

# KISIP 2024

Konferensi Ilmu Sosial dan Ilmu Politik

Research Paper

## Disinformation and Hate Speech: Ethnoreligious Rhetoric on TikTok during Malaysia's 15th General Election (GE15) 2022

---

*Panel 1*

Political Manipulation, Election Interference, and  
Disinformation Campaigns

# Dr. Nuurrianti Jalli

School of Media and Strategic Communications,  
Oklahoma State University, USA

✉ [nuurrianti@gmail.com](mailto:nuurrianti@gmail.com)

Dr. Nuurrianti Jalli is an Assistant Professor of Strategic Communications at Oklahoma State University and Visiting Research Fellow for Media, Technology, and Society Program at ISEAS Yusof-Ishak Institute, Singapore. Her work focuses on propaganda studies, dis/misinformation, media and democracy, tech/public policy, and media information literacy in Southeast Asia. Her writing and research have appeared in leading publications, including the Oxford Reuters Journalism Institute reports, The Conversation, Newsweek, CNA, South China Morning Post, Jakarta Post, and The Diplomat, among many others. Along with academic work, Dr. Nuurrianti also had previously served as an adviser, consultant, and resource person for leading organizations, including the United Nations, UNESCO, ByteDance, Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, Brookings Institution, Taiwan Double Think Lab, Malaysia Prime Minister's Department, Malaysia's Ministry of Tourism, Arts, and Culture.

---

*This working paper is circulated for discussion and comment purposes. It has not been peer-reviewed or been subject to internal review by SAIL, CSIS, or Google. The views expressed here are solely those of the author(s) and do not represent an official position of SAIL, CSIS, Google, or any other organization. Feedback is welcome as the author(s) continue to develop these ideas for future formal publication. Please contact the author(s) directly with any comments or questions.*

Editor: Dandy Rafitrandi

## Abstract

The 15th Malaysian general election (GE15) on November 19th, 2022, saw the continued use of digital information warfare as a prominent feature in the country's political landscape. Similar to past elections, various information warfare tactics were employed, including disinformation dissemination and ethnoreligious rhetoric on social media. This study focuses on disinformation and hate speech spread via TikTok, one of Malaysia's most popular digital platforms for political discourse and propaganda. By analyzing videos related to GE15 using selected trending hashtags and keywords, 2,789 videos posted between November 1st, 2022, and December 15th, 2022, were collected. After data cleaning, 679 videos with over 1,000 views were analyzed. The results show that 373 TikTok videos contained hate speech, with 264 featuring ethnoreligious hate speech targeting non-Malays, particularly those of Chinese descent. Hate speech in Malay predominantly targeted non-Malays while Chinese language content focused on Malays and Islam. Emerging hashtags during the data collection period, including #13mei, #13mei1969, and #bangsamelayu, were used by Malay ultra-nationalists to spread anti-Chinese narratives, which also appeared in the hate speech content. Other types of hate speech found include gender and sexuality-targeted hate speech.

**Keywords:** *Ethnoreligious, hate speech, disinformation, TikTok, GE15, Malaysia*

## Introduction

In Malaysia, a multiethnic and multireligious nation, the political landscape is characterized by its complexity and dynamism (Weiss, 2022). The coexistence of diverse ethnic and religious groups constitutes a critical aspect of Malaysian society. However, this environment also engenders opportunities for political actors to exploit pre-existing tensions and divisions to their advantage, including through strategic deployment of hate speech and ethnoreligious propaganda (Jalli, 2023; Dian, 2022).

## Social media and elections in Malaysia

Over the years, political parties and candidates in Malaysia have increasingly capitalized on social media like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube to forge connections with voters, convey political messages, and employ tactics aimed at polarizing the electorate and undermining their opponents. This pattern persisted during the latest Malaysian general election (GE15), with TikTok emerging as an additional social media platform actively engaged in political discourse (Jalli, 2023). While social media platforms provide avenues for political participation in Malaysia, they also pose challenges to democracy. These platforms have transformed into arenas for information warfare between competing parties, especially during election periods (Lim, 2023). The prevalent use of ethnoreligious propaganda, disinformation and hate speech throughout campaigns has long been a matter of concern in Malaysia (Jalli and Idris, 2019; Jalli, 2023; Hopkins, 2014). The rapid dissemination of dis/misinformation coupled with the anonymity that these platforms offer, facilitates the swift spread of inflammatory propaganda. Worse, as a byproduct of platforms' algorithms, users are exposed to the echo chamber effect, which consequently reinforces users' pre-existing biases and beliefs (Mangentali and Nicita, 2023), and could result in a manifestation of aggression offline.

Table 1: Definitions of key terms for this research

Propaganda	Hate speech	Disinformation
The deliberate expression of opinions or actions by individuals or groups to influence the opinions or actions of others through psychological manipulations.  (Jalli and Idris, 2023)	Hate speech is generally defined as any communication that disparages or discriminates against a person or group based on some characteristic such as race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, nationality, religion, or other protected category. It involves attacks on people's dignity, expressions of hatred or contempt for them, and efforts to denigrate or dehumanize them. (Paz, et. Al., 2020; Herz and Molnar, 2012)	Disinformation is the deliberate creation and dissemination of false or deceptive information with the intent to deceive, manipulate, or sway individuals' opinions, beliefs, or actions. In contrast to misinformation, which can be unintentionally circulated, disinformation is purposefully designed to generate confusion, inflict damage, or accomplish particular goals, frequently associated with political, social, or economic agendas. (Jalli and Idris, 2023)

## Propaganda, disinformation, and democracy

In democratic societies such as Malaysia, the concepts of propaganda, disinformation, and democracy are intricately interwoven, profoundly impacting the functioning of these societies. The dissemination of propaganda and disinformation can undermine the principles of free and fair elections, informed decision-making, and public trust in political institutions (Jalli and Idris, 2023). When exposed to unchecked propaganda and disinformation, individuals are less likely to make informed decisions, which can have severe repercussions for democratic processes (Hutchins, 2021). In Malaysia, employing strategic propaganda campaigns, including the use of coordinated disinformation and hate speech, has proven effective in influencing public opinion and, in many cases, has affected electoral outcomes. For instance, in the 2008 Malaysian general election (GE12), Barisan Nasional (BN, National Front) lost its two-thirds majority in parliament, which then-Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi attributed to the successful social media propaganda campaigns by their opponents (Jalli, 2017). This historic loss catalyzed the growth of paid actors to assist with strategic propaganda campaigns, known as cybertroopers (Hopkins, 2014). The rising prevalence of cybertroopers in manipulating political temperature, shaping public discourse, and influencing political behavior in Malaysia correlates with enhanced internet services in terms of penetration, stability, and accessibility. This trend is further propelled by the increasing capabilities of mobile devices and the global growth of social media industries.

