Culture, Agendas and the Effect of Social Media on Malaysian Politics - A Literature Review

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Abstract—Malaysia is a multicultural nation with a complex political system. Several variables, including racial, religious, and economic diversity, have altered the political landscape. The political climate has been unstable in recent years, especially around general election time. The Malaysian government has been criticized for influencing the media to further its own goals. In some instances, bloggers and journalists who had spoken out against the administration were arrested to stifle free speech. In addition to possible Chinese intervention in internal politics and ethnic unrest that various political groups occasionally stoke to win support, there is also the government's censorship. This essay examines Malaysian studies from the perspective of social media analysis. How social media has reshaped Malaysia, several political scenarios, and the general election. Without a doubt, the internet and social media have become increasingly crucial in Malaysian political discourse. The total internet penetration in Malaysia increased from 1,718,500 in 2008 to 5,839,600 in 2012. Malaysia has 13 million Facebook users and two million Twitter users out of a population of 29 million. In Malaysia, 64 percent of Facebook users are aged between 18 and 34, while 62 percent of total unique Internet visitors are aged between 15 and 34. With approximately 30 percent of Malaysia's 13.3 million registered voters for the GE13 being first-time voters, the Internet played a critical role. Before GE13, social media had played a significant part in various mobilization actions as well as the proliferation of anti-establishment propaganda shared by young urbanites. Reuters Institute Digital News Report of 2022 estimates Malaysia's internet penetration to be around 89 percent. Social media sites were the second most popular news sources at 75 percent. Fifty-two percent of respondents shared the news through social media sites with Facebook (52 percent), WhatsApp (47 percent) and YouTube (39 percent) being the top three social media platforms for news. Malaysia's situation is complex, multifaceted, and fraught with challenges. In this survey paper, we have made an effort to discuss all these traits and difficulties from the perspective of social media and online behavioral studies. It will provide an outline of the research that has been done for these studies.

Keywords-Social media; China Influence; Government censorship of free speech; Political Actors; Voting Patterns; Human Rights; Media Freedom; Political Polarization; Economic Development.

I. INTRODUCTION

Malaysia's government does not exactly adhere to the continuum between authoritarianism and democracy. Many parties compete in Malaysia's frequent and regular elections, which are far from free and fair and effectively lead to one-party control. Malaysia has a history of controlling and regulating the media through legislative measures, with the government taking actions to suppress the free speech of citizens, including arresting independent journalists and bloggers. There has also been considerable effort to manipulate social media and divert public attention.

With its multi-ethnic and multi-religious composition, Malaysia and its politics have been widely studied in the literature, especially in its approach to democratic governance. Malaysia's politics is complex and shaped by its unique history, diverse cultures, and practices. The country is a federal constitutional monarchy with a parliamentary democracy system, with a monarch serving as head of state and a prime minister serving as the head of government.

In this paper, we will review existing literature to analyze different themes and their impact on Malaysian politics. The themes covered in this paper include voting patterns across several population subsets, the evolution of social media as a political tool, the actions, actors, and agendas of ruling regimes in Malaysian politics, and China's influence in Malaysia. Our goal is to provide a comprehensive, consolidated summary of pivotal moments in Malaysian politics, identify quantitative and qualitative gaps in existing research, and lay a foundation for future research on Malaysian politics.

While this survey focuses on Malaysian politics, it is situated within a broader body of work on how social media structures online communities and shapes their cohesion. Prior research on COVID-19 vaccine discourse on X has shown that toxicity can measurably alter community structure—spikes in toxic speech are associated with drops in modularity and clustering coefficients, indicating that communities become more fragmented over time. In the Malaysian context, our review and CFSA-based network analysis already reveal tightly knit focal structures and platform-specific clusters around parties, media, and activists, as well as episodes of ethnic and religious hate speech, particularly on TikTok. Future work can therefore extend this survey by explicitly modeling Malaysian political communities as dynamic networks and examining how the spread of toxic or hateful content affects their cohesion, polarization, and fragmentation over time, paralleling the toxicity–community dynamics framework used in the earlier study [1].

1) Structure of the Paper: From here on, the paper is organized into 4 main sections as follows: Section II explains how we selected the documents used in this study. In Section III, we will analyze data such as keywords, authors and trends about Malaysian politics and this paper. We will also summarize our findings and share possible future research directions.

II. ANALYSIS OF THE MALAYSIAN POLITICAL LANDSCAPE

A. Voting Patterns

This section will analyze subgroups within the Malaysian populace (gender, age, ethnicity, and urban versus rural dwellers) and identify common voting patterns among them.

B. Gender

The Department of Statistics Malaysia (DOSM) in 2022 estimated the Malaysian population to be at 32.7 million with 17 million being male and 15.7 million being female [2]. In its 2021 report, the DOSM stated that the gender equality rate was 71.4 percent as of 2020. Malaysia maintained its 8th ranking in East Asia and was ranked 74th in the world, based on its Malaysian Gender Gap Index score in 2020 [3].
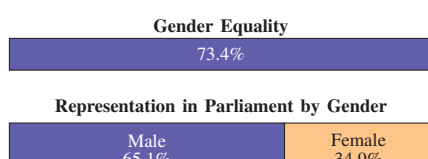

Figure 1: Gender Equality and Representation in Parliament by Gender (Data Source: World Bank (2020), Malaysia Department of Statistics (2020)

According to the World Bank, as of 2019, the adult literacy rate in Malaysia was lower among women at 93.6 percent compared to men at 96.2 percent. The labor force participation rate was also lower for women at 51.2 percent and 77.6% for men. The World Bank also estimates that women held 14.9 percent of parliamentary seats as at 2020 [4].

To understand the low participation rate of women in Malaysian politics, it is helpful to assess how the gender structure in Malaysia has changed over the years. The current role of women in Malaysia is a mix of traditional Malaysian customs, Islamic influences and recent socio-political events and while the government makes efforts to decrease gender inequality, the results of these efforts are minimal especially when it comes to women holding power in politics and the economy as a whole. (Kennedy 2002). One of such government efforts was the National Policy for Women of 1989 which had objectives that sought to ensure equal access and integration of women in all sectors of national development [5]. Another more recent effort by the Malaysian government in increasing women participation in politics is its endorsement of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), the United Nations treaty on women's equality [6].

The Malay woman as represented in literature has evolved over the years; from the historical Malay woman who had relative autonomy [7], idealized in female rulers like Che Siti Wan Kembang and Ratu Shafiuddin [8], which evolved to the factory girl who had lost some autonomy as a result of capitalism and patriarchy, who further developed to the modern Malay-Muslim woman, embodied by women such
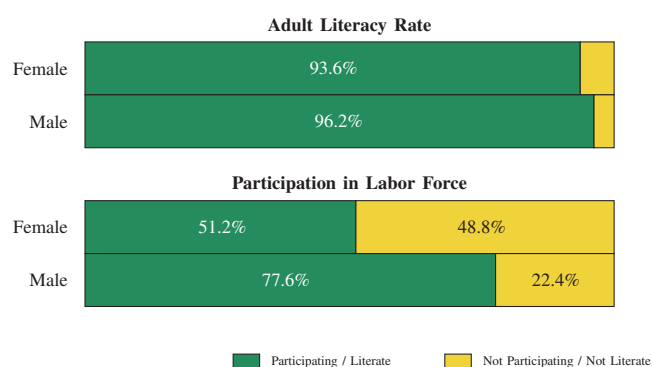

Figure 2: Adult literacy and labor force participation by gender.

as Wan Azizah; veiled and devout, educated, loyal to family with a degree of independence [7].

Malaysian society struggles to juxtapose its traditional views about women with the increasing outcry for gender equality and women's acceptance into traditionally male-dominated spaces. Although women now have careers and support their families economically, they are still expected to prioritize domestic responsibilities. This expectation is often reinforced through concepts such as taat (obedience) and symbolism, which are frequently deployed to remind women of their place and roles in society [9].

In a 2009 study conducted by Mellstrom, female students expect to balance domestic responsibilities with career re-sponsibilities, choosing careers that allow them to do so easily, with some anticipating early retirement to focus on their families [10] fully. A study by Noor (1999) highlights the cultural differences in how Chinese and Malay women approached their careers. Confucianism prioritizes family welfare over individual welfare, and this impacts Chinese women's attitudes towards work in that they think of work as an economic necessity needed to contribute to the family. On the other hand, Malay women expressed that while work was for family gains, material gains are not the most essential thing in life [11].

As female education became more prevalent and Malaysian women were exposed to ideas about gender equality, they became increasingly conscious of their marginalization. They had to confront hegemonic processes in their desire to participate more in society [12]. For example, Malay-Muslim women, in attempts to navigate the tension between Islamic beliefs and the expectations of the modern world, have adopted various tactics, in ways similar to tactics described by Kandiyoti (1988) as patriarchal bargaining. Some have adopted the term 'womanist' rather than 'feminist' to avoid the negative cultural implications associated with the 'feminist' term [7]. At the same time, some have used the veil to garner public acceptance as they make career moves in politics and public management [13]. It is against this cultural backdrop that Malaysian women participate in politics.

