

Political Bloggers and the Personalisation of Political Participation

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Abstract: *This study argues that political blogging challenges traditional understanding of political participation that defines politics as ultimately institutional and electoral. By focusing specifically on the experiences of the Malaysian political bloggers who are generally confined within a very closed and elitist political culture, this study captures how blogging empowers everyday citizens to be involved in politics. These bloggers are able to become political by personalising issues and politics according to their own interpretations. Through intensive interviews that focused on the bloggers own understanding of their blogging experiences, the study found that these bloggers were able to see themselves as important political players by positioning themselves as the authority, the political centre and the public figure.*

Keywords: Politics, Personalization, Blogging, Malaysia, Participation, Citizenship, Political bloggers

I. Introduction

Despite being confined to strict legal restrictions, Malaysians are now taking their discourses online and are challenging the government's control on freedom of speech and expression. Blogging in particular, enables everyday Malaysians to become interactive social activists and political actors. Through media laws and concentrated media ownership, the Malaysian Government oversees all the information circulating in the mass media. Media laws such as the Printing Press Act (1984) and Broadcasting Act (1987) limit political discussions in that news or stories deemed derogatory or overly critical of the government cannot be published. Freedom of speech and expression are also limited by laws that stipulate what can and cannot be discussed in public. Sedition and defamation laws restrict freedom of speech and protect political figures from being scrutinized; and laws such as the Security Offences (Special Measures) Act 2012 and the Official Secrets Act (OSA) enable the authorities to detain without trial anyone accused of disrupting the country's harmony. As such, Malaysians have been inculcated to accept a culture of political apathy and fear of expression (Loh, 2009). The ownership of media by the government and organizations close to the government also limits media freedom largely through management self-censorship.

Opposition and dissenting voices do not have access to the mainstream media. Due to the lack of open access to the mainstream media, the opposition parties in Malaysia have resorted to creating their own alternative media. Malaysia's alternative media includes "politically contentious" (George 2005; 2006) professional online newspapers, NGO websites, and journalistic blogs. The primary objective of these alternative forms of communication is to challenge "the consensus that powerful interests try to shape and sustain through the mainstream media" (George, 2006, p. 3). Thus, the alternative media in Malaysia mostly adopts political, oppositional and radical inclinations. The alternative media often finds it difficult to survive due to the lack of finances and barriers to license renewals.

The rise of the social media in the mid-2000 allowed average Malaysians to produce their own media content. The lack of barriers and regulation made it possible for Malaysians to write and express about issues and politics. In the 2008 and 2013 national elections, both the government and the opposition faced major challenges because voters had more access to information. They were no longer confined to the government controlled mainstream media nor the opposition-influenced alternative media. They were also exposed to citizen produced information that were less partisan and more demanding of the politicians. This new source of information were ideas coming from everyday individuals.

More specifically, it is the political bloggers who are taking centre stage when offering citizen's say on political issues. However, these bloggers are considered by some to be soap boxes, writing anything they want, with little thought, deliberation or accountability (Wallsten, 2008). While they do have their own followers, their influence is seen to be limited simply because they are not prominent politicians nor policymakers. This study attempts to

discredit this negative view. By arguing that through their unique blogging experiences, these bloggers are ultimately active citizens who participate in grassroots politics by putting forth their own ideas and opinions. In order to explicate this argument, this study asks: How is politics understood and experienced by political bloggers? And; How do their experiences affect the notion of politics and participation?

II. Conceptual framework: Personalization of Politics

According to Bennett (2012), the personalisation of politics has long existed in the form of populist uprisings or emotional bonds with charismatic leaders. To date, many theoretical and empirical studies on the personalisation of politics have concentrated on the role of politicians and their personal lives in defining politics and political campaigns (Garzia, 2011). However, Bennett and Segerberg (2012) contended that the notion of personalised politics is salient in the practices of everyday political participation. They reasoned that the rise of new communication technologies together with increased social fragmentation have produced individualisation as a dominant social condition. These developments have also led to the diminishing of institutionalised, formal and hierarchical accounts of politics and participation.