In another example, in the 2018 General Election (GE14), the Barisan Nasional's cybertroopers utilized bots as a propaganda tool to suppress the #pulangmengundi hashtag on Twitter. The hashtag aimed to connect people who needed assistance traveling to their hometowns to vote with those willing to help through either monetary donations or carpooling and was perceived as a criticism of the government. The #pulangmengundi hashtag emerged after the government, under Prime Minister Najib Razak, announced plans to hold the election on a Wednesday, May 9<sup>th</sup> 2018, which was unusual as polling was typically held on weekends to accommodate voter travel to their registered hometowns. The move to hold the election on a weekday was seen as a strategic decision by Barisan Nasional to lower voters' turnout (Leong, 2019; Seiff, 2018). Shortly after the #pulangmengundi hashtag gained momentum on Twitter, it is alleged that Barisan Nasional deployed bots to overshadow genuine tweets seeking for carpooling assistance requests. These bots primarily disseminated propaganda tweets that supported Barisan's narrative, contained hate speech against opposition candidates, and included irrelevant content. The primary objective of using these bots was to mitigate the influence of the #pulangmengundi movement, ensuring it wouldn't significantly affect voter turnout on election day (Jalli and Idris, 2023).

Obviously, the continuous advancement of social media has made it easier for propaganda and disinformation to spread rapidly and reach vast audiences, making it more difficult for democracies to counteract these harmful practices. In Malaysia, multiple attempts have been made to address these issues, including the implementation of new "fake news" laws that were criticized for being a means for the government to silence opposition, the creation of [sebenarnya.my](http://sebenarnya.my), a state-owned fact-checking center, that faced criticism for being biased and inefficient as it is part of government agencies, and various media and information literacy initiatives by government entities and civil society organizations. Despite these efforts, the issue of propaganda and misinformation remains prevalent in the country (Jalli, 2022).

## Hate speech as disinformation and propaganda tactic during elections: the prevalence on TikTok

Elections have traditionally been hotbeds for propaganda. The rise of digital platforms, combined with tech giants' policies questionable stance on 'freedom of expression', and poor policy implementation has inadvertently paved the way for hate speech to permeate political discussions on social media (Jalli and Idris, 2023). Hate speech is defined as any harmful rhetoric that targets individuals or groups based on characteristics like race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, nationality, or religion. This type of communication seeks to undermine their dignity, express deep-seated prejudice, and degrade or strip them of their humanity (Paz, et. al., 2020; Herz and Molnar, 2012). In India for example, the call for TikTok ban centralized in the platform 'inaction' in dealing with hateful content including promotion of misogyny, cruelty against animals, rape culture, and many others (Jain and Jain, 2021).

The 'permeable' nature of TikTok provides an opening for political actors, particularly during elections, a time marked by intense emotions and stark divisions. Knowing this, cybertroopers, and other political actors could take advantage to deploy propaganda campaigns including hate speech to influence political sentiment (Jalli and Idris, 2019; Hopkins, 2014). Through the dissemination of emotionally charged content, they can tap into pre-existing biases, deepen societal rifts, and even provoke violence against specific groups, ultimately distorting the political climate. In Malaysia specifically, with strong identity politics (Dettman and Pepinsky, 2023; Chin, 2021; Lemière, 2019), ethnoreligious narratives with hateful undertones have been found to be one of the key influencing factors in political behaviors during elections seasons (Jalli and Idris, 2023; Jalli and Idris, 2019).

### TikTok as the new frontier

TikTok's format of quick, engaging videos makes it an effective medium for spreading messages rapidly and this includes propaganda. While social media platforms like TikTok have policies against hate speech and propaganda, detecting and removing such content in local and indigenous languages remains a major challenge (Jalli, 2021; Jalli, 2023). This makes TikTok vulnerable to misuse for spreading toxic rhetoric in languages that evade automated content moderation (Jalli, 2022). Plus, with its algorithm, which pushes content to users based on their viewing habits, can create echo chambers where users are repeatedly exposed to similar types of content, reinforcing users' existing beliefs.

TikTok's widespread appeal to younger demographics positions it as a prime platform for those aiming to sway young voters. This was particularly evident during the 2022 GE15 in Malaysia, marking the first instance where the voting age was reduced to 18 through the Constitution (Amendment) Act 2019, which was gazetted on September 1st, 2019 (Chai, 2022). Content laced with hate speech, camouflaged as benign memes or clips, can effortlessly infiltrate users' 'for you page'. The brevity of TikTok videos means viewers may overlook the subtle threads of prejudice or misinformation, leaving them vulnerable to adopting these skewed perspectives.

In Malaysia, the proliferation of propaganda including disinformation and hate speech is propelled by multiple factors, including low media literacy (Jalli, 2022), deep-rooted ethnoreligious divisions, and increased polarization that nudges individuals towards information affirming their preconceptions (Jalli, 2020). The allure of financial rewards from propaganda campaign benefactors further accentuates this spread (Jalli

and Idris, 2019). Additionally, the lack of competent independent fact-checking agencies combined with rapid technological innovations like AI tools, lends a veneer of authenticity to propaganda. This sophistication allows it not just broader dissemination, but also precise targeting on social media platforms, amplifying its potential impact.

This paper examines TikTok, the social media phenomenon that witnessed explosive growth during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic (Jalli, 2021). Despite its success, the platform has come under fire for its perceived lax moderation policies (Jalli, 2023). While tech giants such as Facebook, Twitter, and Google have rolled out comprehensive strategies to thwart the misuse by propagandists (Bradshaw, Bailey, and Howard, 2021), TikTok continues to be a point of concern for global governments. Largely dependent on its internal AI-driven monitoring system and user reports, the platform grapples with the challenge of overseeing the vast array of user-generated content effectively. Adding to the complexity, TikTok's algorithm, designed to prioritize engaging content, can unintentionally amplify the reach of deceptive information, making it even more challenging for users to distinguish between authentic and misleading content.