Malaysian politics is divided along ethnic and religious lines, and politicians must identify themselves with their

ethnic group and/or religion. Ethnicity-based politics takes precedence over gender politics, as reflected in the division of women's involvement in politics along ethnic party lines [10]; consequently, their participation in politics is viewed through the lens of ethnicity rather than gender [14].

In terms of political preferences and voting, a survey of Malaysian women voters after the 14th General Election found that women made voting decisions based on multiple factors, including party identification, their demographics, and the information they had gathered about the candidates. Age was a significant factor as older women tended to vote for key leaders while younger female voters prioritized issues over candidates or parties. The voter's ethnic group also mattered, as Indian women were shown to prefer issue-based politics while Malay and Chinese women favored candidate/party-based politics. Malay women also showed reduced support for increased female participation in politics compared to women from other ethnic groups [15].

Any benefits or support that women politicians receive are usually based on their ethnicity rather than their gender. For example, Malay women in politics receive preferential treatment based on their Malay identity and the associated benefits accorded to Malays, rather than on their merits as women politicians [13]. This ethnicity-based view of women in politics has led to the relegation of women's agenda to the background as a focus on women's agenda could be penalized by public condemnation [14], therefore preventing the development of a collective affinity between women.

Women's participation in politics is often relegated to helper roles such as mobilizing other women to support the party's candidates and taking care of logistics [16]. They have also had to downplay their roles to continue receiving public support. For example, in 2001, the woman minister of the Ministry of Women and Family Development had to emphasize that the ministry, previously known as the Ministry of Women's Affairs, would prioritize advocating for women's traditional roles to prevent upsetting the electorate. To receive nominations and support from their parties or electorates, women often adopt masculine traits or nicknames, risk being perceived as selfish for prioritizing politics over family, and navigate past traditionally male party gatekeepers [17].

The story is not too different in civil society movements. While women have been able to assert their voices through civil society movements [6], they still struggle to bridge ethnic and gender divides with respondents to a survey by Ng (2010) sharing difficulties they have faced such as derision on their pushing women's agenda or criticisms on their choice of dressing [18].

Women issues have also been co-opted by political parties and coalitions to gain points in electoral battles. When Wan Azizah Wan Ismail, Anwar Ibrahim's wife, became prominent following her husband's travails and the creation of the Reformasi, Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS), that did not field any woman candidate for elections and whose leaders had previously dissuaded women from public roles, rallied behind her in a show of solidarity. Barisan Nasional (BN) also championed women's rights to distract the public from its

history of corruption and poor governance.

In recent times, the Pakatan Harapan Coalition (PH) had, as part of its GE14 campaign, promised to put 30 percent of women in parliament. Shortly after elections, a group of women activists called for the coalition to uphold its promises, a call that culminated in a Twitter social media campaign known as the 30 peratus (30 percent) campaign. The campaign continued for months despite counter-calls asking women to earn their rights rather than being given quotas, and that the campaigners should wait for the 'right time' (Yoong 2019), further underscoring the prevailing view of Malaysian society towards women.

Even as Malaysia seems to be having more success towards more women participation in politics, as seen in the GE14 with the election of the highest percentages of female lawmakers among other women victories, there are still issues around low female candidates nominations, a situation identified by Yeong (2018) as a barrier for women party members, midst socio-cultural other problems.

C. Ethnicity

The Department of Statistics Malaysia [2] estimates Malaysia's population to be around 32.7 million people. The major ethnic groups comprising this population are the Malays and the Indigenous people (Orang Asli, Dayak, Anak Negeri etc.) collectively known as the Bumiputera, the Chinese, the Indians, and other ethnic groups.

To fully understand how ethnic dynamics influence Malaysian politics, it is essential to consider the legacy of British colonization in Malaysia. Britain colonized Malaysia until its independence in 1957, and to date, the effects of this colonization are still visible in Malaysia. The British employed the indirect rule style to manage their affairs in Malaysia, meaning that traditional Malay leaders retained their figurehead status but had limited political authority, despite participating in state administration. Colonization also separated the rural peasants from the local elites, reserving modern education and economic activities for the elites and urban areas [19].
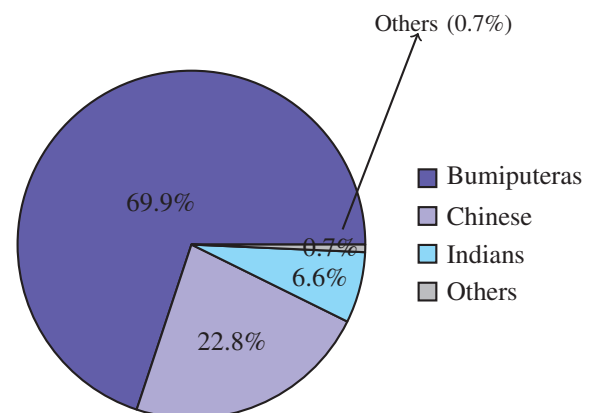
Figure 3: Ethnic Composition in Malaysia

To support the increased economic activities in Malaysia, the British facilitated labor immigration from China and

India, a situation that altered the demographics of Malaysia, especially the western half of the peninsula, which is regarded as the Federated States [20]. Due to this influx of immigrants, three distinct labor lines started to emerge where the Malays continued their traditional economic activities of farming, the Indians worked in the rubber estates in rural settlements, and the Chinese worked in mines and traded in the wealthier urban areas [21].

The British also accorded some form of status protection to the Malays, giving them preference for civil/public roles in the military, civil service, and police force, and also protecting their occupation of the land [22]. These jobs paid less and were unattractive to the other groups [23], but were politically important, reinforcing the political supremacy of the Malays. Land protection also created distinct living areas for the ethnic groups, with the Malays living in the rural areas, and the Chinese and Indians (except Indian plantation workers) living in the urban areas. The economic advantage the Chinese gained from their exposure to more lucrative jobs, the special preference for Bumiputeras, and the high contrast between the three cultures became primary sources of tension in Malaysia. This tension culminated in several incidents, notably the Sino-Malay riots in May 1969.

The British exercised less control over the unfederated states of Malaysia, particularly the northern states of Kelantan, Terengganu, Kedah, and Perlis, which excluded these areas from experiencing the same economic and demographic changes as the other areas, thereby allowing them to retain their distinct features [20].

D. Ethnic Groups and Voting Patterns in Malaysia

1) Malays: The Malays are traditionally Muslim, rural inhabitants who value brotherhood and mutual assistance [24]. They prioritize cooperation for the common good, embracing the solidarity and sense of belonging as taught by Islam [25]. By independence, most Malays were still dominantly in the rural areas working as farmers or fishers, and occupying civil and government roles. Their political attitude is influenced by feudalism, traditional western values, and Islam, culminating in a deference and uncritical acceptance of authority by the citizens and expectations of respect and electoral support by the political leaders [23].

When planning their exit and deciding the future of the Malayan Union (now Malaysia), the British attempted to create a more democratic government, but met resistance from the Malays, who believed that such an arrangement would downgrade their special position [22]. The special consideration afforded to the Malays has influenced much of Malaysia's politics. It influenced the formation of the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) in 1946, which aimed to advocate for Malay interests and was mainly composed of Malay aristocrats [22].

The 1957 Constitution of Malaysia further reinforced Malay special privileges, retaining Malay as the official language, with Article 153 of the Constitution specifying a reserved proportion of public service positions for Malays, among other special benefits.

UMNO went on to be a founding member of the Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition, and the support they received from Malays, based on their advocacy for Malay interests, informed the political dominance of Barisan Nasional for the decades after independence.

2) Chinese: The Chinese are considered the most heterogeneous of the ethnic groups in Malaysia in terms of language and religion, and this has influenced their political attitude. They are the wealthiest ethnic group in Malaysia, aided by their presence in the wholesale/retail (27.7 percent), manufacturing (26.4 percent), and other services (13.8 percent) sectors [26]. They are concentrated in the more developed urban areas with access to better educational opportunities, which has increased their level of political knowledge. The Chinese have Confucian values that encourage the vocal airing of grievances and the seeking of redress when wronged, which means they were vocal against perceived discrimination in Malaysia. This situation has created an impasse for the Chinese party, Malaysian Chinese Association(MCA), founded in 1949, whereby they feel obligated to advocate against Chinese discrimination, but risk alienating the Malay electorate when they do so, but also when they don't advocate for the Chinese, they alienate the Chinese community and are decried as sellouts [24].

This lack of a communal voice in MCA may explain the divided loyalties of the Chinese, most of whom support MCA, with some supporting opposition parties [23]. MCA went on to join Barisan Nasional and the Chinese support they received also contributed to BN's dominance in politics.