As ideological and formal group identifications (such as party, union, church or class) fade as the mechanisms for organising civic life, individuals increasingly code their personal politics through personal lifestyle values (Bennett, 2012). Social fragmentation and the decline of group loyalties have also given rise to an era of personalised politics in which individual expression displaces collective action framed by reference to the agenda of political causes. Individuals can hold themselves at the centre of their own political universe and take control of their political environment. The social networking potential of ubiquitous communication technologies, such as blogs, has expanded these political universes, and the reach of social networks often enables the co-production and distribution of multi-media content involving a potentially large audience. These individualised orientations can lead to engagement with politics as an expression of personal hopes, lifestyles and grievances. Bennett and Segerberg (2012) argued that:

when enabled by various kinds of communication technologies, the resulting personalized political action in post-industrial democracies bear some remarkable similarities to action formations in decidedly undemocratic regimes such as those swept by the Arab Spring. In both contexts, large numbers of similarly disaffected individuals seized upon opportunities to organize collectively through access to various technologies (p. 744)

While personalisation and individualisation have been related to the experiences of post-democratic societies (Coleman, 2008), Bennett and Segerberg's acknowledgement of the similarity shared between the deinstitutionalised post-democratic society and the discriminatory undemocratic society in personalising and maximising the use of communication technologies for political participation. The ability to reclaim politics and personalise participation is appealing to any citizenry where there is a disconnection between institutionalised, formal politics and the everyday citizens. In the case of the activist bloggers that I focus on in this chapter, it was evident that their participation was not welcomed by the political centre. Just like the disaffected individuals in Western democracies or in undemocratic societies, these bloggers found it more effective and rewarding to design their own political framework where they were able to assert and offer their own views on socio-political issues without having to succumb to the elitist and partisan political traditions.

Blogging fits well with this desire to customise political participation. Papacharissi (2010, p. 144) claimed that personalisation is:

The ability to organize information based on a subjective order of importance determined by the self, presents an operative feature of online media like the internet. It is a widely accepted fact that popular applied uses of the internet, like blogs or MySpace personal/private spaces, thrive on personalization

By allowing the personalisation of content, blogging facilitates the personalisation of politics. In the ability to dictate and design how a particular discourse is presented, the activist bloggers in this study often wrote about political issues that interested and benefited them personally. Such personally-invested intention might appear selfish. However, based on the narratives that I gathered, I argue that for these activist bloggers, the political views shared on blogs may be personally motivated but were meant to contribute to the greater public. Papacharissi (2010) further argued that personalising politics through blogging encourages the plurality of voices and expands the public agenda by creating greater fragmentation and pluralism in the structure of political participation. Papacharissi further argued that by de-institutionalising politics, fragmenting communication and accelerating the pace of public agenda and decision-making, blogging challenges the political status quo by making personal agendas public. Blogging also offers new political opportunities for bloggers to communicate without the need to depend on mainstream media and political institutions (Cottle, 2008) The interviews conducted in the present study concur with Papacharissi's optimistic take on personalization by revealing a civic and democratic dimension to the bloggers' personalised take on politics.

III. Methodology

In studies that look into blogging and political participation at the individual level, multi-site

qualitative research that combines online and offline enquiries is not as widely used as a single site approach that either looks at the offline or online experience independently, such as textual analysis that analyses blog content (Shaw, 2012), or case studies that focus on the outcomes of blogging (Moyo, 2011). Studies that apply multi-site qualitative analysis tend to investigate blogging and its relationship with new forms of political participation (Mercea, 2012). Similarly, multi-site qualitative approach is significant for this study to uncover the interaction between blogging, socio-political contexts and unique individual life experiences.

Two online and offline data-gathering methods in the form of intensive interviews, and online observation were used. Face-to-face interviews were conducted to gather the bloggers' life histories, blogging experience and their understanding of those experiences. Online observation was done to analyze the bloggers' writings and other blogging activities. Data from the three instruments was analyzed together to connect the bloggers' online practices with their everyday experiences.

Sampling wise, Li and Walejko (2008) found that the majority of the research on bloggers employed the non-probability sampling technique because it provides the easiest and cheapest way to sample a large number of bloggers. However, they suggested that to guide the sampling process, it is important for the researcher to specifically operationalize the population of interest. For this particular research, the research population was blogs that were written by Malaysians about Malaysian life, issues and politics. All in all, 30 Malaysian bloggers were sampled. The interviews were translated and transcribed. The thematic coding technique was used to analyse the data for categories of meaning and the themes that recurred. Data analysis was done before, during and after data collection with the help of hand-written notes and NVivo.

