning PCs and having Internet access at that time, this was hardly seen as a threat. Discussion forums, like the famous 'Sang Kancil' mailing list created by one of Malaysia's first online journalists, the late MGG Pillai, were limited to an interested intellectual elite.

The first significant example of the impact of ICT on political developments was the *reformasi* movement in combination with the sacking and arrest of then Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim for alleged corruption and homosexuality. In an unprecedented move, media reports swung from praising Anwar to denouncing him within 48 hours and an almost complete blackout of statements defending him soon followed (for a more detailed account on the impact of online information exchange on the *reformasi* movement see Abbott 2004).

3. The impact of ICT

During the height of the Anwar trial in 1999, *MalaysiaKini* became the first non-partisan online newspaper to enter cyberspace. It managed to publish a daily set of news articles which covered topics neglected or

blackened out by mainstream media. The shift towards a subscription-based system provided the company with the necessary resources to also hire full-time journalists. Adhering to journalistic principles such as the separation of news and comment, it gained credibility beyond those *reformasi* sites, which had their own limited scope and agenda.

With *MalaysiaKini's* popularity rising, the BN government thought about ways to counter its influence. The dilemma was that any technological measures would have run counter to the Bill of Guarantees, so 'offline' laws were used to bring down the site and the company: in the early days, readers' letters were used as a reason to confiscate servers and PCs. However, this turned out not to serve the purpose as, after a short interruption, mirror servers in several locations around the world brought the service online again. The government realized that this would not be beneficial for its reputation – especially with such little effectiveness – and so similar actions have not occurred since then. This does not mean that government interference in general has stopped; rather, it is happening in a more indirect way: on the one hand, actions are now targeted against outspoken individuals who are sued for leaking 'official secrets', sedition or defamation. In this context, the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (MCMC) – which was designed to be more of a media regulatory body – has also been given the task of monitoring “blogs and websites that touch on the people's sensitivities” in cooperation with the Home Ministry and the Information, Communication and Culture Ministry (see *MalaysiaKini* 2010). According to a ministry official, the monitoring of issues and postings that contain “seditious contents on sensitive issues to incite anger and hatred” had been going on long before the existence of blogs (*New Straits Times* 2010). On the other hand however, there are indications that funded hacker attacks are being used to bring down undesirable websites: Clare Rewcastle Brown, who is running the news portal *sarawakreport.org*, had to face serious attacks on her site in the wake of the Sarawak state elections in April 2011. Due to her strong criticism and accusations of corrupt practices carried out by Chief Minister Abdul Taib Mahmud, several counter measures were deployed to limit the impact of her investigative journalism. In the beginning, look-alike sites praising the current government came up under similar names (formed, for example, by adding an extra 's' to the domain name). This was followed by paid advertisements on Google

to support these sites in order to divert potential readers. Finally, a full blown distributed denial of service attack was launched against the site (and others, such as *MalaysiaKini*) in the last days before the election. All this stopped the day after the election took place, which is an indication for Rewcastle Brown that the ruling coalition was involved in this matter, as a full-blown attack from various parts of the world would require substantial financial resources (SarawakReport 2011). This accusation is supported by BN's own stated aim to "come up with an aggressive strategy to counter baseless allegations which might be posted over the internet" in the wake of the Sarawak elections (Malay Mail 2010). While the attacks were aggressively carried out, their success in terms of silencing these online media was limited, as once more alternative forms of dissemination were found, this time through Facebook or Wordpress. While this still meant financial pressure for the publishers and inconvenience for the readers, the incriminated content was reproduced in numerous blogs, thus creating even greater awareness of the issues that BN would have liked to be silenced.

Despite such intimidation, it can be argued that the growing importance of online media has to a certain extent counterbalanced the previous dominance of the traditional print and broadcasting media. While the examples above still echo the rather hostile attitude that BN adopted against blogs when it dismissed the necessity to get engaged in the blogosphere, the positive impact for Pakatan Rakyat in the 2008 elections made the government realize how influential this medium had become. Global cultural influences and ideas of freedom of speech, as well as the possibility to use a space still relatively free from government control, created political demands that could not be overlooked and to a certain extent pushed for a more democratic discourse. Thus, despite BN's overwhelming might in the print and broadcast media, a better informed electorate seemed to demand answers to more fundamental issues. When this became clear to BN, their approach changed (Tan/Zawawi 2008: ch. 8): At first, rather inept top-down approaches were undertaken in which BN politicians were simply told to set up blogs (see Sunday Star 2008). However, this did not yield the desired results as setting up a blog alone without providing content beyond self-centered public relations neither attracts readers nor changes their perception of BN. The government then started to try to win over established bloggers into its fold as well as to make use of bloggers to promote