Essentially, this exploratory research aims to answer these questions.

1. Could disinformation and hate speech be found on TikTok during GE15?
2. What are the primary disinformation and hate speech narratives prevalent on TikTok during GE15?
3. How did TikTok offer a platform for disinformation and hate speech during GE15?

## Methods

To gather relevant data, TikTok videos were systematically compiled within a specified timeframe stretching from November 1st, 2022, to December 1st, 2022. The data collection process was structured around the utilization of trending hashtags and key terms that held substantial relevance to the 15th general election, presented in both Malay and English languages. This encompassed a range of identifiers, which included but were not limited to trending hashtags, acronyms such as “PRU 15” — an abbreviation for Pilihanraya 15, which means 15th general election in the Malay language — and “GE15,” the corresponding term in English (full list of the used hashtags and keywords in Table 2 below). Additionally, to extend the research scope and add depth to the exploration, the titles of prominent political alliances, specifically “Perikatan Nasional” and “Pakatan Harapan,” were also incorporated into the keyword repertoire utilized in this research.

Key political party acronyms were also incorporated, such as “DAP” (Chinese-majority Democratic Action Party), “PAS” (the Malaysian Islamic Party), “BN” (Barisan Nasional), and “GPS” (the Sarawak Alliance Party). Additionally, the research incorporated the names of notable political figures: “Anwar Ibrahim” (the leader of the Keadilan political party), “Muhyiddin” (referring to the former minister Muhyiddin Yassin), “Ismail Sabri” (former prime minister), “Zahid Hamidi” (from the United Malay National Organization, UMNO), “Mahathir Mohammad” (ex-prime minister and election candidate), “Lim Guan Eng” (the DAP Chairman), “Abdul Hadi” (or Abdul Hadi Awang, the PAS president), and the former prime minister “Najib Razak”.

A total of 2,789 videos were tagged between November 1st, 2022, and December 1st, 2022. After data cleaning, 679 videos with more than 1000 views were collected for analysis. The study found that 373 TikTok videos had black propaganda

and 261 videos of those videos contained hate speech with ethnoreligious tones, particularly dominant in videos posted in non-English languages such as Malay and Chinese.

Table 2: Full list of keywords and hashtags for data scraping from November 1st – December 15th, 2022

Hashtags	Keywords
#PRU15	"PRU15" and "PRU 15"
#GE15	"GE15" and "GE 15"
#MalaysiaBaru	"Perikatan Nasional"
#Undi18	"Pakatan Harapan"
#DemiMalaysia	"Barisan" "Barisan Nasional"
#TolakKleptokrasi	"Keadilan"
#KitaBoleh	"BN"
#NotmyPM	"DAP"
	"PAS"
	"GPS"
	"Gerakan"
	"UMNO"
	"MUDA"
	"Anwar Ibrahim"
	"Najib Razak"
	"Muhyiddin" and "Muhyiddin Yassin"
	"Ismail Sabri"
	"Zahid Hamidi"
	"Mahathir Mohammad"
	"Lee Guan Eng"
	"Abdul Hadi"

\*Hashtags and keywords were identified using Brand24, a social media monitoring tool

## Quantitative content analysis

Quantitative content analysis is a research method used to analyze and interpret large amounts of textual data, such as written documents, news articles, or social media posts. In this research, quantitative content analysis helped in systematically categorizing TikTok content into numerical data for statistical analysis. Prior to categorizing collected videos, as the first phase of data analysis (Figure 1, stage 3), videos were sorted out into two main groups which are propaganda and non-propaganda content. A codebook was developed following the Institute for Propaganda Analysis (Sproule, 2001), and a list of propaganda techniques was also developed by Jalli and Idris (2023). In the first level of propaganda identification, videos were separated into three key propaganda categories; 1) white propaganda, 2) gray propaganda, and 3) black propaganda. White propaganda is characterized by clearly identifiable sources and typically presents accurate information. In contrast, gray propaganda has ambiguous or unclear sources, and its accuracy is often doubtful. Black propaganda, however, is disseminated from hidden sources and deliberately shares false or misleading information with the aim of bewildering its audience, influencing public opinion, and undermining the reputation of its targets (Jalli and Idris, 2023).

In the second level of analysis, I purposely chose only 'black propaganda' videos, and further analyze the selected videos to map out all the different propaganda

techniques used by TikTok users as per the developed propaganda codebook. Propaganda techniques in the codebook includes, name-calling, glittering generalities, transfer, testimonial, plain folks, card stacking, bandwagon, whataboutism, character-assassination, and 'other' (Jalli and Idris, 2023; Sproule, 2001). Two research assistants served as additional coders to help with data analysis.

For the next phase of data analysis, the 679 propaganda videos underwent two separate quantitative content analyses focusing on two different objectives, firstly, to identify disinformation (Figure 1, stage 4a), and secondly to identify hate speech (Figure 1, stage 4b). To identify disinformation, a disinformation checkbook was developed loosely based on Rosińska (2022) and Golbeck et al. (2018). We also contrast TikTok content with fact-checked information by selected Malaysia's non-state-owned fact-checking groups such as Pemantau by Bersih ([www.pemantau.org](http://www.pemantau.org)), MYCheck Malaysia (under Bernama, a news agency in Malaysia, [www.mycheck.my](http://www.mycheck.my)), and JomCheck Malaysia ([www.jomcheck.org](http://www.jomcheck.org)). Next to identify hate speech, a hate speech codebook was developed based on a previous codebook developed by Phadke, et. Al (2018). Hate speech categorization includes race/ethnicity, immigration/nationality, sexual orientation, religious view, gender identity, political view, disability, appearance, and 'others.'

Full data analysis framework could be seen in Figure 1, below.