IV. Results and Analysis

To explain the dynamic relationship between blogging and the personalisation of politics, this study identifies three ways how the bloggers experience political participation. These bloggers become political by presenting themselves as: 1) the authoritative voice; 2) the centre of politics; and; 3) public/political figures.

4.1 The Authoritative Voice

One of the ways in which the bloggers personalise politics is by employing the authoritative voice. The term "authoritative voice" refers to the way they present themselves as the authority, indicating self-proclaimed expertise on issues and deliberate attempts to influence the public's political views. In his study of bloggers' motivations, Kim (2006) found that political bloggers were more likely to say that blogging made them feel confident and authoritative. He also found that bloggers who were explicitly political tended to identify the need to influence readers. Kim's findings resonate with the present study, where it was found that the political bloggers were more likely to assert an authoritative voice when blogging.

This can be exemplified by the experience of Laila. Laila was a 33 year old English teacher who had never thought much about politics. Her life was utterly changed when her husband was detained under the Internal Security Act (ISA). The Internal Security Act (1960) allowed for the detention without trial of anyone deemed to be a security threat to the country. The Malaysian government was highly condemned for practicing what was seen as a draconian law that it decided to repeal the Act in 2011.

Although the ISA is no longer in existence, Laila's experience is still significant in explaining the role of blogging in enabling the personalisation of political participation. Laila's political activism was catalysed by her husband's unexpected arrest. As someone who had not been exposed to public life, her husband's arrest left her, as she said "shocked". Laila explained that "for two years I was not able to do anything. I was clueless, I did not even contact a lawyer when that was the first thing I should have done". Blogging enabled Laila to transform from a victim of the ISA to an ISA activist. If she was previously unable to bring forther predicament, blogging allowed her to not only fight for her cause but also become an expert on ISA and human rights. Laila explained:

My husband was accused of trying to bomb Port Klang and kill people. He was thrown straight to jail without given any legal opportunity to state his case. If there are evidences against my husband, put it forward for all to see. Just give us [Laila and husband] justice. We have no intention of going against the government. So my blog was my own media, my own newspaper.

Laila wanted justice. She did not see her activism as anti-government, but unfortunately she was not offered the avenue to state her case in the mainstream media and the mainstream political culture silenced voices that challenged the established system. As such, Laila resorted to blogging which she claimed was her "own media". With full control of what she wanted to make public and how she wanted to promote her fight, Laila was able to personalise her own activism. In her terms, activism was about getting justice for her husband and other ISA detainees. Laila's attribution of her struggles and the personal nature of her blogging is a result of the structural controls that suppress her ability to participate through formal political channels. Since objectively discussing and commenting about laws and legislations is not considered acceptable in the political culture, personalizing these issues based on her experience becomes a viable option. By personalizing the ISA through her experience and sharing them in her blog, Laila is not only able express her views and experiences, she is also able to

influence her readers. Personalization allowed her to dictate what she wanted her readers to get from her blog by focusing on the ISA and her experience as the spouse of a detainee. In her claims of creating and dictating issues, Laila is portraying and asserting political authority. To her, blogging was:

First, self-expression. Second, to educate and create awareness and lastly, of course to influence. I need the public's support. I want my readers to be my media. The government's media is too big and powerful. We [the ISA detainees and their family] do not have anything. The detainees are not even tried in court. So where can we defend ourselves and clear our name? Even some of the Chinese who had been detained, they were called communists when most of them were really freedom fighters; they were simply fighting for their rights. I don't want these people to die with the communist label. The main point here is that everybody needs to be given due process. You cannot just accuse people and take it as the absolute truth.

Laila was very clear about her intention to use her blog as her media and political tool. To her, the purpose of blogging was more than just self-expression it and a way for her to share her predicament - it was a form of political action. She claimed to want to educate, create awareness and ultimately influence her readers specifically about the ISA and its unfairness. Her goals were specific and they required more than simply the sharing of experiences. Laila was aware of this and that is why she felt the need to gain the public's support. Blogging allowed her to reach audiences whom she wanted "to be my media". Laila's way of presenting her case became two- fold. Laila used her media to inform her readers with the hope that her readers would in turn be equally informed and able to spread her cause. By indicating authority over the issue, Laila not only acted as an opinion leader, she also aimed to create and train other opinion leaders.