BN's policies, albeit with limited success (MalaysiaKini 2011a). The most significant impact was probably achieved by prominent political figures such as Mahathir, who chastised not only the political opposition, but also came out in support of right-wing ethno-nationalist groups. Just about a year after its launch, his blog 'Che Det' became Malaysia's most popular socio-political blog in terms of visitors (Malay Mail 2009). This was an early indication that ethnicized agendas were (and still are) in significant demand in Malaysia's cyberspace, negating optimistic assumptions that, after 2008, ethnicized agendas were on the decline.

4. The ethnicized cyberspace

The aforementioned control over the conventional and mainstream media through legal and structural means enables the government to push forward its own ethnicized agenda in the mainstream media without serious challenges. As long as it manages to maintain the image of striving for 'racial harmony', it can also to a certain extent advance and deepen ethnicized and polarizing positions as well. Obviously, this playing with fire does not always work out in the interest of the agenda-setters, as can be seen in the so-called 'Allah controversy' that Eva Eichenauer analyzes in this volume. Nevertheless, as there is always the option to 'pull the plug' on issues that have not developed in a desired way, for example by means of legal interference described above, there is so far little to risk for BN, at least in the mainstream media which are under its control. Things look a bit different in the online world, where interference is not as easy. This is significant, as the impact of issues that haven't been open for discussion for years and maybe decades cannot necessarily build upon a rational argument, a fact which is especially important in ethnicized discourses, which are often characterized by heated emotionality. Thus, the ethnicized agenda setters will then have to deal with a situation that may be beyond their control.

Until the election in 2008, however, polarizing content in Malaysian cyberspace remained fairly limited (Mandal 2003: 57; MalaysiaKini 2008). On the contrary, when it became clear that ethnicized policies were among the reasons why BN fared so badly, the coalition even pondered the question of how to adjust itself in order to live up to an apparently new era of

politics in Malaysia. Ideas were put forward to transform BN into a single, multi-ethnic party, but these did not materialize, arguably due to the fact that the component parties do not have any other agenda apart from being representatives of ethnicized groups. The feared loss of power thus did not result in political transformation, yet left the coalition in disarray. For about a year, until the resignation of the then Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi, BN had to struggle with defecting Members of Parliament and further losses in subsequent by-elections. Until then, the government had neither really acknowledged the impact of websites or blogs nor had it bothered to associate itself with any kind of non-government controlled online media (MalaysiaKini 2007).

However, things changed with the emergence of ethno-nationalist, radical groups like Perkasa and others who claim to be ‘defenders of the Malay race’. Attracting so-called UMNO ultras who feared the loss of their power after the 2008 elections, backed by influential politicians such as Mahathir and tacitly approved by Abdullah’s successor, Najib Razak, the rise of groups like Perkasa have dealt a blow to more optimistic expectations that ethnicized politics would be on the decline due to a better informed electorate and the setback for ethnicized parties in the 2008 general election. Its success can be traced back to a dual strategy: on the one hand by successfully trying to woo politicians like Mahathir who still have a voice in the mainstream media in order to get their message across a larger audience, on the other hand by mobilization through online media and SMS, which was necessary in order to build up a substantial membership base of 50,000 (according to the organization’s own estimates; The Star 2010a).

Nevertheless, despite the support of well-connected politicians, Perkasa’s racist agenda did not make huge inroads in the print and broadcast media – with ruling party UMNO’s mouthpiece *Utusan Malaysia* being a notable example – as the bulk of the mainstream media had to adapt to a more toned down portrayal of ethnicized discourses. However, the relatively unrestricted blogosphere provided the necessary means for these actors to develop and advance ethnicized discourses. Due to the uncertainty of BN’s future direction mentioned above, more and more UMNO members were seen to come out with racist blogs. In this respect, the ones by prominent politicians such as Mahathir or former Selangor *menteri besar* (Chief Minister) Khir Toyo are noteworthy in my opinion:

these blogs show most clearly that no effort is made to try to adapt to or appease the rather liberal mindset that has been prevalent in many pro-opposition blogs. On the contrary, the blogs of these politicians as well as some of the lesser known ones are often rife with racist rhetoric that would be unimaginable in the conventional print media, for example in the case of Khir Toyo calling ‘the Chinese’ chauvinist for not voting BN or in the case of Mahathir stating that since ‘the Chinese’ control the economy, they do not deserve adequate political representation (see the blogs entries of Khir 2010; Mahathir 2010). Statements like these even draw flak from BN partners, however with limited to no effect (see the MCA 2010 press statement).