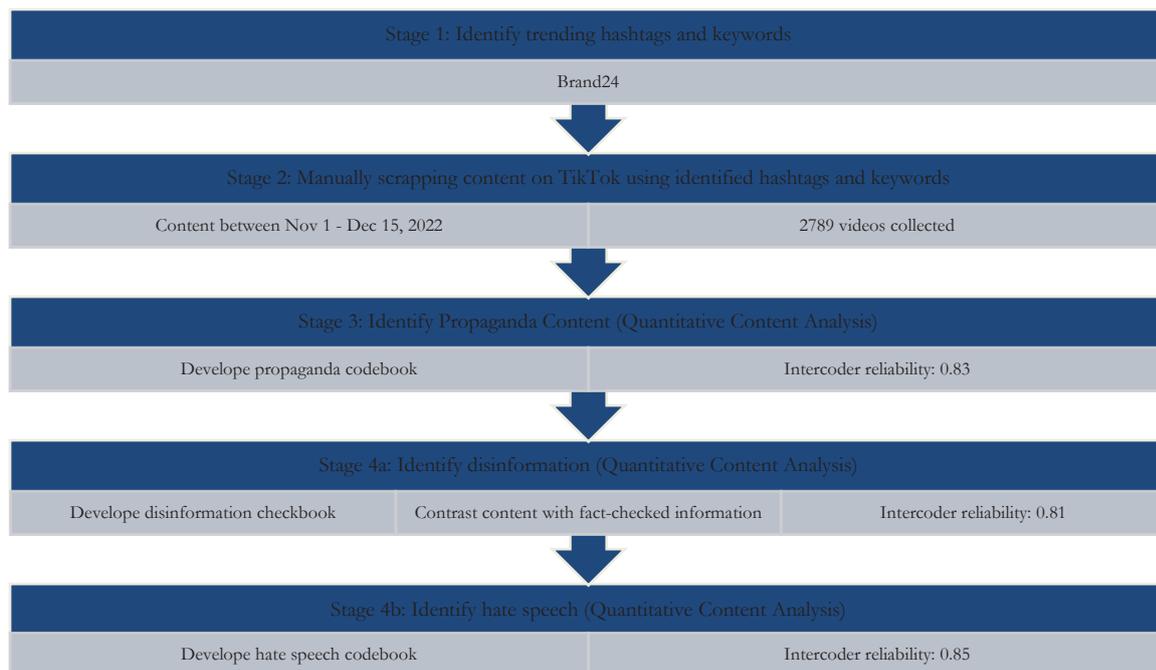


Figure 1: Framework for researching content on TikTok during GE15

## Online interview

In the second phase of this study, six TikTok content creators were engaged in a series of online interviews to gain deeper insights into how the TikTok framework enables content creators, including cybertroopers, to disseminate disinformation and hate speech on the platform. The online interview methodology is a qualitative research approach that entails conducting interviews via the Internet using video conferencing

or instant messaging tools. For this study, Zoom was employed for data collection purposes. Each interview spanned between 1 to 1.5 hours. Participants were granted the option to protect their identities during the research process to minimize risks. Interviews took place from November 20th to December 15th, 2022.

## Findings

### RQ1: Could disinformation and hate speech be found on TikTok during GE15?

Data analysis identified, out of the 2,789 videos collected during the data collection period, 679 videos contained propaganda. Out of the 679 videos, 373 contained black propaganda and hateful narrative. And out of the 373 videos, 89 contained disinformation, and 147 contained hate speech.

Table 3: Different propaganda techniques in TikTok videos

Propaganda techniques	Definitions	Frequency
Name-calling (NC)	When propagandists give a bad name for an idea, people, or organizations, create hatred toward the object.	35
Glittering generalities (GG)	When propagandists use impressive and eloquent words in showing the “virtue” of an idea, people, or organization to create public acceptance and amazement.	66
Transfer (TF)	When propagandists associate themselves with other authoritative or respectable entities so target audience would accept the propagated ideas. Transfer can also be done via symbolic manner.	16
Testimonial (TS)	When propagandists strategically use prominent and important individuals to give testimonials or support their ideas.	9
Plain folks (PF)	When propagandists justify their ideas in the name “of the people” or the “plain folks”.	18
Card stacking (CS)	A tactic used by propagandists to present a selected part of the story that is twisted or uses a false logical argument to construct a persuasive idea, program, persona, or product.	11
Bandwagon (BW)	A propaganda technique used by propagandists to make the target audience to “contribute to their cause and follow the crowd.”	45
Whataboutism (W)	A propaganda method involves the act of strategically deflecting criticism or avoiding accountability by redirecting attention to an unrelated issue or action, often by asking “what about” some other person or group.	36
Character-assassination (CA)	A propaganda technique that aims to tarnish the reputation of an individual or group to undermine their credibility and influence.	87
‘Other’ (O)	Other propaganda techniques	168

\*Cohen’s Kappa intercoder reliability (ICR) is 0.83. ICR is a quantitative indicator of the consistency between various coders in their data coding decisions. (O’Connor and Joffee, 2020). For Cohen’s Kappa ICR (>0 but <1, varying degrees of agreement above

chance), scores ranging from 0.81-1.00 are considered almost in perfect agreement. Also, note that some videos may contain multiple propaganda techniques, such as in Figure 2 below (this video contains CA, CS and false information).