Indians: The Indians are the smallest of the three major ethnic groups, settled in urban, rural, and suburban areas. Composed mainly of Tamil-speaking Hindus, they did not have a majority in any Malaysian constituency [27].

Culturally, Indians are expected to yield to family and caste authority and are more concerned with their moral development than with seeking redress for injustice. This, alongside their smaller numbers in Malaysia, may explain why scholars generally see the Indian ethnic group as passive and amenable to authorities.

Without the special treatment received by Malays, the economic advantage of the Chinese, and with the decline of the Malaysian agricultural sector, the Indians are the poorest of the three major ethnic groups [28]. The combination of these factors meant that the Indians do not have significant political bargaining power in Malaysian politics, further marginalizing them.

A few Indians support the opposition but most support the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC) which was part of the BN coalition, allowing them to access the benefits associated with belonging to the ruling regime [22].

The continued ethnic, religious and economic marginalization culminated in the creation of HINDRAF (Hindu Rights Action Force) in 2006 to advocate for Indian interests, which mobilized the HINDRAF rally of 2007 [27].

3) The 1Malaysia Concept: Issues such as the lack of cultural and regional integration and the economic and political imbalance among all the ethnic groups have prevented

genuine pluralism from occurring in Malaysia, as racial tensions and imbalances continue to persist. To address this, Malaysia, under Prime Minister Razak, introduced the 1Malaysia concept to create a shared identity and nationalistic spirit among Malaysians of all ethnic groups [29]. However, researchers have found that the concept is not fully embraced by Malaysians. According to Noor et al. (2013), the Malays see it as a way to undermine their special rights, while the non-Malays see it as a political strategy [30] and participants in a study by Harris et al. (2020) described the concept as an 'advertising slogan' with little change being effected on inter ethnic relations [31].

The Malaysian government continues to make efforts towards a more integrated Malaysia; however, these efforts seem to be yielding little results. A 2022 report by PUSAT KOMAS about racism in Malaysia found an increase in incidents of racial discrimination and racism in Malaysia, citing 82 incidents, a record high over the previous record of 76 incidents in 2018 and higher than the 55 incidents recorded in 2021. Most of these incidents were related to politics and may be due to 2022 being an election year in Malaysia [32]. This shows that racial politics continue to persist in Malaysia, highlighting the importance of understanding the role of ethnicity in Malaysian politics.

E. Urbanization

According to a 2022 report from the Department of Statistics Malaysia (DOSM), as of 2020, the urbanization rate in Malaysia was 75.1 percent, representing a 4.2 percent increase over the previous decade. The composition of this urban population is as follows: Bumiputera (62.6 percent), Chinese (28.6 percent), and Indians (8.1 percent), with 6.6 percent of this subset being over the age of 65. On the other hand, the rural population is composed of Bumiputera (90.4 percent), Chinese (6.3 percent) and Indians (2.4 percent) with 7.3 percent of this population subset being over the age of 65 [2].

The impact of urbanization on electoral outcomes in Malaysia has been widely studied and this section of the paper will examine existing findings on the issue, especially on the skewed composition of the rural and urban areas, attempts to drive urbanization in Malaysia, and the impact of urbanization on voters and politicians alike.

To understand urbanization in Malaysia, it is essential to examine the role of the New Economic Policy (NEP). Following the 1969 ethnic riots in Malaysia, NEP was implemented with the aims of eradicating poverty across all races and societal restructure to remove race-based identification with economic functions and geographic locations, with one underlying goal being to increase Bumiputera's participation in the urban sector [33].

Several issues have been identified with the NEP such as slowed economic growth and brain drain (as the non-bumiputeras seek countries with less discriminatory policies), however the policy achieved some success as Malaysia has reduced absolute income poverty, recorded increased

levels of universal primary education [34], increased rates of urbanization, especially among the bumiputeras.

The NEP also led to the creation of a new Malay urban middle class who are more politically informed and more ideologically independent than the Malaysian rural inhabitants, focusing on political issues such as human rights and the rule of law. This situation may have altered voting patterns in Malaysia, leading to increased support for opposition parties and creating more space for political dissent in the country [35].

There is some dissent among researchers as to which of urbanization and ethnicity takes precedence in determining electoral outcomes in Malaysia. In their study on the most salient factors affecting the 2018 Malaysian 14th General Election, Ng et al. (2021) found that urbanization, followed by ethnicity, had the most significant influence on predicting the vote share of Barisan Nasional, the ruling party at the time of the election. They attributed the difference in political attitudes between urban and rural inhabitants in Malaysia to several reasons, including the difference in interests, whereby rural voters seek the fulfillment of immediate needs, such as food and state assistance, while urban voters seek higher-level needs, including quality of life and good governance. The metropolitan population also has better access to the internet, which has been utilized as a tool to foster political discourse and information sharing, enabling opposition parties to access it and garner support [36].

On the other hand, some authors caution against a binary analysis of both factors or not considering other factors when studying electoral outcomes in Malaysia. For example, Ong (2020) argues that urban or rural life highly correlates with different variables, including income and education, which makes it hard to pinpoint the specific variable that shapes political preferences. According to him, voters in rural electoral districts may not be living rural lives, and vice versa. Using OLS regression, Ong found that urban respondents to a survey about political attitudes consistently self-reported lower interests in politics compared to rural respondents and found no difference in the propensity of urban and rural voters to persuade others to participate in specific political activities [35].

Despite this dissent regarding the effects of urbanization on political attitudes, researchers have shared findings on how urbanization influences general attitudes, particularly among young people. Salleh (2013), in his study on the 1Malaysia concept, found that adolescents in urban areas were more likely to identify as Malaysians rather than as Malays, which was more common among rural groups. He suggests that this may be the result of what the urban youth see on television, read in books, and more importantly, from their interactions with friends. The rural youth, on the other hand, are not as exposed to media and rely on their family for information and their sense of identity; therefore, their likelihood of identifying more as Malays than Malaysians [37].

There are also differences in the governance issues that rural voters and urban voters are concerned about. According to Elangovan et al. (2022), rural voters were more concerned

about municipal issues such as infrastructural improvements and state assistance, while urban voters were more concerned about a cleaner (i.e., less corrupt) and stable government. Rural voters were aware of the bigger picture such as the economy and the future of democracy, but their concerns about the basic infrastructure they lacked took precedence over these big picture issues [38].

Politicians capitalize on the differences in rural and urban political attitudes in their messaging and campaigns. In their study on political advertising in Malaysia, Rahim et al. (2017) found that Barisan Nasional used messaging focused on everyday living issues, such as education, improved police force, and better services, which directly interest rural inhabitants, low-income earners, and the middle class. The opposition, on the other hand, focused on issues such as cronyism, corruption, and free education [39].

As Malaysia becomes increasingly urbanized and the younger generation replaces the older, it will be interesting to see the resultant change in political attitudes in rural and urban areas, and how that change reflects in electoral outcomes.

F. Age

In 2019, the Malaysian parliament lowered the voting age from 21 to 18, potentially increasing the population of new voters by about 16 percent and raising questions about who these new voters will benefit and the impact on future elections [40]. To swing these new voters to their side, Malaysian political parties have invested heavily in social media like TikTok and Twitter, which highlights the influence of this group of voters [41] but has led to the youth being concerned about the aggressiveness of the advertisements and campaigns [42].

The youth use tools such as the internet to engage in political discourse and activism but some researchers argue that the youth may have developed political apathy after their activism was undermined by lack of political change and the government through manipulation, spying, threatening etc [16], [39], [43]. Other researchers have also attributed the political apathy of the youth to a lack of opportunities to showcase political skills, their lack of knowledge, and excessive focus on entertainment and pleasure-seeking activities [44].

The youth rely heavily on social media for political information [42], are concerned about the state of the economy, and tend to vote outside of religious and ethnic sentiments [45]. A study by Abd Rahim et al. (2017) showed that the young voters were more attracted to political advertisements "that promote peace, stability, progress, pride and developments" [39]. This group tends to consider the party, its leaders' policies and attitudes, and their previous performance. It promises that, when making voting decisions, they believe that if they continue to vote, there might be some change in the political system, suggesting continued hope in democracy.

Following the recently concluded GE15 in 2022, there are opportunities for researchers to examine how the youth used social media during the lead-up to the elections and how their participation influenced the electoral process and outcome. It may also be useful for researchers to study how the use

of TikTok and other platforms reflects the political attitudes of young people, especially in light of the recently lowered voting age. There also seems to be a disparity between the identified political attitude of the Malaysian youth, which is that of issue voters, versus the behavior of Malaysian TikTok users in the lead-up to GE15 where there were several incidents of ethnic and religious hate speech [46]. This raises questions about who these TikTok users are and what their agenda is.