Laila's performance as an opinion leader is not a unique experience. Wright and Hinson (2009) suggested that blogging has updated the relevance of Katz and Lazarsfeld's (1955) two- step-flow model as many bloggers are becoming influential as opinion leaders. Before explaining about Laila's opinion leadership further, it is important to introduce the theoretical background of opinion leaders in the context of media studies. Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955) identified opinion leaders as certain individuals who paid close attention to an issue, frequently discussed the issue, and considered themselves more persuasive in convincing others to adopt an opinion or course of action. Opinion leaders need not necessarily hold formal positions of power or prestige in communities but they serve as the link that alerts their peers to what matters among political events, social issues and consumer choices. More than that, opinion leadership can lead to better social status based on knowing about and circulating media content (Ruddock, 2013). The emergence of digital communication and the Internet has made opinion leadership more significant with unprecedented opportunities for opinion leaders to assert their influence on large number of users (Lyons & Henderson, 2005).

Despite the affordances of blogging, the importance of bloggers in the information dissemination process of opinion leadership stems not only from the unique characteristics of blogs, but also from the bloggers' own personal traits and motivations. For example, by capitalising on her personal struggles and desire to achieve justice for her husband and other ISA detainees, Laila was able to assume the role of opinion leader among her blog readers. Pelmutter (2008) explained that blog opinion leaders are issue-specific. They are highly interested in discussing particular issues and their expertise and influence is usually related to a specific area of influence. Laila was evidently issue-specific. Her focus on the ISA was a personal conviction and her activism was driven by her own experience and her deep knowledge of the law.

Furthermore, as proposed by Nisbet and Kotcher's (2009, p. 341) delineation of bloggers as opinion leaders, Laila might be defined as an "agitator", who sparks discussion about issues, and a "synthesizer" who compiles and makes sense of news, scientific reports, and other blog material. As an agitator, Laila saw herself as the main source of information. She provided alternative information to the government-influenced media that was "too big and powerful". Thus, she not only shared her experience but also the predicament of other ISA detainees. Laila became somewhat like a spokesperson for the other detainees. As a synthesiser, Laila became the expert, scrutinising and analysing these experiences while continuously updating her readers about new developments or activities that related to the ISA. By becoming an opinion leader, Laila was able to further educate and train her readers to become "her media", allowing her personalised activism to achieve a wider reach.

In a way, Laila was tactical in her media use. There was a method to her blogging. Her own experience dealing with her husband's arrest and her solidarity with other detainees further supported her portrayal as an opinion leader in ISA activism. Her ability to highlight the ISA as a national issue that cut across racial boundaries further signified her way of making the ISA more than a personal issue. By claiming that she was fighting for justice and due process, Laila was able to generalise the ISA as something that was ultimately a legal and political issue that affected all Malaysians. Her ability to relate her experience into wider political connotations indicates that Laila portrayed herself as an authority.

By adopting the authoritative voice, Laila was personalising her own understanding and practice of politics and participation. To her, educating not only her readers but a whole generation was in itself a powerful citizenship

experience. In doing so, Laila was portraying what Bang (2009) considered as a discursive approach to “the political”, whereby citizens create their own political realities through action. In response to the structural controls that affected her everyday life, Laila sought to take control of her existing reality. By being able to create discourses and form collectives with other detainees and also her blog readers, Laila was also experiencing a new form of citizenship – one that was personalised but civically and politically significant. Laila was able to reach and connect with other Malaysians through her personal activism, something that is not entirely accepted within the established culture. Through blogging, Laila was not only a victim of the ISA, she was also an ISA expert, ISA activist and ultimately an authoritative citizen. Laila was strategic in her pursuit of these roles and was determined because she sought political influence. By personalising her own political activism, Laila moved from feeling hopeless to taking charge of her own predicament by challenging the system that caused her the predicament.