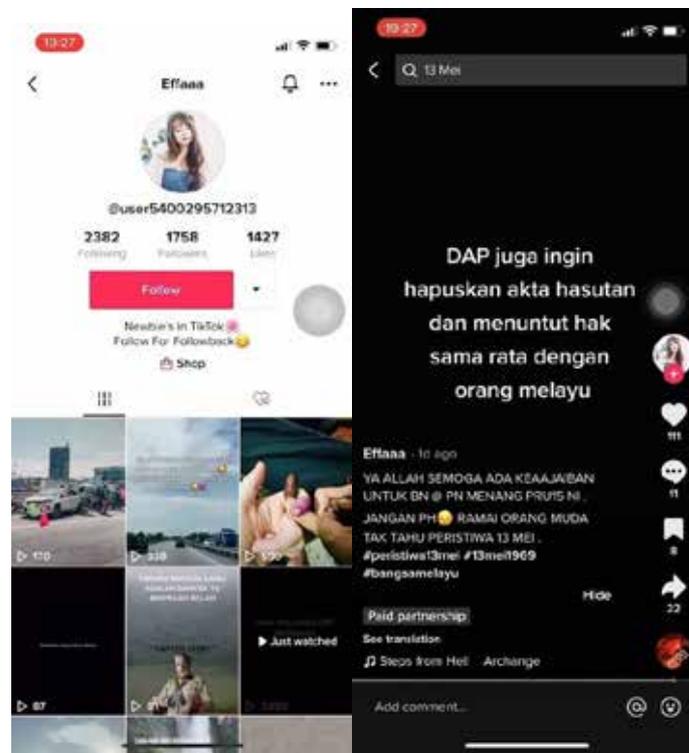


Figure 2: TikTok video 1

TikTok user @user54000295712313 (Figure 2) posted various emotive content on its TikTok page. Their content focusing mainly on disinformation campaigns against *Pakatan Harapan* (Hope Alliance) which one of its key political parties is the Democratic Action Party (DAP), a Chinese majority party. Using hashtag #peristiwa13mei #13mei1969 and #bangsaMelayu (Malay race), the video shared anti-DAP propaganda with various racially charged captions “DAP juga ingin hapuskan akta hasutan dan menuntut hak sama rata dengan orang melayu” (reads DAP also wants to abolish the Sedition Act and demand equal rights with the Malays). This video also had a “paid partnership” label on its caption indicating this video was sponsored. TikTok did not provide comments. On December 15th, this account is no longer available on TikTok.

Table 4: Frequency of disinformation and hate speech in the collected TikTok videos

Disinformation	Hate speech
89 out of 373	147 out of 373
Cohen's Kappa ICR of 0.81	Cohen's Kappa ICR of 0.85

## RQ2: What are the primary disinformation and hate speech narratives prevalent on TikTok during GE15?

The qualitative content analysis and thematic analysis of the collected videos identified one predominant theme: ethnoreligious narrative. Other emerging themes included corruption and economy.

### Ethnoreligious narrative

Throughout the GE15 election, data indicate a high prevalence of ethnoreligious propaganda and disinformation. Of the 373 videos examined, 264 featured ethnoreligious rhetoric. Propaganda in the Malay language was aimed at non-Malays, particularly the Chinese community, while content in Chinese focused on the Malays and Islam in Malaysia. As an example, on November 11th, 2022, a TikTok user @125cc\_madi posted a video that received over 16,000 views and depicted DAP supporters criticizing PAS as “stupid Muslim ulama.” Another video by @user54000295712313 claimed that DAP aims to bring communism to Malaysia and challenge Islam as the official religion of the country. In another video by @semutpink2 posted on November 18th, 2022, showed a DAP leader glorifying a former communist by the name of Chin Peng, and how Chin Peng was demonized by Malay leaders in Malaysia. The caption reads “*DAP mengagungkan Chin Peng di Tanah Melayu*” (DAP glorified Chin Peng in Tanah Melayu/Malaya).

The majority of the 264 videos analyzed had similar narratives and focused on the Malay Muslim and Chinese Democratic Action Party (DAP) communities. Only a limited number of videos (34) addressed other racial groups such as Indians or East Malaysians, or other religions like Christianity or Hinduism. This highlights the intense information warfare between the two political coalitions PN vs PH; *Perikatan Nasional* (PN), dominated by Malay-Muslim dominated parties such as PAS and Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia, and Pakatan Harapan (PH), represented by the Chinese-dominated DAP and the mixed-party *Keadilan*. This study also found that the emerging hashtags during the data collection period, #13mei, #13mei1969, and #bangsamelayu, used by Malay ultra-nationalists to spread anti-Chinese narratives, also appeared in the hate speech content.

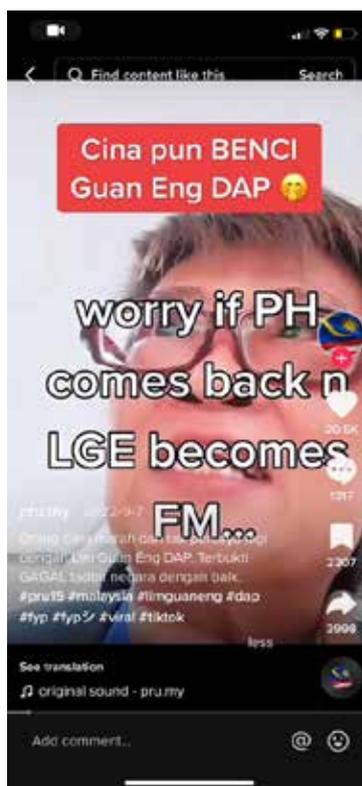


Figure 3: TikTok video 2

On December 15th, 2022, a TikTok video posted by @pru.my (Figure 3) received over 300,000 views. The account is believed to be pro-*Perikatan Nasional* (PN), a coalition of parties dominated by Malay Muslims, including *Parti Pribumi Bersatu* Malaysia (BERSATU) and *Parti Islam Se-Malaysia* (PAS). The video is an example of transfer, as it depicts the Chinese community supposedly rejecting the Chinese-dominated Democratic Action Party (DAP) and its leader Lim Guan Eng, therefore non-Chinese should not vote DAP. DAP is a member of the *Pakatan Harapan* (PH) alliance.

### Emerging trending hashtags #13mei #13mei1969 #bangsamelayu

Given the exploratory nature of this study, which also aimed to observe emerging trends on TikTok, the Malaysian TikToksphere experienced an influx of content related to “13 Mei” on November 20th, 2022. Hashtags such as #13Mei, #13Mei1969, and #BangsaMelayu (Malay Race) trended on TikTok, prompting the Malaysian government to be on alert. In this newly emerging trend, hate speech videos were shared on the platform, inciting strong reactions among users. Neonationalists on TikTok and alleged *Perikatan Nasional* (National Alliance) cybertroopers shared videos insinuating a potential recurrence of the May 13th, 1969, tragedy (“race war”) if the Democratic Action Party (DAP), a Chinese-majority political party, and its coalition were to govern Malaysia (Mohsen, 2022).