G. Social Media in Malaysian Politics

The role of social media in Malaysian politics has been widely studied. The Internet Users Survey conducted by the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission in 2020 reported an internet usage rate of 87.4 percent and smartphone usage of 98.7 percent. Political content sharing spiked in 2018 to 32.1 percent, an election year, but reduced to 17.2 percent in 2020, with the most popular sites being Facebook (91.7 percent), YouTube (80.6 percent) and Instagram (63.1 percent) (IUS 2020). Recently, TikTok has been gaining popularity in Malaysia. As of January 2023, Statista reported a penetration rate of 77.7 percent among adults over 18 years [47], with those between the ages of 19 and 25 years being the majority of TikTok users [48]. This usage rate is even more notable when the incidents prior to and during the recently concluded 15th General Elections, held in 2022, are considered. TikTok became a breeding ground for ethnic-based hate speech and violent extremism [49].

Scholars have employed the concept of affordances to examine how social media facilitates political discourse. Affordances such as sharing, likes, and timelines have increased information flow [50], reduced the time and effort required for participating in political discourse, improved access to political information, and also reduced the cost of collecting political information [51]. In authoritarian regimes like Malaysia, the availability of end-to-end encryption in social media applications such as WhatsApp and Telegram has also reduced the risks of government surveillance and retribution associated with participating in subversive political discourse [52].

In Malaysia, social media and its affordances have facilitated social mobilization movements such as the reformasi and the Bersih rallies. Social media has also played a significant role in electoral outcomes during elections. The reformasi movement, triggered by former deputy prime minister Anwar Ibrahim's detention, is acknowledged as the foundation for online political activism in Malaysia [28], [53], [54], even though it did not result in a regime change [55]–[57]. The Bersih rallies used social media and the internet to mobilize protesters, share information, and counter negative narratives, bypassing the restrictive traditional media [28], [58]. The rallies were able to induce some political changes in Malaysia, including the loss of the popular vote for the then-ruling coalition, Barisan Nasional, in the 13th general elections [59], [60].

The Malaysian government recognizes the influence of social media in driving political change. To maintain control

over the online space, the government has resorted to tactics including participating more actively on social media, using cybertroopers to spread government-endorsed narratives, creating bills aimed at punishing activists, and infiltrating activists' groups [61], [62].

Overall, social media has facilitated significant political change in Malaysia by allowing ease of coordination and connection [63]. However, some authors argue that social media does not necessarily change the underlying factors that affect politics in a society (Weiss 2013).

1) Government's Involvement: The Malaysian government has been accused of manipulating government agencies, controlling the news media, and using cybertroopers to sway public opinion. These measures have been aimed at protecting the government's interests and silencing critics, resulting in the introduction of laws that restrict free speech and freedom of expression, as well as the arrest of individuals who speak out against the government. The Sedition Act is one of the laws used to prosecute individuals who criticize the government. Overall, the government's engagement in Malaysia has been characterized by attempts to maintain its grip on power and silence those who oppose it.

2) Online Media Manipulation: After the racial riots of 13 May 1969, the media were placed under state control. From that time, the government and many in the media have portrayed the job of print and television media as primarily reporting "positive news" about government policies, racial harmony, and national identity [64]. The media's position as a "watch-dog" was viewed as a "Western" view of journalism and news reporting [65]. Malaysian authorities (and others in Asia) called for "developmental journalism", which is defined as journalism that aids in the process of nation-building and development and in which the press is not a natural foe of the government. Malaysian media practitioners have long advocated for more press freedom and a more independent, balanced media, but the BN has substantially undermined their efforts. Furthermore, the BN has frequently invoked 'developmental journalism' to deny the opposition access to national radio and television stations. While the Internet has increased online openness, voters in rural places face fewer different opinions due to a lack of Internet access. In Malaysia, media-freedom advocates and journalists have focused on the concept of 'maintaining a political balance' as a vital professional practice in journalism. That is, the ability to report on both the administration and the opposition, or to 'balance' favorable pro-government voices with critical ones. Following the GE13, some privately owned major media companies began to provide more balanced coverage [66].

3) Offline Media: To enhance sales and earnings, certain mainstream media businesses in Malaysia are promoting a business model of "balanced" coverage. This concept is intended to differentiate them from other companies in the media business, which are primarily pro-government in their coverage. For example, chief editor Abdul Jalil Ali from The daily Malay-language newspaper Sinar Harian said, "We believe if the newspaper is government-friendly, it won't be reader-friendly. Our readers determine our survival." Another

example of this is the Oriental Daily. The Oriental Daily was another newspaper that promoted balance and truth during GE13. This Chinese-language newspaper was founded in 2003 by the KTS Group, which also owns a Sarawak forestry industry and has close ties to Abdul Taib Mahmud, who has been in power in Sarawak, Malaysian Borneo, for over 30 years. As a result, the Oriental Daily is not without political connections or ownership persuasions [67]. From 2006 to 2012, daily sales of most English and Bahasa-language newspapers fell, with only the tabloids The Sun and Harian Metro seeing an increase in circulation. The circulation of the New Straits Times in 2012 was 100,382, which was lower than that of any other major English, Malay, or Chinese-language daily newspaper in Malaysia (Malaysia Media Planning Guide 2013). While the drop in share price and newspaper readership is not unique to Malaysia, it is crucial to note that in more privately owned media, circulation revenue outnumbers advertising revenue. In several cases, it has been observed that Political leaders find a way to manipulate the content of the news. In some cases, they own the media house or they befriend the media-house owner to make the news content more government-friendly [67].

4) Electronic Media: The main television stations in Malaysia are all owned by the government-controlled Media Prima Berhad. However, Ananda Krishnan, Malaysia's second-richest person, controls Astro, a satellite-television operator with three million subscribers. Astro Awani, its news channel, was founded in late 2007, primarily to cover worldwide news. However, in 2008, it also covered the general election and revised its business strategy to hire more journalists to cover Malaysian news. Astro attempted to be more neutral in its coverage of the GE13 to increase its subscriber base and compete with the government-owned news channel TV3 [68].

5) Laws and Acts to suppress free speech: Since Malaysia gained independence in 1957, the Internal Security Act (ISA), the Official Secrets Act, the Sedition Act, and the Printing Presses and Publications Act have been the primary pieces of legislation that restrict press freedom and freedom of expression (PPPA). The ISA received the most criticism of all the government's strategies used to muzzle dissenting voices. The ISA was applied to opposition party and civil society leaders, most notably Anwar Ibrahim, the former Deputy Prime Minister, in 1998. It was also used to journalists and bloggers, such as Hishamuddin Rais, a columnist for Malaysiakini in 2001, and Raja Petra Kamaruddin, the most well-known blogger in the nation, in 2008. The Malaysian government amended the Printing Presses and Publications Act (PPPA) in April 2012 by removing the annual renewal requirement for licenses. The restriction on judicial review of any refusal, revocation, or suspension of a permit by the Home Minister was also lifted, and the publication (or other relevant person) was given the chance to be heard before a decision to revoke or suspend was made. Although that was a step forward, the reasons for suspension or revocation remain substantially the same. However, the law's provision allowing the public prosecutor to sentence journalists to up to three years in prison for disseminating "fake news" remained in

place [69].

6) Economy: The Mahathir administration's support for high-profile mega-projects as part of a larger objective to transform Malaysia into a developed economy by 2020 was one of its distinguishing features. The Multimedia Super Corridor's 1996 launch was the most notable of these initiatives. The initiative, now known as MSC Malaysia, sought to make Malaysia a regional IT hub by providing extensive tax advantages to foreign companies and significant government investment in high-speed broadband infrastructure in Cyberjaya, a newly constructed town and research park [70].

7) Influencing Government Agencies and Media: The government used several of their independent agencies to push their agendas. The Election Commission (EC), which was responsible for designating constituencies, maintaining an electoral role, and holding elections, was one of the bureaucratic institutions with the most direct influence on elections. It was ostensibly an independent organization, but it was part of the Prime Minister's Department, and all seven members were nominated by the prime minister, thus it actually advocated UMNO's interests (Ostwald 2017; see also Lim Teck Gee 2018). Tan Sri Abdul Rashid Abdul Rahman, the outgoing EC chairman, said in 2013 that he had ensured Malays remained in power through multiple elections.

Numerous legislative changes effectively eliminated the ability to appeal EC rulings, including a 2002 legislation that barred any judicial challenge to the electoral roll once it was gazetted [71]. The Registrar of Societies (ROS) was also crucial, as its clearance was required for political parties to compete in elections. ROS has a history of making the lives of opposing parties challenging. In the build-up to the 2013 elections, it kept everyone wondering until the very last minute before allowing the DAP to run under its flag, and it refused to recognize the opposition Pakatan Rakyat alliance as a party. Following Mahathir's dismissal of Malaysia's top judge in 1988, the judiciary likewise deferred to government wishes. Despite widespread skepticism, judges in several high-profile cases unanimously agreed with the government.