This development was also made possible because of generally easier access to online media as a result of affordable internet connections, as well as content management systems that require little technological knowledge to deploy content.² In combination with a re-heated ethnicized discourse in the political domain, the floodgates for ethnicized content to be published in the web were opened up. The demand for ethnicized content was now also seen as a way for BN to implement ethnicized agendas also in cyberspace.

Comparing the online content of the said groups and bloggers with the reporting in the conventional mainstream media, it is noticeable that the extent of racist remarks is significantly lower in the latter, especially in the English-language dailies, which have a major position in Malaysia (Audit Bureau of Circulation Malaysia 2010). This may not come as a surprise as the major newspapers in Malaysia basically all cater for a specific ethnicized ‘target audience’ for which news are presented accordingly. Especially after 2008 and in light of government programmes such as ‘iMalaysia’ through which the government wants to portray itself and its policies as more inclusive, radical statements of political actors in the mainstream media have been on the decline. Nevertheless, in an ethnicized political system, ethnicized contestations are necessary to maintain the *raison-d’être* of an ethnic-based coalition such as BN. In this respect, groups like Perkasa, but also websites and blogs disseminating ethnicized content, have partly taken over a role that BN itself cannot play in public discourse (at least for the moment) if it does not want its fragile credibility to be shattered. This constellation can even work out to the advantage of BN as long as actors like Perkasa

remain 'BN-friendly'; the coalition has thus successfully 'outsourced' its more radical ethnicized agenda and limited the risk of losing support from both supporters of its more radical as well as its moderate stance.

5. Ambiguities and contradictions in ethnicization processes

However, this works out only as long as all actors involved – the 'good' as well as the 'bad guys' – still respect the position taken by the centre, in this case UMNO as the leading party within BN.

Yet the more ethnicized agendas are pushed – both online and offline – by 'independent' protagonists such as Perkasa's president Ibrahim Ali, Mahathir or Khir Toyo, the more this arrangement is jeopardized and shows that this new online ethnicized discursive space does have serious repercussions on the 'offline world' as well: the more and more open and frequent racist outbursts of *Utusan Malaysia*, for example, suggest that certain actors have begun to advance their own agenda even though this may be detrimental to the position that BN holds.

While BN has always oscillated between the various and often contradictory ethnicized ideologies of its component parties, to the extent of overt racist outbursts, for example at UMNO general assemblies, these have always been confined to a more or less controlled environment. Backed by the support that ethnicized agenda setters garner online, it has become difficult to rein in even close allies who seem to act more and more independently now in advancing an ethnicized agenda. A statement by *de facto* law minister Nazri Abdul Aziz speaks volumes about the extent to which public discourse has been shaped by these actors: "No action can be taken against Perkasa chief Ibrahim Ali over his warnings of violence against the Christian community as such remarks are now a Malaysian norm. [...] No matter how unsettling such remarks are, Malaysians therefore 'need to live' and 'be mature' in dealing with [it] [...] since social platforms and media such as *Twitter* and blogs have allowed statements such as Ibrahim's to proliferate beyond the government's ability to proscribe – or punish" (MalaysiaKini 2011b).

This example could be explained in isolation as a mere outsourcing of BN's ethnicized agenda, but the larger context seems to indicate that the government is under greater pressure than seems beneficial for it: another

recent example in this respect is *Utusan's* campaign 'iMelayu, iBumi', which is said to 'safeguard' the position of ethnicized Malays against other Malaysians (Utusan Malaysia 2011). Happily supported by Perkasa and joined by radical blogs, this counter manifesto to Prime Minister Najib's 'iMalaysia' shows that even from within the media backbone of UMNO, powerful ethnicized voices have emerged that may put their political paymasters in jeopardy.