4.2 The Centre of Politics

Being authoritative allowed these bloggers to feel some form of ownership over issues. By being the expert opinion leader, they were able to command a following and attract the attention of politicians and authorities. For these bloggers whose main intent was to influence and pursue their ideals, being connected to the public and the political decision-makers allowed them to directly participate in the country’s politics (Cottle, 2008). Through the connection they built with the authorities and the larger public, the bloggers often found themselves advising, initiating and participating in political actions.

Through blogging, these bloggers were able to highlight their personal contribution to politics and in the process saw themselves as important citizens. The phrase “the centre of politics” refer to how the bloggers were able to not only see themselves as participative citizens but also as agenda-setters and decision-makers. In this sense, the bloggers focused on their ability to highlight the issues that they cared about and pushed these issues onto the political agendas of their blog readers. Essentially, agenda setting is a traditional and well-accepted function of the mass media, and the experience of these activist bloggers indicates that agenda setting can also be realised by citizens who have the ability to connect directly with the mass media, political elites and the general public.

A core assertion in the agenda-setting theory is that media attention to specific “objects” (e.g., issues, politicians, organizations, activists) in the news leads to increased public concern with these same objects. The transfer of object salience from one agenda to another has come to be known as “first-level” agenda-setting (McCombs, 2004). Agendas consist of not only a set of objects but the attributes that are chosen by communicators to describe and define these objects. Expressed another way, the media not only may tell the public “what to think about” (object salience) but also may influence “how to think about” (attribute salience) those objects. This transfer of attribute salience is identified as “second-level” agenda- setting (McCombs, 2004). Through blogging, the bloggers in this study claimed that they were able to inform their readers about pressing issues and through deliberate and careful analysis, the bloggers could even directly influence how their readers interpret and understand the issues. In these situations, the bloggers can be said to have adopted both the first and second levels of agenda-setting. These bloggers were able to highlight specific issues and when those issues caught the attention of a number of readers including politicians and authorities, the bloggers situated themselves at the centre of the discourse, managing and navigating how the issue was presented and accepted. If having the authoritative voice gave the bloggers a sense of ownership over issues and allowed them to act as the opinion leaders, being at the centre of politics gave the bloggers an indication that they could also become agenda- setters and decision-makers.

The agenda-setting ability of blogs mostly relies on the kind of communication that they make possible. Blogs are an immediate, horizontally linked dialogical space. This format has the effect of expanding the scope of public space and providing a structure that is closer to conversation than any traditional news medium (Papacharissi, 2010). As such, blogs enabled news and information to be directly picked up, distributed and promoted by everyday citizens. Citizens can identify issues that they feel are important and subsequently transmit the importance of those issues to their readers. Although the agenda-setting function of blogs can be undermined by its small readership, Tomaszewski et al. (2009) contended that sometimes blogs attract the attention of the traditional news media and the political elites who might be scanning the blogosphere for public sentiments on issues. In cases where blogs are able to influence the agendas of political elites and the traditional media, blogs challenge and modify the agenda-setting function by enabling a bottom- up or horizontal transmission of issue salience.

Similarly, the bloggers in this study claimed that, through their issue advocacy, they had in many instances attracted the attention of the political elites. Although these bloggers mostly focused on issues that interested and affected them personally, they had nevertheless been able to have these issues included in the agenda of the political decision-makers. Mahendran, for example, was a 24-year old IT analyst. He grew up Indian in a Malay-majority community in the rural northern state of Kedah. His father was a driving instructor and his mother was a housewife. Mahendran claimed that his minority background and underprivileged upbringing motivated him to

be interested in the country's politics:

I started blogging during my final year in college. It started casually; very informal... but everything I wrote is usually related to my personal life. I remembered one of my friends told me that his father had told him not to go to Indian barbers because it would be wrong to have a non-Muslim touch his head. When I blogged about it, I related it to my own experience growing up in a multi-racial community. I wrote about how I was not chosen to be a prefect simply because I was a Non-Malay. I wrote about how we must learn from these experiences. I cannot hate Malaysia just because of these disparate experiences... that's how my experiences shape my views and my interest in politics and social activism.