The two trials against Anwar Ibrahim are among the most well-known examples of judges making decisions that have been widely denounced by critics, including Malaysia's Bar Council and foreign legal experts [72], [73]. The BN kept and expanded its dominance over the major media during its leadership. The government primarily owned radio and television, and businesses typically held little private ownership with ties to UMNO. Organizations with ties to the BN controlled all the major print media outlets. On both print and television media sources, there were direct controls. Prime Minister Najib Razak, the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), partially owned Utusan Malaysia, the largest Malay-language newspaper, which it exploited as a political instrument. Journalists, bloggers, and even a cartoonist who satirized Najib were arrested. 2015 saw Malaysia restrict media freedom when the Wall Street Journal published an article alleging that 700 million dollars from a public fund had gone into Najib's personal bank account. Additionally, it targeted the few publications that had

resisted the crackdown, like MalaysiaKini and the Malaysia Insider [64].

H. Breaking Down Malaysian Politics

Analyzing the Motivations and Actions of Key Actors The Barisan Nasional (National Front) and the Pakatan Harapan are the two main coalitions in Malaysia's multi-party political system. Malaysian politicians frequently emphasize topics like corruption, ethnic and religious diversity, economic development, and human rights. Following their independence in 1957, the nation has undergone several political changes, including a change in administration in 2018 and a return to the previous ruling coalition in 2020. There are several political actors present in the Malaysian Political landscape:

1) United Malays National Organization (UMNO): The Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition, which includes UMNO as a founding member and the main dominant force, has been the main ruling force in Malaysia from the year of Malaya's independence in 1957 until its defeat in the general election of 2018. With a focus on race, UMNO seeks to defend Malay nationalist ideals and the concept of Ketuanan Melayu (Malay Supremacy), as well as the honor of the Malay people, Islam, and the nation as a whole. The party also seeks to uphold, defend, and promote Islam throughout Malaysia, as well as preserve Malay culture as the nation's cultural heritage [34].

2) Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA): One of the three original central com- ponent parties of the coalition party in Malaysia known as the Alliance Party, which later evolved into a larger coalition known as Barisan Nasional in Malay, or National Front in English, is the Malayan Chinese Association, a uni-racial political party that seeks to represent the Malaysian Chinese ethnicity. Since Malaysia gained its independence, MCA has had a considerable impact on the political landscape. The party was formerly Malaysia's largest Chinese political party, and it held sway from the early 1960s to the late 1960s.

3) Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC): A political organization in Malaysia is called the Malaysian Indian Congress (formerly Malayan Indian Congress). It is a founding member of the Barisan Nasional coalition, formerly known as the Alliance, which ruled the nation from its independence in 1957 until the 2018 elections. The party is one of the oldest in Malaysia and was among the first to struggle for Malayan Independence.

4) Malaysian Islamic Party/Parti Islam SeMalaysia (PAS): One of the significant actors and major Islamist political parties in Malaysia is called the Malaysian Islamic Party (Parti Islam Se-Malaysia). PAS's voting base is primarily located in Peninsular Malaysia's rural, conservative northern and eastern coasts, particularly in the states of Kelantan, Kedah, and others, as well as in some rural areas of Perak, due to the party's focus on Islamic extremism. The party was a member of the coalition that was in power at the time, Perikatan Nasional (PN), which was formed in response to the political unrest in Malaysia in 2020–21. In the states of Kelantan, Terengganu, Kedah, Perlis, and Sabah, the party is the only or one of the coalition partners in the government.

Table I: Coalitions, Member Parties, Ideologies, and Political Positions in Malaysia

Coalition	Member Parties	Ideology	Position
Barisan Nasional (BN)	United Malays National Organisation (UMNO)	• Ketuanan Melayu • National conservatism	Right Wing
	Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA)	• Malaysian Chinese interest • Social conservatism	Right Wing
	Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC)	• Malaysian Indian interest • Social conservatism	Right Wing
	Parti Bersatu Rakyat Sabah (PBRS)	• Sabah nationalism	Right Wing
Pakatan Harapan (PH)	People's Justice Party (PKR)	• Social liberalism • Malaysian reformism	Centre - Left
	Democratic Action Party (DAP)	• Social democracy • National secularism	Centre - Left
	National Trust Party (Parti Amanah Negara)	• Islamic modernism • National progressivism	Centre - Left
	United Progressive Kinabalu Organisation (UPKO)	• Sabah regionalism • Malaysian nationalism	Centre - Left
Perikatan Nasional (National Alliance)	Malaysian Islamic Party	• Islamism	Right-wing to Far-right
	Malaysian People's Movement Party	• Liberalism	Centre-left
	Malaysian United Indigenous Party	• Malay nationalism	Centre-right

5) Democratic Action Party (DAP): The Democratic Action Party (DAP) is a center-left social democratic political party in Malaysia. After defeating Barisan Nasional in the 2018 Malaysian general election and bringing an end to the party's 53-year stint in opposition, it joined the Pakatan Harapan (PH) coalition as one of the four constituent parties. Unfortunately, the coalition lost power after 22 months due to defections by its partner party, before it could complete its first term, which led to the political crisis in Malaysia in 2020. The PH coalition, of which the DAP was a part, was restored to power at the 2022 general election in Malaysia, albeit with a weaker majority, forcing it to form a unity government with opposition parties [34].

6) People's Justice Party (PKR): The National Justice Party and the socialist Malaysian People's Party were combined to form the reformist People's Justice Party, which was established on August 3, 2003. After former Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim was arrested on April 4, 1999, during the height of the Reformasi movement, Wan Azizah Wan (wife of Anwar) Ismail founded the party's forerunner. The coalition of Pakatan Harapan (PH) includes the party as one of its principal members.

7) Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia/Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia (PPBM): A nationalist political party in Malaysia is called the Malaysian United Indigenous Party. The United Indigenous Association of Malaysia arrived before the party. Within the Perikatan Nasional alliance, it is a significant component party. From May 2020 through August 2021, the party held both the office of Prime Minister and the majority of the cabinet positions. In 2016, the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) and the Barisan Nasional dissident organization Gabungan Ketua Cawangan Malaysia provided the party's founding members.

I. Chinese Influence in Malaysia

China's influence in Malaysia has been growing in recent years, and allegations have emerged that China has attempted to manipulate Malaysian domestic politics to serve its interests. An example of this is the alleged involvement of Chinese companies in corrupt practices to secure major infrastructure projects in Malaysia. Additionally, Chinese investments in Malaysia have been seen as a means for China to expand its influence in Southeast Asia. China has also been accused of using its economic power to influence Malaysian politics,

including by funding political parties and politicians who are seen as friendly and perceived to be pro-China. These actions have led to raised concerns in Malaysia about Malaysia's sovereignty and the possibility that China could use its influence to undermine Malaysian democracy.

1) Upheaval in Malaysian Politics: The Chinese government has attempted to influence the elections through both soft power, exploiting the apparent warmth of the Malaysian public, and more covert means of corruption, also known as sharp power. Beijing mainly fostered Chinese-Malaysians. The Malaysian Overseas Chinese Association (MCA), the overseas Chinese political party of the Najib government, stated that it had helped promote Chinese investment in Malaysia before the election. Party propaganda claims that "voting for the Najib coalition is synonymous with supporting China," and Chinese language media emphasize pro-China positions while refraining from criticizing Beijing for silencing opposition. These attempts were, at the very least, transparent.

However, in addition to more visible soft-power tools, China may have utilized covert and coercive means to bolster Najib. According to minutes from previously undisclosed meetings obtained by the Wall Street Journal, as Malaysia's election approached, Chinese officials told Najib that Beijing would pressure foreign countries to drop investigations into the graft-ridden, tanking 1Malaysia Development Berhad (1MDB) state fund, which was hemorrhaging money, and would even bail it out if the administration gave China stakes in Malaysian pipeline and rail projects. But unfortunately, China failed. On election day, Mahathir's coalition stunned Najib and his coalition to sweep into power [74]. The substantial Chinese FDI invested in Malaysia provides a significant chunk of the economic context for the political dilemma confronting Prime Minister Najib's administration. According to an announcement made by the Malaysian government in October 2016, the 620 km East Coast Rail Link (ECRL) would be built by China Communications Construction Co. and financed by China Export-Import Bank.

The ECRL, which will connect Kuantan Port on Peninsular Malaysia's east coast with Port Kuala Lumpurang on its west coast, will enable goods to be transshipped between the Malacca Strait and the South China Sea without requiring travel via Singapore [75]. As Mahathir has joined a political party that opposes the rule of current Prime Minister Najib Razak, many believe the dispute over Forest City is a sign that the general election that is anticipated for this year will revolve on Chinese Investment in Malaysia. Mustafa Izzuddin, for instance, forecasts that "Mahathir and other Malay politicians from the anti-Najib camp will use the sheer Chinese investments into Malaysia to criticize Najib as selling Malaysia's internal sovereignty to China to the extent of drifting into the China orbit and becoming its satellite state." China Railway Group, a Chinese state-owned enterprise, has formed a consortium with a local developer to purchase 60 percent of the land parcel for the 160 billion Bandar Malaysia real estate project, located at the Kuala Lumpur terminus of the Singapore-Kuala Lumpur high speed rail line, from 1Malaysia Development Berhad - the Malaysian state-owned

investment fund whose financial troubles, as we shall shortly see, have triggered the current political crisis.