Therefore, the impact on the political elite is not to be underestimated: reclaiming a space that seemed to be lost after the elections in 2008, UMNO ultras come out quite openly now and try to benefit from this development of once more increasing ethnicization, including Deputy Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin, who stated that he is a Malay first and a Malaysian second (The Star 2010c). While on the surface this contradictory distribution of roles is nothing new – often referred to as *sandiwara politik* (political theatre/shadow play) – I argue that the emergence of more and more ethnicized discourses online, as well as in some segments of the conventional mainstream media, may eventually lead to a reconfiguration of the political architecture of BN and beyond. The current rise of radical ethnicized agendas has given the respective political actors a new lease of life; already written off by many after the last elections, they are now spearheading an ethnicized backlash that seriously challenges more accommodating positions which surfaced in the aftermath of March 2008, within BN as well as the political sphere in general. This puts top-down oriented parties such as UMNO in a fix; they are not designed to accommodate challengers from within the party, even less when these come from different directions. Thus, if such a situation arose in the past, these challengers were sidelined, expelled or jailed, like Tunku Abdul Rahman, Tunku Razaleigh or Anwar Ibrahim.

In contrast to earlier times, however, these actors do not need to fear marginalization due to a mainstream media blackout – similar to what happened to Mahathir during the Abdullah years – since they continuously infuse public discourse by means of their online presence. Seen in the context of the dominant push to make Abdullah resign from his post and the subsequent rise of the UMNO ultras, both in terms of public discourse as well as in party positions, this adds another perspective to the role the online media played in the aftermath of 2008: not only as catalysts

for the *reformasi* movement, but also – and maybe more importantly for the internal power struggles within UMNO – as a means to strengthen the position of the ultras and their ethnicized agenda. These actors would otherwise have faced serious difficulties in mobilizing their followers in the wake of impending marginalization had the proposed BN transformation plans become more concrete. Thus, Abdullah’s resignation may likewise be seen not only as a result of critical online reporting from the opposition-affiliated online media, but equally of pressure building up from UMNO ultras that regarded an even tougher stance in terms of ethnicized politics as an adequate reaction to the new political scenario. With their subsequent rise after Abdullah stepped down, Saravanamuttu’s conclusion that “unless he [Abdullah] relinquishes power, the movement to the next stage of Malaysian politics will not happen” (Saravanamuttu 2008: 71) is still appropriate, yet in a quite different way.

These examples show the difference between the implementation and instrumentalization of ethnicization; whereas the latter suggests a top-down approach where an omnipotent centre can instrumentalize issues and policies at will with a predefined outcome, much like using an instrument, the perspective of implementation indicates that there are multiple actors who participate in this process. At the same time, it is often characterized by an uncertain outcome, sometimes even to the extent that it develops in a way that goes against the intentions of their original initiators, as the outsourcing of radical ethnicized discourses into cyberspace has shown.

The perspective of manifestations of ethnicization provides a new concept when looking at those electronic media that claim to be promoting a non-ethnicized agenda. Online news portals such as the veteran *MalaysiaKini* have for good reasons been hailed as essential in providing content that counters the ethnicized agenda of the mainstream media. While this is certainly the case in terms of uncovering the various implementations of ethnicization, such as by criticizing ethnicized policies and explicit rhetoric, a closer look is necessary when examining forms of ethnicization that have become routine and may thus go unnoticed despite their manifest presence.

The matter becomes evident when looking at the way reporting is carried out on issues which are not ethnicized in a straightforward way, such as party politics, but rather deal with day-to-day issues where an ethnicized component is not a main feature of the issue. The subtle way in

which ethnicized referencing is still made nevertheless shows how established ethnicization has become, in terms of everyday language, reiterated not only ‘offline’ but also ‘online’.

One of these aspects is the conflation of religious and ethnicized identities: the three largest ethnicized groups (Malays, Chinese and Indians) are often equated with one specific religion – Islam, Buddhism and Hinduism, respectively. While this is done intentionally to a certain degree by BN politicians and the mainstream media in order to reinforce ethnicized group delimiters by including religious references, this pattern also occurs to some extent in online media, such as *MalaysiaKini* (this has been pointed out by Schäfer 2010). Here, references to ‘non-Muslim interests’ and for example ‘Chinese interests’ or ‘Indian interests’ tend to be used interchangeably, thereby ignoring the sizable Muslim minority among ethnicized Chinese and Indians as well as extending the ethnicized dichotomy to religio-cultural aspects.

This is further aggravated by regularly making uncritical use of ethnicized group labels. The ethnicized overlay that becomes established by simply referring to ‘Malays’, ‘Chinese’ or ‘Indians’ not only prevents Malaysia’s society from being seen as more heterogeneous and differentiated than merely consisting of just three or four larger groups; it also reinforces the ethnicized perspective that the most important aspect is differentiation based on ethnicized cleavages and not, for example, social class or other political dimensions in a left-right political spectrum. Last but not least, this ethnicized segmentation plays into the hands of those ethnicized agenda setters who claim that membership in one of the ethnicized groups is more significant and defining than being Malaysian (The Star 2010d). Ethnicized group identifiers thus become similar to national identities, which further reinforce the perception of difference, almost to the extent of being a foreigner in one’s own country.