The #13mei and #13Mei1969 hashtags referred to the tragic May 13th Incident, an ethnic conflict that took place in Kuala Lumpur in 1969 between the Malay and Chinese communities (Mohsen, 2022). The conflict was triggered by a rally organized by Malay political groups on May 12th, 1969, to protest the results of the 1969 Malaysian general election, in which the ruling *Parti Perikatan* (Alliance Party) lost several seats to the Chinese-dominated DAP (Soong, 2008). The rally escalated into a violent confrontation (Ananthalaksmi, 2022) between the two communities, leading to hundreds of casualties and widespread property damage (Jalli, 2017).

With Malaysia experiencing its first-ever hung parliament, where neither of the major parties secured enough votes to establish a new government, concerns emerged that a victory for Pakatan Harapan (Hope Alliance) might lead to street “wars” targeting the Chinese community. In reaction to the widespread #13Mei content on TikTok, Malaysian authorities contacted ByteDance, TikTok’s parent company, to address hate speech and disinformation on the platform (Latiff and Chu, 2022). However, allegations emerged that TikTok did not respond swiftly enough and permitted ‘paid sponsorship’ for creators who openly shared controversial ethnoreligious content. According to Ibrahim (2022), following the election (the exact number of days after the election is unclear), as many as 1,126 videos considered provocative and extreme were blocked by TikTok’s automated system. Prior to the polling date, from November 12th to 18, a total of 857 videos were automatically blocked, and on November 19th, an additional 130 videos were removed (Ibrahim, 2022).

### Post electoral results; Broken links and deleted TikTok accounts

A review of the direct links for the collected videos was conducted to determine if any inflammatory and emotional content remained accessible on the platform. By December 15th, 2022, some accounts had been deactivated and deleted, potentially due to violations of TikTok’s policy, such as posting content that breached their guidelines, cyber troops concluding their disinformation campaigns, or creators departing the platform after being targeted by other users. However, numerous videos remain on the platform, raising questions regarding the effectiveness of TikTok’s enforcement of its “community guidelines” policy, which includes provisions addressing hate speech, misinformation, and hateful behavior (TikTok, 2022).

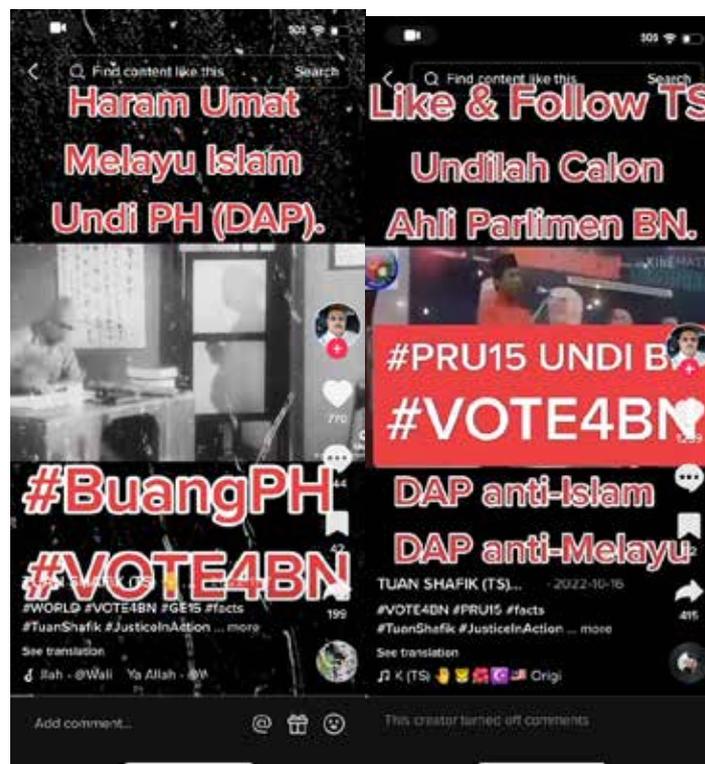


Figure 4: TikTok video 3

Despite TikTok’s policies on disinformation, contentious ethnoreligious content remains available on the platform as of February 3rd, 2023. As seen in the TikTok video above, which reads “Haram for Malay Muslim to vote PH,” posted on October 16th,

2022, and the caption on the right, which states “Vote for BN parliament member, DAP is anti-Islam, DAP is anti-Malay.” This demonstrates that even two months after the GE15 election, ethnoreligious disinformation continues to be present on the platform.

## Corruption

Corruption emerges as the second dominant narrative, encompassing videos that address diverse aspects such as political, electoral, and economic corruption. While many of these videos can be considered propaganda, they do not necessarily constitute disinformation. Among the analyzed videos, 13 contained astroturfing<sup>2</sup> elements<sup>3</sup>, featuring anonymous accounts claiming that Najib Razak, the former prime minister of Malaysia, is innocent and should return to Malaysian politics. As in previous elections, corruption was a prevalent narrative on social media in Malaysia. Issues such as the 1MDB scandal took center stage during the 2018 election, and surprisingly, some narratives in 2022 revisited the same issue. TikTok users also made corruption allegations against DAP, particularly targeting Lim Guan Eng, who was accused of failing to fulfill their manifestos when they were briefly part of the government in 2018. User @pru.my employed the term “*kencing*” (or “pee,” a colloquial Malay word meaning lying) to describe Lim Guan Eng’s alleged false promise to abolish toll fees in Malaysia. The video featured a caption reading “*pakar kencing rakyat sudah kembali*” (the citizen pee expert is back). Another video by @pru.my showcased Ragavan, Chief of Keadilan Pahang, refuting an allegation made by another politician that Anwar Ibrahim, the president of Keadilan, would break his promise not to accept pay if elected as Prime Minister. Accusations of corruption and broken promises were frequently used to undermine the reputation of the Pakatan Harapan coalition, which comprises the Democratic Action Party (DAP) and Keadilan as member parties.

### RQ3: How did TikTok offer a platform for disinformation and hate speech during GE15?

In a previous study, the potential use of TikTok for propaganda and methods for circumventing the platform’s restrictions were investigated (Jalli, 2021). Some strategies identified by Southeast Asian activists who actively employ TikTok to advocate for their causes include using combinations of letters and numbers to spell sensitive words and making minor alterations to word spelling. For instance, when discussing issues related to underage rape cases, one activist would spell “rape” as “r4pe” or “r4p3” to avoid the platform’s automated system (AI) from banning the content. Additionally, using local languages instead of mainstream global languages like English, standard Spanish, or Mandarin offers TikTok creators a greater likelihood of sharing more ‘sensitive’ content on the platform.