2) The Debate Over Chinese Investment and National Sovereignty in Malaysia: A dangerously racist political issue in Malaysia has attracted China because of a public disagreement between the Sultan of Johor and former Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad. The dispute relates to Forest City, a huge 100 billion US dollars real estate undertaking being built in Johor Bahru, the state capital of southern Malaysia's Johor. This property is being developed by Country Garden Pacific View, a joint venture between the Chinese developer Country Garden and a local developer wholly owned by the Sultan of Johor.

The Sultan of Johor argued that Mahathir "twisted" the facts to incite "fear, using race, to fulfill his political motives" in response to his accusations that the 700,000 future residents of Forest City will be mainland Chinese nationals, "that citizenships will be given away, and that vast tracts of land have been sold to the Chinese." The Sultan stated that the project, which is being built on reclaimed land, will instead "increase Johor land size and sovereignty" and that the residential units are "not just for Chinese investors, but for anyone around the world, including Johoreans," in response to Mahathir's accusations that "Johor is surrendering land to the Chinese and that we are giving up our sovereignty." For- est City, which is being constructed on four artificial islands, will eventually "home 700,000 people on an area four times the size of New York's Central Park," as well as "office towers, parks, hotels, shopping malls, and an international school." It is one of nearly 60 real estate developments in Johor's Iskandar Malaysia special economic zone — an area three times the size of Singapore — that has attracted considerable FDI from Chinese developers such as Country Garden (Lim, 2016; Mahrotri and Choong, 2016). The Sultan also noted that while Mahathir was Prime Minister, he encouraged Malaysians to "look East," but now he criticizes Chinese capitalists who come to invest in Malaysia. The Chinese embassy in Malaysia stated emphatically that "someone welcomed Sino-Malaysian cooperation while in power but stoked the flames of anti-Chinese sentiment after... Claiming that Chinese investment is snatching Malaysian jobs is a total lie with a hidden objective" [76], [77].

3) Significant Chinese Investment: The massive Chinese FDI invested in Malaysia constitutes a significant element of the economic backdrop to Prime Minister Najib's leadership challenge. The Malaysian government announced in October 2016 that China Communications Construction Co. will build, and China Export-Import Bank will fund the 620 km East Coast Rail Link (ECRL), which is expected to cost 55 billion. The ECRL will connect Kuantan Port on Peninsular Malaysia's east coast with Port Kuala Lumpurang on the west coast, providing a land bridge that will allow products to be transshipped between the Malacca Straits and the South China Sea without passing through Singapore.

The Malaysia-China Kuantan Industrial Park (MCKIP), which has drawn investment in "high-tech businesses including stainless steel goods, electrical and electronics, information

communication technology, and renewable energy," would profit from this increase in transportation alternatives. The MCKIP has been paired with the China-Malaysia Qinzhou Industrial Park in the Chinese province of Guangxi, and the ongoing development and modernization of Kuantan Port, in which China's Guangxi Beibu Gulf International Port Group has a 40 percent stake, will help to increase trade between Malaysia and China [75].

A 30 billion joint venture has been established to build the Melaka Gateway in the state of Melaka on the west coast of Peninsular Malaysia by local developer KAJ Development and the Power China International Group of China. A natural island will be "marked as a container and bulk terminal, shipbuilding and ship repair services, and a maritime industrial park" in addition to three artificial islands that will be used for "different tourism, commercial, property, and marine activities" [78]. The project would also involve building the Melaka Gateway Port, which is expected to be finished in 2019. It will cost 8 billion.

Chinese rail companies are vying for the Singapore-Kuala Lumpur high-speed rail project. Although the contract to build the high-speed rail link between Singapore and Kuala Lumpur has not yet been released, "local media reports imply that Singapore prefers a Japanese or European bidder while Malaysia favors a Chinese one" (Martin, 2016). The Malaysian state-owned investment fund 1Malaysia Development Berhad (1MDB), whose financial issues, as we shall see in a moment, have led to the current political crisis, has in fact formed a consortium with a local developer to purchase 60 percent of the land parcel for the 160 billion Bandar Malaysia real estate project, located at the Kuala Lumpur terminus of the Singapore-Kuala Lumpur high speed rail line.

4) South-China Sea Dispute: The recent increase in Chinese FDI appears to have softened the Malaysian government's former firm attitude against China in the case of the South China Sea dispute. According to Urchick (2017), Prime Minister Najib traveled to Beijing after newly-elected Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte took steps to normalize relations with Beijing "to meet with China's leadership and agree to negotiate their dispute bilaterally, which resulted in the signing of 34 billion dollars in trade deals and a naval vessel arms sale to Malaysia," Urchick (2017) recollects. Manila and Kuala Lumpur undoubtedly won't want to kill the goose that lays the golden eggs given the scope of Chinese generosity. Hence, "the Philippines and Malaysia will not retract or drop their claims in the South China Sea but will instead work to keep their dissatisfaction quiet for the sake of bilateral trade deals and will continue with their projected military purchases." Chinese Investment does not, however, provide Beijing free reign to act without anticipating a reaction from its allies. For instance, the satellite photographs showing the most recent Chinese installation of military hardware in the Spratly Islands prompted the governments of Malaysia and the Philippines to ask Beijing for clarifications. Even though they are inadequate, their actions demonstrate to their citizens that their governments have not allowed China to militarize the disputed islands [79].

5) Chinese support for 1MDB Project: The financial assistance for 1MDB came from some Chinese FDI in Malaysia. Chinese state-owned companies have achieved this through the purchase of 1MDB assets, such as China General Nuclear Power Co.'s 17 billion acquisition of Edra Global Energy. Such Chinese state-owned companies' acquisitions of Malaysian infrastructure assets have upset opposition lawmakers, including Democratic Action Party member Ong Kian Ming, who asserted that: "The Malaysian government needs to be fully transparent on the specifics of this deal. The Malaysian taxpayer deserves to be informed of the full cost of the rescue because nothing is ever free. Most recently, China generously gave 1MDB finance in exchange for state assets to assist 1MDB in paying off its debt to Abu Dhabi's state-owned International Petroleum Investment Co., which totaled about USD 6.5 billion. Although Chinese Investment has assisted 1MDB in surviving its financial difficulties, doing so has put China at political danger because 1MDB's issues are related to a still-developing international corruption scandal in which Prime Minister Najib has a significant stake [80]. After the US Justice Department launched civil proceedings in July 2016, implicating Najib in the scam, the Malaysian government shifted its stance from the US to China. As a result, Najib made the aforementioned crucial trip to Beijing. Hence, China has become a crucial component of the opposition coalition's criticism of Najib's leadership [76].

6) Potential Interference and Radicalization in Malaysian Domestic Politics: Given that the political conflict is radicalized, the involvement of China is particularly risky. The radicalization first became apparent in 2015, when it was discovered that Najib's personal bank accounts contained suspicious deposits totaling around USD 700 million. Following large-scale opposition demonstrations demanding the removal of Najib, pro-government demonstrations were held, where the conflict was reframed as an effort by Malaysia's Chinese minority to restrict the privileges enjoyed by the Malay majority. This radicalization has dangerously increased the ethnic tension in the political conflict because Malaysia has a history of ethnic rioting [81]. The Chinese administration has had to be cautious in its interactions with the Malaysian government cause of the racist aspect of the political disagreement. After publicly stating that "China, Malaysia's top trading partner, would not hesitate to speak out against any threat that may affect the country's ties with Malaysia and that Beijing is opposed to discrimination against races and any form of extremism, the Chinese ambassador to Malaysia was summoned to Malaysia's Foreign Ministry in September 2015. The ambassador's remarks came after pro-government Malay groups threatened racial violence following an anti-government event that Malaysians of Chinese ancestry predominantly attended. The Chinese embassy clarified that the ambassador's message was only an "act of goodwill" and an expression of "the desire that Malaysia stays united, successful, and harmonious," whereas the Malaysian government viewed it as meddling in Malaysian domestic matters [82]. The ambassador expressed hope that Malaysia will be able to "keep national unity and stability and

ethnic harmony," while the Chinese Foreign Ministry clarified that China does not "interfere in other countries' domestic politics or intervene in other countries' internal affairs".

III. BIBLIOGRAPHIC ANALYSIS

This section provides an analytical overview of the literature referenced in this study, presented through two key visual methods: a citation network diagram and a temporal timeline graph. These tools help to map the intellectual landscape and historical progression of scholarship related to Malaysian politics and digital influence.