In this respect, electronic media such as *MalaysiaKini* thus – presumably unwillingly – reinforce ethnicized manifestations in a similar way to the BN-owned mainstream media. Others, such as the news portal The Nutgraph, are trying to be more aware in this respect by referring to ‘Malay Malaysians’ or ‘Chinese Malaysians’. However, while this puts an emphasis on a common national community, the underlying separations are nevertheless maintained.

These aspects underline the dilemma that the manifestations of ethnicization mean, even for those actors who are actively trying to counter an ethnicized discourse, yet at the same time cannot escape the social realities formed by ethnicization. The resulting group identifiers remain difficult to dismantle and are thus, at least discursively, reinforced, be that reluctantly or unintentionally, or both.

6. Conclusion

The above examples have shown that both implementations as well as manifestations of ethnicization can be found to a significant degree in the Malaysian cyberspace. They do not only indicate the extent to which ethnicized rationales previously suppressed in the public sphere have nevertheless become manifest but also show that there is a demand for ethnicized content which is also provided by online media and blogs. In some cases, such as in racist-toned blogs by former top politicians, there are indications of collusion with the BN government. Previously blacked-out in the mainstream media, these ethnicized positions are nowadays 'outsourced' in radical forms to the blogosphere and are thus becoming means for implementing ethnicization. This is similar to developments in the political sphere where, for example, radical ethno-rightwing groups like Perkasa have taken over the task of voicing out UMNO's more extreme ethnicized demands. Thus, the 'mainstream' actors, both in the media as well as in party politics, can continue to convey images of 'racial harmony' without losing out in more extreme ethnicized discourses and when touching upon 'sensitive issues'. This distribution of labor in the online and the offline sphere assures that BN remains the Janus-faced entity it has always been: inclusive on the outside, but underneath the surface deeply entrenched in policies of ethnicization.

The mentioned cases, however, also show that a change in perspective is necessary in order to grasp ethnicization in a more holistic way – away from an omnipotent centre that instrumentalizes policies of ethnicization with a defined goal, towards a perspective where ethnicized policies are implemented, but then moulded by multiple actors with uncertain unpredictable outcomes, sometimes even going against the intentions of their original initiators. On the surface, the perspectives of instrumentali-

zation and implementation may not differ significantly, as in both cases seemingly beneficial ethnicized agendas are pursued. However, a centre-focussed perspective of instrumentalization can only insufficiently explain those cases which develop – sometimes even at an early stage – against the intentions of those who laid out these policies.

In the context of the media system, this unpredictability of the implementations of ethnicization may point to a new perspective on limiting the freedom of the print media through various means. I argue that, in addition to the restriction of alternative positions countering ethnicization while at the same time putting forward ethnicized discourses in a ‘controlled’ way, these means are also used in order to prevent the emergence of ‘uncontrolled’ ethnicized discourses that would otherwise increase due to the manifest character of ethnicization in Malaysia.³ Despite BN being a main motor in implementing ethnicized policies, promoting explicit or extreme ethnicized positions would nevertheless be counter-productive for BN in its official goal of securing ‘racial harmony’. For BN to remain successful, a balance between advancing ethnicization and furthering the promise of a better future therefore needs to be maintained.

With these controls no longer available in the online sphere, ethnicized discourses can travel more easily and also – thanks to translation websites – across language barriers. Thus, information that the government does not want the mainstream media to publish still eventually becomes disseminated online, through whistle-blowers or mere rumors. The impact is not to be underestimated: decades of controlled media content may lead readers to trust particularly those kinds of information that differ from the mainstream media’s reporting (for examples see Holst 2007).

Yet, despite the significant changes in the political system over the last few years, where ethnicized politics are becoming more and more challenged, manifestations of ethnicization cannot be easily dismantled, for example through a change in government. Therefore, these manifestations which are continuously sustained through various implementations, for example through public discourse or policy making, pose concrete challenges, and not only for political and social activists in terms of their daily work. The character of manifestation becomes especially visible in electronic media which aim at transgressing ethnicized boundaries, but at the same time have difficulties in finding a proper language that moves beyond

ethnicized references. ‘Harmless’ ethnicized references are thus either reiterated or, as in the case of The Nutgraph, softened. The problem thus remains that ethnicized reference points, such as group identifiers, and the related concepts are thus still being reinforced.