Similarly, interviews with six content creators identified through the first 500 collected videos during the data period revealed the same techniques. Employing unique spelling could help bypass TikTok’s restrictions unless other users report the content. This was one of the methods they used to post GE15 content on the platform. Other creators mentioned that simply speaking in dialects or Malay enabled them to avoid many restrictions. One informant also emphasized that “many divisive contents in

---

<sup>2</sup> Astroturfing is the practice of creating a fake or deceptive appearance of grassroots support for a cause, individual, product, or policy, when in reality the support is orchestrated and funded by an organized group or corporate entity.

<sup>3</sup> Using videos of Najib Razak supporters to indicate strong grassroots support for the former prime minister.



2019; Hopkins, 2014). Access to accurate and trustworthy information is essential in an inclusive democracy, enabling citizens to fully participate in the democratic process and make informed decisions. The spread of disinformation creates confusion and undermines the legitimacy of the democratic system. In Malaysia, such tendencies have been ongoing for a considerable period and seem unyielding. Deep-rooted political divisions, amplified by ethnoreligious differences, have catalyzed the emergence of cybertroopers and the prevalent use of emotionally charged political narratives. This, in turn, affects public opinion, biases election results, and jeopardizes the ideals of transparent and unbiased elections, thus eroding the democratic process.

As communication technologies evolve, especially with the rapid progression of AI, notably generative AI, it's expected that propagandists, cybertroopers, and ardent supporters will employ even more advanced strategies. As these technologies become more accessible, a broader spectrum of the public, including political actors and cybertroopers, can produce increasingly sophisticated content. Given the current absence of specific regulations and policies addressing this technology in Malaysia, the continuous use of disinformation and incendiary propaganda to shape political sentiments and behaviors remains a pressing concern. Plus, as long as Malaysia remains centered on identity politics, ethnoreligious rhetoric will continue to be employed to influence public opinion.

Malaysian reformists should strive to establish more inclusive democratic institutions face numerous challenges. One of the most significant challenges for Malaysia is that the political and legal frameworks may be inadequate to support reforms, necessitating changes to the underlying systems themselves. Despite these challenges, policymakers must remain committed to building more inclusive and just democracies, particularly in addressing information pollution in the digital space. Scholars such as Iosifidis and Nicoli (2020) and Crilley and Gillespie (2019) argue that the responsibility for containing propaganda and false information should not fall solely on governments and policymakers, but also on big tech companies. These companies, including TikTok, have a moral and ethical obligation to ensure their platforms do not serve as tools for spreading false information and manipulating public opinion. To combat disinformation and hate speech propaganda campaigns on TikTok, ByteDance has implemented measures to detect and remove misleading content, as described earlier in this article. However, the immense size of TikTok's user base and the rapid pace at which content can spread on the platform make it challenging to eliminate this content.

An informant, who requested anonymity, revealed that TikTok has been collaborating with government and non-government organizations in Southeast Asia to tackle disinformation issues on its platform. Although TikTok has previously worked with governments to address national security concerns, such as during the #13mei trend in Malaysia's election, the company reportedly has reservations about working too closely with governments as it could potentially compromise freedom of expression on its platform, especially when dealing with authoritarian or pseudo-democratic states. Therefore, it is crucial for governments and civil society to prioritize imparting media and information literacy to online users to protect against disinformation, hate speech and other forms of information pollution on social media. By equipping users with the necessary skills, democracy can be strengthened, and citizens will be less likely to be misled by false information.

## References

- “Undi18 punca parlimen tergantung.” *Berita Harian*. November 23rd, 2022. <https://www.bharian.com.my/berita/nasional/2022/11/1030751/undi18-punca-parlimen-tergantung>
- “Undi18: Jangan nafikan hak pengundi muda untuk memilih kerajaan – PM.” *Astro Awani*. December 11th, 2021. <https://www.astroawani.com/berita-politik/undi18-jangan-nafikan-hak-pengundi-muda-untuk-memilih-kerajaan-pm-335757>
- Ananthakumari, A. “Analysis: Gains for Malaysia’s hardline Islamist party a challenge for new PM Anwar”. *Reuters*. November 25, 2022. <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/gains-malaysias-hardline-islamist-party-challenge-new-pm-anwar-2022-11-25/>
- Baugut, Philip, and Katharina Neumann. “Online propaganda use during Islamist radicalization.” *Information, Communication and Society* 23, no. 11 (2020): 1570-1592.
- Chai, James. “The Paradox of Malaysia’s Lowering of Voting Age - Expanded Enfranchisement Devalued by More Unequal Representation”. *Perspective: ISEAS Yusuf-Ishak Institute*. June 15th 2022. [https://www.iseas.edu.sg/articles-commentaries/iseas-perspective/2022-63-the-paradox-of-malaysias-lowering-of-voting-age-expanded-enfranchisement-devalued-by-more-unequal-representation-by-james-chai/#:~:text=The%20Constitution%20\(Amendment\)%20Act%202019,adults%20aged%2018%20and%20above.](https://www.iseas.edu.sg/articles-commentaries/iseas-perspective/2022-63-the-paradox-of-malaysias-lowering-of-voting-age-expanded-enfranchisement-devalued-by-more-unequal-representation-by-james-chai/#:~:text=The%20Constitution%20(Amendment)%20Act%202019,adults%20aged%2018%20and%20above.)
- Chin, James. “Malaysia: Identity politics, the rise of political Islam and Ketuanan Melayu Islam.” In *Religion and identity politics: Global trends and local realities*, pp. 75-95. 2021.
- Crilly, Rhys, and Gillespie, Marie. “What to do about social media? Politics, populism and journalism.” *Journalism* 20, no. 1 (2019): 173-176.
- Dettman, Sebastian, and Thomas B. Pepinsky. “Demographic Structure and Voting Behavior during Democratization: Evidence from Malaysia’s 2022 Election.”
- Gibaja, Alberto Fernandez. “How young voters are revamping democracy in Malaysia”. *IDEAS*. November 11th, 2022. <https://www.idea.int/blog/how-young-voters-are-revamping-democracy-malaysia>
- Golbeck, Jennifer, Matthew Mauriello, Brooke Auxier, Keval H. Bhanushali, Christopher Bonk, Mohamed Amine Bouzaghrane, Cody Buntain et al. “Fake news vs satire: A dataset and analysis.” In *Proceedings of the 10th ACM Conference on Web Science*, pp. 17-21. 2018.
- Herz, Michael, and Péter Molnár, eds. *The content and context of hate speech: Rethinking regulation and responses*. Cambridge University Press, 2012.
- Hopkins, Julian. “Cybertroopers and tea parties: government use of the Internet in Malaysia.” *Asian Journal of Communication* 24, no. 1 (2014): 5-24.
- Iosifidis, Petros, and Nicoli, Nicholas. “The battle to end fake news: A qualitative content analysis of Facebook announcements on how it combats disinformation.” *International Communication Gazette* 82, no. 1 (2020): 60-81.
- Jain, Tanvi, and Jain, Romit. “Google and TikTok vs. Freedom of Expression.” *Law Essentials J. 2* (2021): 1.
- Jalli, Nuurrianti, and Idris, Ika. *Misguided Democracy in Malaysia and Indonesia: Digital Propaganda in Southeast Asia*. Lexington Books, 2023.
- Jalli, Nuurrianti. “Mission impossible?: tracking political misinformation and disinformation on TikTok.” December 20th, 2021. *The Conversation*.