1) Literature Network Diagram: The citation network diagram (Figure 5) reveals the relationships between selected literature, represented by green nodes, and the broader body of related literature, represented by blue nodes. The arrows indicate the direction of citation, while their thickness reflects the level of scholarly influence or frequency of reference. The structure of this network reveals that certain scholars, notably Abbott (2001, 2013, 2015) and George (2005), occupy a central and influential role in shaping the discourse surrounding media control, government narratives, and democratic transitions in Malaysia. Their work forms a foundation upon which more recent studies have built. The diagram also reveals distinct clusters that align with the thematic structure of this paper, such as media censorship, ethnic voting patterns, online mobilization, and foreign interference, notably from China.

Additionally, the presence of bridging authors such as Postill (2014) and Khoo (2016) connects earlier foundational research with emerging perspectives on digital activism, indicating a continuous evolution of the scholarly conversation. These authors serve as intellectual conduits, drawing together otherwise disconnected bodies of work, particularly linking traditional political theory with recent studies on internet-enabled political engagement and reform movements.

2) Timeline Diagram: Complementing the network diagram, the timeline graph (Figure 4) visually depicts the chronological distribution of the cited literature. This visualization demonstrates a clear shift in scholarly focus over time. Before 2010, research primarily emphasized authoritarian state control, traditional ethnic politics, and media regulation. Moving into the 2010s, there is a noticeable expansion into digital domains, reflecting a growing awareness of the transformative power of social media in Malaysian civic life. This trend intensifies after 2016, coinciding with political shifts during and after the 14th General Election (GE14), which brought regime change and intensified public discourse online. Recent years have seen an increase in literature addressing platform-specific behaviors, especially the use of TikTok and WhatsApp for political messaging, as well as concerns over hate speech and misinformation.

Together, these visual analyses support the paper's broader argument that Malaysian political discourse has undergone a significant transformation, heavily influenced by the interplay of technology, identity, and governance. The scholarly record reveals a dynamic and expanding field of inquiry, one that continues to evolve in tandem with Malaysia's shifting sociopolitical landscape.
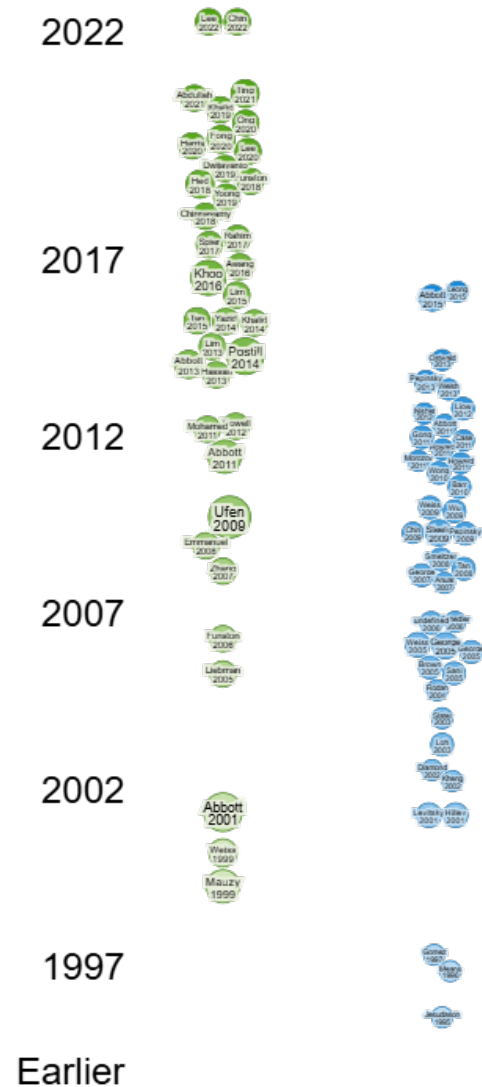

Figure 4: Timeline Graph of Selected (Green) and Related (Blue) Literature published
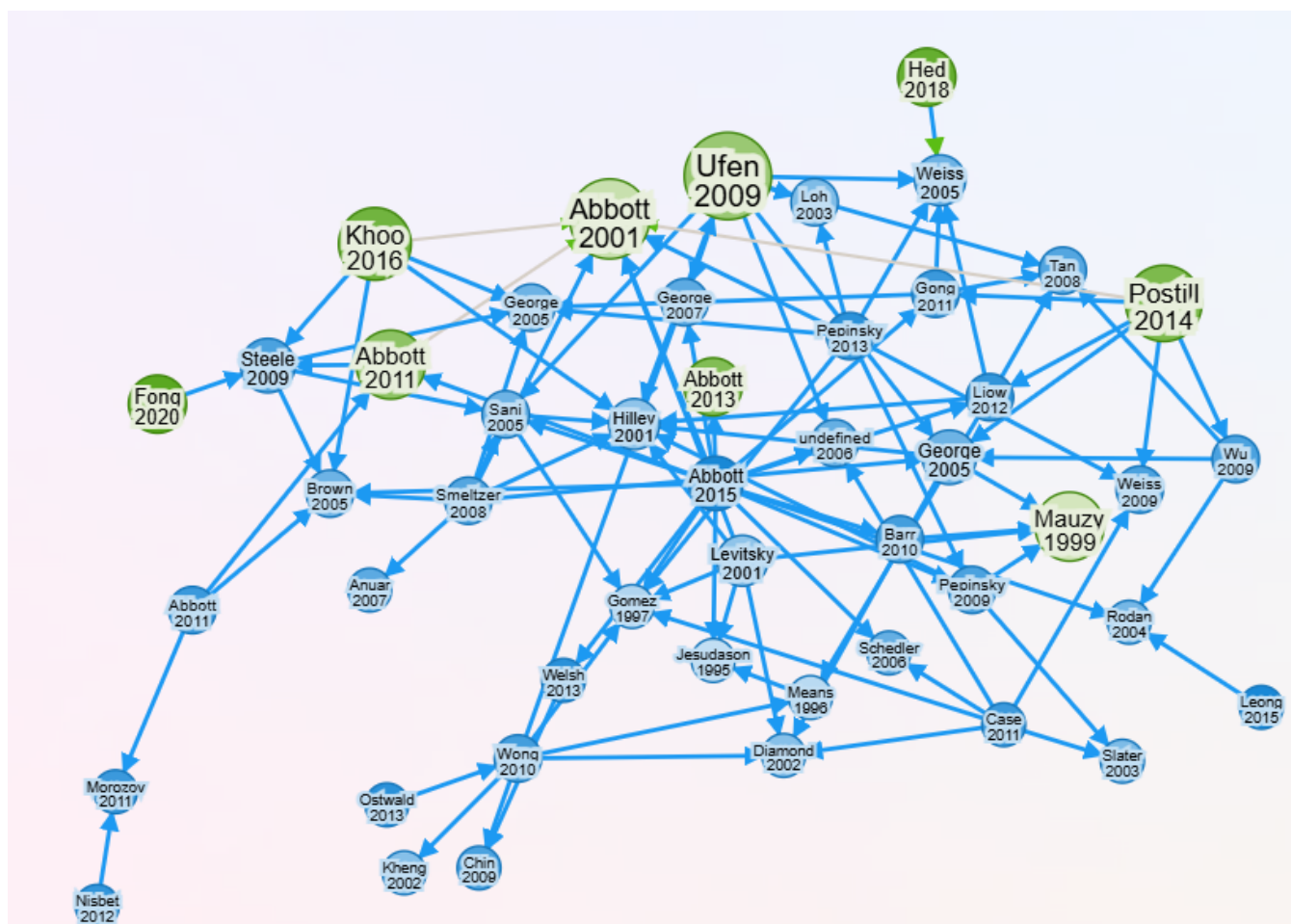
Figure 5: Citation network diagram of selected (green) and related (blue) literature.

IV. NETWORK ANALYSIS

Building upon the bibliographic analysis of Malaysian political communication studies, this section examines a specific methodological advancement in understanding digital political discourse through social network analysis. To further investigate the bibliographic and thematic insights identified in our survey of Malaysian political discourse, we conducted a computational analysis of the 2022 Malaysian General Election (GE15), with a specific focus on Instagram as a digital space for political engagement. We analyzed 53,116 Instagram posts collected using election-related hashtags—including #UndiHarapan, #KitaBoleh, #PH, #Election2022, #Malaysia, #AnwarIbrahim, #PakatanHarapan, #GE15, #KelasDemokrasi, #PRU15, and #MalaysiaMemilih—using the APIFY scraper tool. Leveraging this dataset, we employed a two-step methodological framework combining Contextual Focal Structure Analysis (CFSA) and topic modeling.

1) Contextual Focal Structure Analysis (CFSA): The CFSA methodology represents a significant advancement over traditional social network analysis by incorporating contextual information alongside user interactions, enabling a more nuanced understanding of network dynamics. Unlike simpler models that focus solely on user-user connections, CFSA integrates multiple layers of information, such as shared topics or hashtags, to provide a richer representation of social interactions.