While Mahendran did not openly admit to ethnicity as the factor driving his political motivations, his constant reference to his upbringing and his sharing of his personal experience dealing with racial issues indicated that, as non-Malay, Mahendran was well aware of the country's biased political system and how this affected his everyday life. He claimed that his life experiences had shaped his views and had made him more aware and inquisitive. Dealing with a biased system had intentionally and unintentionally limited his citizen potential and had pushed Mahendran to be more interested in the system that discriminated against him. In response to this bias, Mahendran resolved to perform social activism and blogging as a way to participate and challenge the system that had excluded him as an equal citizen.

Since Mahendran started blogging he had been able to share and deliberate about issues that might have been considered sensitive by the mainstream political culture. His blog (bmahendran.com) was prominent, especially within the Indian community, and was read by non-Indians. Although he mainly focused on issues in the Indian community, Mahendran stated that he was actually more interested in fair governance. He claimed that politicians read and exploited his blog posts and related the following:

The non-Indian readers, they read my archived post and they understand my experiences [as a minority] and this allow for the creation of dialogues. As such they tend to relate more. Like the issue with the slaughter of the cow at the parliament. I was disgusted by it and I wrote about it. I got many responses saying things like 'I would feel the same if I was in your shoes'. They [the non-Indians] wouldn't know if I don't talk about it and they can be informed if they get the perception of the minorities. There are also politicians; Indian and non-Indians that read my blog, they tend to pick up whatever I write, even the smallest of issue. They will then highlight the issue as if they are the champions of the minorities.

But it's good I guess, at least the message gets across.

Mahendran felt that by sharing his experience and writing about issues relating to the Indian community, he created inter-ethnic dialogue. The non-Indian readers looked to his blog to become better informed about issues that related to the Indian community. By indicating that he was sharing the views of the minority who were always side lined, Mahendran considered his blog to be the centre that represented Indian politics especially for those who were unaware such as the non-Indians who were not exposed to the issues in the mainstream media. Mahendran gave the example of a controversial demonstration that happened in 2009. In the demonstration, a group of Muslim demonstrators were protesting against the relocation of a Hindu temple into their neighbourhood and marched a few hundred metres from the parliament carrying the decapitated head of a cow as an act of offence against the Hindu faith. The demonstration was met with nation-wide condemnation. Mahendran claimed that the sharing of his views and personal feelings about the incident allowed for a better understanding among his non-Indian readers. He believed that he gave his readers the views of the minority. In this way, Mahendran was able to dictate and determine what he considered to be the important issues in the Indian community. Subsequently, he further indicated and relayed the importance of these issues he had identified to his readers. In this sense he was pushing the issues of the minority Indians onto the political agendas of his circle of readers.

Mahendran placed himself at the centre of the politics that he championed. By positioning himself in this way, he was able to analyse and present issues according to his personal views and transform the issues into a political agenda. He substantiated this claim to represent the Indians by stating that there were politicians who looked to his blog to get an Indian perspective. He believed that politicians politicised his views and made his views their own. Mahendran saw himself as not only informing other citizens; he was also setting the agenda for politicians. Although he did not seem to approve of the politicians 'borrowing' his views, he obliged because he found that at least "the messages get across". By being cynical about the politicians' way of taking his ideas and presenting themselves "as the champions of the minorities", Mahendran portrayed the lack of trust many of the advocate citizens investigated in this study had about the established politicians whom they felt were part of the problem with the essentially elitist and exclusive mainstream politics. At the same time, by claiming that the politicians tended to "pick up whatever I write, even the smallest of issue", Mahendran was really pointing out that he was the actual champion of the minorities because to him, the views and issues that were politicised by the politicians were really his views and reflected his agenda.

Mahendran's experience confirms the findings by Drezner and Ferrell (2008) who concluded, in their studies on blogging and political participation that the majority of bloggers felt that they had become more knowledgeable

and had more influence on politics and political discourse. Blogging becomes a form of political empowerment. The bloggers' claims of having direct influence on the country's higher political decision-making might require a more sophisticated research tool able to quantify or qualify the claimed contributions. But by having the confidence to equate their roles as bloggers with those of agenda-setters and decision-makers, these bloggers were personalising politics and issues according to their own interpretation and were portraying themselves as political citizens. As a result, blogging allows more than just the personalization of politics; it also gives confidence to the bloggers who now feel that they are part of the country's politics.