- <https://theconversation.com/mission-impossible-tracking-political-misinformation-and-disinformation-on-tiktok-173247>
- Jalli, Nuurrianti. "Disinformation and Democracy in Malaysia." In *Foreign Policy at Brookings: Democracy in Asia*, pp. 44-52. Brookings Institution, Washington DC, 2022.
- Jalli, Nuurrianti. "How TikTok became a breeding ground for hate speech in the latest Malaysia general election". *The Conversation*. March 23rd, 2023. <https://theconversation.com/how-tiktok-became-a-breeding-ground-for-hate-speech-in-the-latest-malaysia-general-election-200542#:~:text=Malaysian%20authorities%20contacted%20TikTok%20to,even%20months%20after%20the%20election.>
- Jalli, Nuurrianti. "How TikTok can be the new platform for political activism: lessons from Southeast Asia". *The Conversation*. February 2nd, 2021. <https://theconversation.com/how-tiktok-can-be-the-new-platform-for-political-activism-lessons-from-southeast-asia-155556>
- Latiff, Rozana and Mei Mei Chu. "TikTok on 'high alert' in Malaysia as tensions rise over election wrangle". *Reuters*. November 23rd, 2022. <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/tiktok-high-alert-malaysia-tensions-rise-over-election-wrangle-2022-11-23/>
- Lemière, Sophie. "Illusions of Democracy: Malaysian Politics and People." *Illusions of Democracy* (2019): 1-370.
- Leong, Pauline Pooi Yin. "New Media and Political Change." In *Malaysian Politics in the New Media Age*, pp. 147-160. Springer, Singapore, 2019.
- Lim, Merlyna. "From Activist Media to Algorithmic Politics: The Internet, social media, and civil society in Southeast Asia." In *Routledge Handbook of Civil and Uncivil Society in Southeast Asia*, pp. 25-44. Routledge, 2023.
- Manganelli, Antonio, and Nicita, Antonio. "Regulating Platforms' Digital Services: Speech and Reach." In *Regulating Digital Markets: The European Approach*, pp. 167-197. Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2022.
- Mohsen, Amar Shah. "Netizens Raise Alarm over May 13th Hate Content Posted on TikTok." *The Vibes.Com*. *The Vibes*. November 23rd, 2022. <https://www.thevibes.com/articles/news/78211/netizens-raise-alarm-over-may-13-hate-content-posted-on-tiktok.>
- O'Connor, Cliodhna, and Helene Joffe. "Intercoder reliability in qualitative research: debates and practical guidelines." *International journal of qualitative methods* 19 (2020): 1609406919899220.
- Paz, María Antonia, Julio Montero-Díaz, and Alicia Moreno-Delgado. "Hate speech: A systematized review." *Sage Open* 10, no. 4 (2020): 2158244020973022.
- Phadke, Shruti, Jonathan Lloyd, James Hawdon, Mattia Samory, and Tanushree Mitra. "Framing hate with hate frames: Designing the codebook." In *Companion of the 2018 ACM conference on computer supported cooperative work and social computing*, pp. 201-204. 2018.
- Rosińska, Klaudia A. "Disinformation in Poland: Thematic classification based on content analysis of fake news from 2019." *Cyberpsychology: Journal of Psychosocial Research on Cyberspace* 15, no. 4 (2021).
- Sani, Mohd Azizuddin Mohd. "Election Law in Malaysia." In *Routledge Handbook of Election Law*, pp. 306-318. Routledge, 2023.
- Seiff, Abby. "This Country's Election Shows the Complicated Role Twitter Plays in Democracy." *Huffpost*, May 5, 2018. [https://www.huffpost.com/entry/twitter-malaysia-elections\\_n\\_5aeafdd5e4b00f70f0efe0bf](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/twitter-malaysia-elections_n_5aeafdd5e4b00f70f0efe0bf)
- Shah, Dian. "The 'Three RS'in Malaysia's Struggle for Constitutional Democracy." *Federal Law Review* 50, no. 2 (2022): 137-155.

- Soong, Kua Kia. "Racial conflict in Malaysia: against the official history." *Race and Class* 49, no. 3 (2008): 33-53.
- Sroule, J. Michael. "Authorship and origins of the seven propaganda devices: A research note." *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 4, no. 1 (2001): 135-143.
- Wagner, Markus, David Johann, and Sylvia Kritzing. "Voting at 16: Turnout and the quality of vote choice." *Electoral studies* 31, no. 2 (2012): 372-383.
- Yahaya, Khairul Anuar. "Salah ahli politik jika Undi 18 salah memilih". *Malaysia Gazette*. February 6th, 2022. <https://malaysiagazette.com/2022/02/06/salah-ahli-politik-jika-undi-18-salah-memilih/>
- Weiss, Meredith. "Is Malaysian democracy backsliding or merely staying put?" *Asian Journal of Comparative Politics* (2022): 20578911221136066.