The analytical process involved three key phases:

- **Network Construction:** The researchers generated a co-occurrence network of users based on mentions, where users who mentioned each other in their posts were considered linked, creating a web of interactions that reflected the discourse around the Malaysian general election.
- **CFSA Implementation:** The modified CFSA model accepted users and the links between them based on mentions, representing a coupling matrix. The outcome included the smallest possible contextual focal structure sets, comprising influential users within different communities who were frequently mentioned or who mentioned others in election-related posts.
- **Topic Analysis:** The researchers employed Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) topic modeling to extract and analyze the most frequent issues from textual content associated with each focal structure. The model achieved a perplexity score of 8.07 and a coherence value of 0.59, demonstrating the quality and reliability of the topic

modeling results.

CFSA enabled us to map the underlying interaction network of Instagram users who were actively shaping the electoral conversation. This technique identified sets of influential actors not just by popularity but by their relational embeddedness within election-related discourse. Our network was built from user mentions, constructing an interaction matrix that captured how individuals and entities engaged with each other during the campaign period.

Through this, we revealed tightly connected clusters of users—primarily journalists, media houses, and political party affiliates—who collectively functioned as key drivers of online narrative framing.

In parallel (Figure 6), we employed Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) for topic modeling, extracting coherent themes from the text content of the posts. The most prominent themes centered around voter empowerment, media framing, leadership identity (notably Anwar Ibrahim), and coalition branding (e.g., "KamiAWANI", "Malaysia Memilih"). The network visualization underscored the convergence of media and political communication, indicating a blurring of boundaries between news outlets and partisan actors. Interestingly, while media figures appeared to span multiple narrative clusters, certain political actors and party-linked profiles dominated isolated sub-networks, suggesting varied levels of online influence and cross-sector collaboration.

A. Impact & Implication

This analysis makes several significant contributions to understanding Malaysian political scenarios, beginning with its methodological innovation in political discourse analysis. The application of CFSA to political discourse analysis provides a more sophisticated approach than traditional network analysis methods, demonstrating how the combination of network analysis with content analysis can effectively decode the multifaceted nature of online political communication. This methodological advancement makes a substantial contribution to the broader field of digital democracy studies by providing researchers with a robust framework for analyzing complex political networks that extends beyond simple connectivity patterns to incorporate contextual relationships and thematic coherence.

The findings reveal a concerning trend in media-politics convergence, where the close interconnection between media professionals and politicians underscores a blurring of lines between these traditionally distinct sectors. This convergence raises critical questions about media independence and the framing of political narratives, as the symbiotic relationship between media coverage and political messaging appears to influence how the public perceives and engages with election-related information. The implications extend beyond mere professional relationships to fundamental concerns about information flow and potential bias in political coverage, suggesting that the traditional role of media as an independent watchdog may be compromised in Malaysia's digital political landscape.

These methodological insights seamlessly connect to broader implications for digital democracy, as the study highlights the significant role of social media, particularly Instagram, in modern political communication. The identified focal structures reveal an intricate interplay between journalists, media houses, politicians, and political parties, demonstrating how digital platforms have become crucial for political engagement and information dissemination. This transformation represents a fundamental shift in how political discourse is constructed and consumed, moving from traditional gatekeeping models to more complex, interconnected networks where influence flows through multiple channels simultaneously.

However, the research also reveals troubling concerns about political representation that arise from this digital transformation. The explicit mention of "Friends Of Harapan Selangor" without strong representation from other political parties indicates a potential disparity in online presence or influence among different political factions during this crucial period, suggesting unbalanced digital political discourse. This imbalance extends beyond simple visibility to questions of democratic representation in digital spaces, where certain political voices may dominate while others remain marginalized or underrepresented in the online conversation.

The analysis of information flow patterns further illuminates these concerns, as the network structure not only highlights the central role of media in shaping public opinion during elections but also points to potential challenges in maintaining a balanced and diverse political discourse in the Malaysian online sphere. The concentration of influence within specific focal structures suggests that information dissemination may be controlled by relatively small networks of interconnected actors, potentially limiting the diversity of perspectives and narratives available to the public during critical democratic processes.

This research expands the bibliographic understanding of Malaysian political communication by providing empirical evidence on how digital platforms reshape the structures of political discourse, moving beyond theoretical frameworks to demonstrate concrete patterns of influence and interaction. The CFSA methodology offers future researchers a robust framework for analyzing complex political networks. At the same time, the findings shed light on the evolving dynamics of Malaysian democracy in the digital age. The study's revelation of media-political convergence patterns provides crucial insights for understanding contemporary challenges to media independence and democratic discourse in Malaysia's increasingly digital political landscape, suggesting that traditional concepts of media autonomy and political representation require reconceptualization in the context of social media-driven political communication.

Ultimately, this integrated methodological approach revealed how digital platforms, such as Instagram, have evolved into key arenas for political discourse in Malaysia, where influence is exerted not just through traditional metrics like post volume or likes, but also through strategic positioning within networked conversations. Our findings illustrate the dynamic
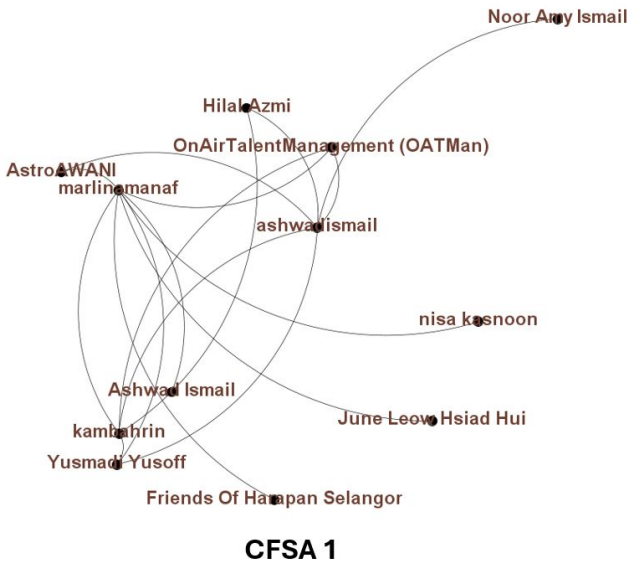
Figure 6: CFSA 1 set (among 11 focal structures) with breakdown and Frequent Keywords obtained by LDA

interplay between media narratives, public engagement, and political communication strategies in a hybrid media system increasingly shaped by social platforms.

V. CONCLUSION

Malaysia is a multicultural nation with a complex political system that continues to evolve in response to diverse social, economic, and technological forces. In this survey paper, we examined the various factors shaping the political landscape in Malaysia through a comprehensive approach that combines bibliographic analysis with advanced social network analysis. Our investigation encompassed the political attitudes of different voter subgroups, the role of social media, government actions, and the impact of Malaysia's relationship with China. It introduced empirical evidence through the Contextual Focal Structure Analysis of the 2022 Malaysian general election.

Through our bibliographic analysis, we identified and examined how political attitudes are formed across ethnicities, gender and age, shedding light on how voting choices are made across these demographic segments. We highlighted the evolution and growing importance of social media as a tool for political discourse and mobilization, demonstrating how these platforms have given citizens the tools to criticize government failings while simultaneously allowing the government to further push their propaganda. Our examination of government actions revealed several incidents where direct political interference has obstructed democratic processes in the country. Our analysis of the Chinese factor provided detailed insights into how Malaysia's relationship with China influences domestic political dynamics.

Building upon this foundational understanding, our application of Contextual Focal Structure Analysis to Instagram data from the 2022 Malaysian general election provided empirical validation of social media's transformative role in political communication. The CFSA methodology revealed complex networks of influence involving journalists, media houses, politicians, and political parties, demonstrating how digital platforms have fundamentally reshaped the structures of political discourse. Our findings uncovered concerning patterns of media-politics convergence, where traditional boundaries between journalism and political advocacy have become increasingly blurred, raising critical questions about media independence and democratic representation in Malaysia's digital age.

The network analysis revealed significant disparities in online political representation, with certain political factions dominating digital discourse while others remained marginalized. This empirical evidence corroborates our bibliographic findings regarding the uneven distribution of political power and influence in Malaysia's contemporary landscape. The identification of key focal structures and information flow patterns provides concrete evidence of how political narratives are constructed and disseminated through interconnected networks of media and political actors, offering a more nuanced understanding of influence dynamics than traditional analysis methods.

Overall, this survey paper highlights the complex and evolving nature of Malaysian politics, offering both theoretical background and empirical evidence to inform future research in the area. The combination of a comprehensive literature review with advanced social network analysis demonstrates the value of integrating multiple methodological approaches to understand contemporary political phenomena. The authors hope to expand this research framework by conducting longitudinal social media analytics across various platforms and elections, while developing more sophisticated methods for detecting and analyzing political influence networks. Future research will focus on examining the real-world impact of digital political discourse on voting behavior and democratic outcomes, contributing to a deeper understanding of how

digital transformation is reshaping Malaysian democracy and political participation.

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