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## How Political Parties Used TikTok in the 2022 Malaysian General Election

*By Ooi Kok Hin*

### SYNOPSIS

*Malaysia's recent general election demonstrates the potency of TikTok as a political space, where parties adopted different strategies to appeal to voters, especially those who were young and new.*

### COMMENTARY

TikTok proved its political salience in Malaysia's 15<sup>th</sup> general election (GE15). Two developments, both stemming from the 'Undi18' constitutional amendment, increased its potency. First, the voting age was lowered to 18 years, and second, new automatic voter registration had made many people – who previously did not bother to register – eligible to vote. The result? An additional six million voters were added to the register compared to the previous general election, which was an increase of more than 30 per cent.

These young or [passive](#) swing voters had no previous voting record or known party loyalties. Faced with such uncertainty, political parties and politicians made every effort possible to court their support. This is why TikTok and video [campaigning](#) in general featured prominently during the campaign period and its immediate aftermath.

### How parties pitched their TikToks

Parties and politicians tended to convey different narratives and appealed to voters through a variety of approaches on TikTok. My field observations in five states and content analysis of TikTok videos suggest a far from monolithic platform.

The communications team in the Pakatan Harapan (PH) coalition, which includes the Democratic Action Party (DAP), People's Justice Party (PKR), National Trust Party

(AMANAH), and United Progressive Kinabalu Organisation (UPKO), and collaborates with Malaysian United Democratic Alliance (MUDA) was surprisingly uncoordinated at the national level. As a DAP youth leader revealed to me, PH youth leaders were too busy running their respective campaigns (many were themselves first-time candidates) and did not focus on developing a coherent media strategy and messaging.

At times, local messages tailored for a specific constituency were prioritised over national messages at campaign stops. This was because of the need to strike a balance between emphasising local issues while at the same time addressing issues with state-wide or nation-wide resonance for online media consumption as part of a coordinated coalition-wide strategy.

DAP and PKR candidates whom I met usually had at least two videographers and a photographer for different content creation. One DAP candidate mentioned that the videographers were 'sent' or sponsored by the party headquarters to assist in their campaign. They shot and edited videos on the go, often in car rides between campaign stops and late at night. They released light and straightforward videos that needed minimal editing to facilitate frequent engagement. Videos that needed better scripting, choreography or editing were scheduled in advance for release since they took more time to produce. The fast-paced environment forced content creators to juggle production speed against quality of content.

One of PH's most popular TikTok content creators is Jason Yew. Unlike the other campaign videographers who both shot and edited, Yew usually took extracts from existing videos, including those from the party's YouTube channel, or Facebook livestreams from *ceramah* (political rallies). He selected short, catchy segments, typically of key orators such as Anwar Ibrahim and Rafizi Ramli, and added the all-important subtitles. The latter were important especially for voters who watched them during their commute or at bedtime. This formula was astoundingly successful: between 5 and 18 November (the campaign period), Yew's TikTok videos [amassed](#) 36 million views, 1.5 million likes, over 246,000 comments, and over 134,000 shares!

Barisan Nasional (BN) seemed to be less effective on TikTok than PH or Perikatan Nasional (PN). Former health minister Khairy Jamaluddin topped the chart among BN leaders with the highest number of followers (378,100), followed by former Prime Minister Ismail Sabri (362,400) and former Defence Minister Hishammuddin Hussein (349,300). But it was the then UMNO information chief, Shahril Hamdan, who best utilised the platform to produce rapid-response videos countering their opponent's talking points. Overall, BN's online communications still relied largely on pro-BN news portals and websites.

### **The Importance of TikTok**

MUDA information chief, Luqman Long, [asserted](#) the value of TikTok as a major GE15 battleground, given that it had "fast-paced content, emotion-provoking [effect] and [was a] most friendly cross-app tool." In other words, he claimed that TikTok videos were easy to post across different platforms.

PN relied more on unsponsored and sponsored content created by third parties.

Neither Bersatu President and former Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin nor Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS) President Hadi Awang posted often on their TikTok accounts, but anonymous third-party accounts like @Friendsofmuhyddinyassin (242,000 followers) and @abekitemuhyddin (224,400 followers) posted three to four videos a day. These tended to use roughly the same hashtags: #abah #abahpm10 #apakaharsemua (“How are you all?”, which was the way Muhyddin usually started his speeches), #muhyddinyassin, #PNbest (“PN is best”, the coalition’s catchphrase), #Islam, #bersihdandstabil (“clean and stable”, the coalition’s campaign slogan), #anakmudasokongpas (“youths support PAS”), and #pasdihati (“PAS in my heart”).

Some of the most viewed pro-PN content on TikTok were not created by accounts with large followings. Videos like ‘Ayoh Chik’ (over 860,000 views) and ‘Five Reasons Why Youth Choose PN’ (over 2 million views) were posted by accounts with only a few thousand followers.

A key difference between TikTok and other platforms is that the number of followers matters less. The personalised #fyp (For Your Page) and hashtag-driven searches ensured a more equal playing field. Videos made by ordinary content creators might become viral; not only those by creators with a million followers. What this means for campaigns (political or not) is that having many content creators with small followings could be as effective as, or even more so, than having a few content creators with large followings.

### **Comparing Influencers and Impact**

Not all content came through campaign channels. Compared to PH and BN, PN appears to have had more endorsements from social media influencers who did not typically produce political content. These endorsers declared support for, and suggested their followers vote for PN during the campaign.

TikTok had announced pre-election that it would not allow politicians and parties to profit from use of the platform, i.e., it [prohibited paid ads](#) and paid political content. There is little doubt that some content violated the rule, but whether a particular post is ‘sponsored content’ or reflects the account holder’s true political beliefs is difficult to pin down. TikTok Malaysia does not require ‘sponsored content’ to be labelled or that influencers declare themselves. However, it does know whether a post is paid to be promoted to viewers. For instance, three racially-charged videos that TikTok took down in the aftermath of GE15 were videos posted either by content creators who were [paid](#) to make political content, or by certain accounts which were paid to promote the videos. In these instances, TikTok Malaysia refused to disclose the identities of those who had made the payments.

This is a challenge for regulators and consumers for it departs from traditional media practice, which considers it unethical to have sponsored content masquerade as ‘news.’ On TikTok, users do not know whether they are being fed paid advertisements. In contrast, Facebook displays the profile of the user who had paid for a post to be promoted.

Lastly, it is important to note that not only political parties and politicians use TikTok, but also activists for advocacy purposes. For example, in the wake of a series of videos

on TikTok alluding to the possibility of a repeat of the May 13, 1969, racial riots, satirist and graphic designer Fahmi Reza [went live](#) on TikTok to read testimonies from survivors, and to remind his followers about the dangers of racial incitement and the sufferings of those who had lost family members in 1969.

## Concluding Thoughts

Politicians and campaigners seem convinced that TikTok is an effective tool for reaching out to newly enfranchised voters, especially those who have no prior party affiliation or loyalty. This *tabula rasa* amongst them combined with TikTok's personalised algorithm, which can produce a [filter bubble](#), creates a first-mover advantage: whoever reaches these voters first can occupy their hearts and minds. As political parties and lobby groups step up engagement with these voters on TikTok, effective regulation and content moderation would be necessary to make it a safer and more civil space.

But with the new technology still evolving, it remains to be seen whether TikTok will retain its preeminent status among the young voters in the next election cycle.

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