

Seminar in Johor Bharu reflects on new e-media factor in Malaysia election

The unexpected outcome of the recently concluded General Election in Malaysia has created a lot of debate and discussion in the academia, and among media practitioners and political analysts. Thus, it was the topic of discussion at a half-day seminar-cum-forum held in Johor Bharu, Malaysia on 12 April 2008, and attended by academics, media practitioners and students.

“The X-Factor in the Malaysian 2008 General Election” was the title of the seminar organized by the Asian Media Information and Communication Centre (AMIC), Malaysia, in association with the Institute of Public Relations Malaysia (IPRM). The seminar discussed the content analysis of print media coverage, as well as the emergence and usage of new media during the election campaign by the ruling Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition and the opposition.

“Exciting results, influence of the ex-prime minister, influence of an ex-deputy prime minister, participation of an exciting young candidate and revival of existing veteran politicians were some of the main reasons to call this the X-factor of the General Elections”, noted Dr Sankaran Ramanathan, AMIC Country Representative, Malaysia and Managing Partner of Mediaplus Research Consultancy. In his opening speech, “Historical and Political Background to the 2008 Elections”, he pointed out how this year’s General Election has made exciting changes in terms of e-election campaigns and how young voters influenced by the Internet and new media, played a more active role during elections.

“In order for one to keep monitoring what is happening to society today, we must participate in the public sphere. I think this is the lesson this particular election has driven very clearly”, noted Dr Sankaran, in his explanation of how new media such as Youtube, online forums, blogs and even SMSes played a major role in this year’s election, which led the ruling coalition, BN to lose the two thirds majority in the parliament and five States to the opposition.

“We still have this dichotomy in print, electronic media and the new media. Whether we like it or not newspapers are still powerful and they write a lot of reports. So caught in this dichotomy, on one hand, still print media is censored, but on the other hand, we can’t censor electronic media”, he noted and elaborated more on media and its’ role in a national event such as a general election.

Each presenter at the seminar explained with statistical data how mainstream newspapers in all four languages, Malay, English, Tamil and Chinese, carried information about each political party manifestos and their campaigns etc., within a period of one week prior to the election. It was clearly shown by each presenter that majority of the articles covered news of the BN while a very few articles mentioned about the opposition and its’ policies.

Dr Raja Mohan, lecturer at Olympia College in Johor Bahru presented his research on the issues raised by the candidates and parties during the election campaign, and discussed the manifestos of each political party and issues raised on those. Speaking to *AMCB* after his speech, he said that media today in Malaysia seems to be lopsided. “Everybody should be given a fair chance and fair usage in terms of media and e-media during campaigns”, he added.

“Media will become irrelevant if they do not provide balanced news”, Subra Paidathalli, a Member of Parti Keadlian Rakyat (PKR), told the forum. R Kamalanathan, Hon. Secretary of IPRM acknowledged that in any country the media would usually be slightly biased to the government. In the Malaysian context, he pointed out that, it is necessary for the government to control the media to a certain extent because Malaysia is a multi ethnic country where racial harmony is valued and needs to be protected. “Reporting must be done in utmost fairness with balanced, accurate and objective information”, he concluded.

A CD-ROM consisting the proceedings of the seminar with a set of recommendations for reporting elections will be published by AMIC-Malaysia soon.