4.3 The Public/Political Figure

These political bloggers were motivated to share their views and opinions and often portrayed themselves as the authoritative experts at the political centre. By doing so, they were able to see themselves as important and significant within the country's political decision-making. They found the confidence to dictate and moderate issues in their blogs and made claims to influence not only their blog readers but the authorities and politicians as well. They were able to personalise political participation by presenting, promoting and emphasising their own understanding of issues. Personalisation becomes further evident when the self becomes the foundation of participation, and the self is then credited for what is intended to be a representation of either party or grassroots politics. Just like a politician or a public figure, the bloggers sometimes became recognised for their activism (Papacharissi, 2010).

These bloggers did not start out having a readership, but acquired a following through blogging. For these bloggers who were politically active, being acknowledged by the public and the authorities fulfilled their desire for political influence. Personally, they wanted recognition for their personal interpretation and presentation of politics because such recognition served as evidence of their contribution to and position within the wider political environment. This finding concurs with Sepp et al. (2011) who identified that bloggers enjoyed the exposure and acknowledgement they attained through blogging, and that vanity, or the need for attention, was a common gratification sought by bloggers in validating their position in the blogosphere.

Azhar, for example, was a 38 year old lecturer. He was a strong supporter of the government and had previously worked as the personal assistant to a government politician. He mostly blogged about his experience working in politics and providing analysis on issues that interest him. Azhar claimed that blogging had made him a type of public figure:

When I first started, I had 5 readers a day. Today I can get to about 800 a day. I have had people contacting me through instant messengers and email with questions that they think I can answer. For them to do that, I mean they must be in need of the information that they cannot find elsewhere. I will definitely respond. I feel responsible to these people. I also know that the authorities are reading. I know certain politicians who read my blog because they have communicated with me. There have been instances where I was approached by strangers who claim to read my blog. To say that I'm a public figure will be too far off but it has made me known to some people. In addition, I am now acquainted to many other bloggers who are public figures in their own right. I may not be 100% public figure probably just 10% [laughs].

Azhar indicated that he had built a following. With a readership that could reach 800, Azhar had a consistent circle of readers. He also claimed to have politicians reading his blog, further validating his position as a significant blogger. He had created a persona that went beyond blogging. Being approached outside his blog and having people ask for his personal advice signified his reputation as a public figure in his own right. Although his circle of influence may not have matched a full-fledged politician, Azhar was credible to his followers. In addition, he had connections with other bloggers who he considered were prominent public figures. I observed that for Azhar to imply that he was a part of this network of important bloggers was a self-acknowledgement of his position as a significant blogger. He may have seemed humble by admitting that he was only 10% of a public figure but for him to even feel like a public figure at all was important self-validation. As a result of these external acknowledgements, Azhar was driven to become more participative. He felt a responsibility towards his readers, which drove him to entertain their questions and provide more significant blogging materials.

Laila, who had previously been introduced as the wife of an ISA detainee, is a good example of how external validation and the building of a public persona can ultimately be healthy for political participation. Laila claimed to experience being a public figure when she met her blog readers. She shared an example:

I once got arrested for participating in an anti-ISA rally. I was arrested and brought to the police station. When I got there, there were already hundreds of demonstrators who were already arrested. When they saw me they started asking 'Are you Laila?' They were happy to see me, they gave the *takbir* (an Islamic praise to God) I was like a symbol of the ISA. These people... they were mostly my blog readers.

Street demonstrations and any form of non-governmental political gatherings are illegal in Malaysia, meaning Laila's arrest was very much anticipated. At the police station, she found public encouragement. Laila was recognised by fellow protestors who knew about her experience and shared her activism. When they saw her,

they acknowledged her by approaching her and giving the *takbir*. The *takbir*, or the Islamic call, translated as “God is great”, was her supporters’ way of praising God and indicates their feeling of solidarity when they saw that Laila was together with them in the demonstration. The acknowledgement from the public, who, according to Laila consisted mainly of her blog readers, indicated to Laila that she had become a symbol of the ISA. It was evident to her that her fight was being shared and appreciated. It also signified that Laila had been able to assert her personal agenda into the political agendas of her blog readers, with the support that she received validating her role as an important authority in ISA activism.