Independent electronic media such as *MalaysiaKini*, but also blogs of prominent politicians and others, are additionally in another double-bind situation as they are often the ones which provide spaces for the exchange of ideas in the first place which can then also become venues for ethnicized contestations. An isolated racist blog alone is of little influence, but comment sections of news portals or popular blogs may have a much greater impact and this is made use of by both proponents and opponents of ethnicization. While the ability to have a space for public contestation is generally seen as a positive development, the short-term impact of ethnicized issues that have been ignored for a long time is uncertain. At the same time, online media have become more diverse, bloggers are no longer automatically ‘anti-government’ and news portals not necessarily investigative. The forming of political will and understanding necessary to make an informed decision and selection requires competency in terms of media usage as well as information acquisition – both are aspects which are not promoted in Malaysia’s education system and therefore need to be acquired independently.

Last not least, accessibility remains a concern. While the bread and butter issues in terms of access to electronic infrastructure are becoming of lesser significance, the question of addressing a heterogeneous society – both in terms of language as well as social structure – is only marginally touched upon. Only recently, electronic media such as *MalaysiaKini* have come up with a Malay and Mandarin language section, therefore extending the scope to a certain extent. However, the majority of the content remains in English and therefore – at least in Malaysia – reinforces an urban-rural divide that needs to be addressed if ethnicization is to be challenged effectively.

Cyberspace is therefore neither a ‘better’ nor ‘worse’ place, but part and parcel of everyday discourse that does not change simply because people use a different medium. Likewise, the electronic media are not genuine benign means in a process of democratization. They are heterogeneous, both in terms of their technological distribution as well as their content, and they do not operate in an isolated sphere, detached from developments in society. The multiple aspects of ethnicization stress that

it is therefore imperative to keep in mind that the 'online' world eventually reflects 'offline' structures of power, wealth and knowledge, even if regulations may be different.

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Abstracts

Malaysia is an often cited example of a semi-authoritarian regime in which the Internet is seen as an important tool to counter a government-controlled media hegemony. The election results in 2008 in particular have been accredited with mobilizing voters through the use of online media and are seen as a challenge to Malaysia's ethnic-based political system. In this article, however, it is argued that ethnicization, as one of the fundamentals of this system, is more complex and resistant and that, thus, simply having access to different kinds of information does not necessarily change ethnicized perceptions. Using the theoretical framework of manifestations and implementations of ethnicization, this paper aims to identify the ambiguities and contradictions that result from the impact of the online media in an ethnicized society, and demonstrates that the 'online' world eventually reflects 'offline' structures of power, wealth and knowledge.

Malaysia ist ein vielzitiertes Beispiel von semi-autoritären Regierungen, in denen das Internet als wichtiges Mittel angesehen wird, um eine staatliche Medienhegemonie zu durchbrechen. Besonders die Erfolge der Opposition bei den Wahlen 2008 wurden auf die Mobilisierung durch Onlinemedien zurückgeführt und werden als Infragestellung des ethnisch basierten politischen Systems gesehen. Dieser Artikel argumentiert jedoch, dass Ethnisierung als grundlegendes Element dieses Systems komplexer und resistenter ist und daher der bloße Zugang zu alternativen Informationen nicht unbedingt die ethnisierten Wahrnehmungen verändert. Mit dem theoretischen Ansatz der *manifestations* und *implementations of ethnicization* versucht dieser Artikel die Uneindeutigkeiten und Widersprüche aufzuzeigen, die die Auswirkungen der Onlinemedien in einer ethnisierten Gesellschaft beinhalten. Daraus folgt, dass die „Onlinewelt“ letztlich die Macht- und Wissensstrukturen der „Offlinewelt“ abbildet.

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- 1 Among the component parties, the United Malay National Organization (UMNO) takes an unchallenged leading position, while the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) and the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC) and especially other smaller parties are supposedly partners, although not on an equal footing.
- 2 Internet penetration more than tripled from 2001 to 2010 (The Star 2010b).
- 3 It is, for example, noticeable that reports in the mainstream media about criminal or violent incidents rarely mention the ethnicized background of the suspects or victims. On the contrary, the playing up of 'racial issues' can result in the revoking of licenses even for government-controlled media (see among others The Star 2011).