The connection that Laila built with her readers went beyond her activism; it had become a personal bond. She shared that when her husband was finally freed, it was really the result of a collective effort that she had managed to build through blogging:

When my husband was released I felt that all of Malaysia was jubilant, celebrating together with me. These are the people who were supporting me through my blog; they too feel as if they are part of my fight and that the fight was successful. Ultimately, I was able to share my happiness with my blog readers.

Laila dedicated her triumph and joy to her blog readers who she felt had always been part of her journey. More than that, she felt as if “all of Malaysia” was celebrating with her, indicating that she believed her activism had impacted the whole nation. While she may have been referring to an imagined community, it signified that, for Laila, her activism was politically significant and was acknowledged by the general public. It also indicated to her that the public were on her side, supporting her fight against the political establishment.

Laila considered her husband’s freedom as the measure of her success. She further implied that the success was not hers alone, but was something she shared with her readers who she felt had fought together with her. I argue that Laila’s acknowledgement of the collective effort enforced her status as an opinion leader at the centre of the fight. In this sense, the fight became less about the ISA and more about her ability to lead and help form the collective. Laila’s feeling of ownership over the fight was a signifier of citizen empowerment. Her ability to assert authority and the consequent validation that she received from her supporters show that such personalised political participation can be pertinent in the creation of meaningful citizenship.

V. New Politics in the Personalisation of Participation

For these political bloggers who were very much motivated to blog about socio-political issues and had the desire to educate and influence others, blogging gave them a new way to experience citizenship. These bloggers were experiencing what Bennett and Segerberg (2012) called the personalisation of politics. Personalisation in this context refers to the preoccupation with the self as the foundation of civic and political participation. By portraying themselves as the authoritative voice - at the centre of politics and as public figures - these bloggers were satisfied by their ability to personalise their mode of activism, dictating politics according to their understanding and life experiences. In their attempt to personalise politics according to their ideals, these bloggers often found themselves organising political discourses and participating in political actions without having to succumb to institutionalised political patronage.

As such, for these bloggers who intentionally blog for political influence, personalization affords them the political power to create an alternative sphere of new politics that was more participative and deliberative, a sphere free from the rigidity of the traditional culture of old politics that is inherently ethnicised and elitist (Sani, 2009). In this sphere of new politics, the bloggers were reclaiming their rights to express, deliberate and even scrutinise the political system that evidently affected their everyday lives. Their participation often started from the sharing of personal views, affiliations and experiences that were inherently political. According to Bang (2005, p. 163), this is how personalisation negotiates traditional political structures. Citizens’ engagement is now “couched increasingly in political networks rather than positioned against a hierarchy”. The structured and hierarchical elements of traditional politics that used to be the central elements in political life are replaced by ethics, personal integrity and mutual confidence.

According to Bang (2004, p. 163) “the political is growing increasingly personal and self- reflexive.” It is evident by the narratives shared that these bloggers were ultimately proactive citizens who were affecting and transforming the culture of local politics. Through everyday blogging, they contributed by sharing personal and political views and participating in political actions that would ultimately affect the larger public that could even facilitate political change (Cottle, 2011). Personalization allowed these bloggers to penetrate into the exclusive political culture and overcome the barriers to enter formal politics by claiming and practicing politics as personal. Thus personalization is part of the new deliberative and participative politics in Malaysia that is transforming Malaysian politics.

In their approach to an action-oriented politics, the bloggers investigated in this study were strategic in their desire to inform and take part in decision-making processes because they sought political influence and strove for political recognition (Loh, 2009). These citizens possessed, or could access, the skills and resources that enabled them to influence agendas and decisions. Participation became an integral, almost natural, extension of

their identity as they considered themselves to be significant in the political system (Bang, 2009).

VI. Conclusion

This paper argues that personalisation is ultimately healthy for political participation. Especially for these bloggers who previously felt that there was no opportunity to participate in local political traditions, blogging enabled them to not only participate but also control the issues that they wanted to focus on. In doing so, they not only satisfied their own need for expression and participation, they also offered the public different ways of understanding issues. The way they were able to situate themselves as the political authorities, dictating issues and policies and subsequently affecting political agendas and decision-making also indicates that these activist bloggers were, as Bang (2004, 2005) described, negotiating “the political” and participating in new politics (Loh, 2009) that moves the political centre from the state to the everyday citizens.

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