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# POLITICAL DISCOURSE IN MALAYSIAN BLOGS

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## ABSTRACT

*This study is intended to examine political discourse in a sample of Malaysian Blogs, which operate largely outside the system of close government supervision and monitoring of media content. This paper analyzes blogs quantitatively in terms of freedom of expression, propaganda and compares blog content to analogous samples of content from mainstream newspapers in Malaysia in the midst of 2008 election. The study has revealed that blogging has developed new arena for political discussion, given voice to more criticism of policies, and weakened state control over political discourse.*

## INTRODUCTION

*“The run-up to Malaysia’s March 8 general election has seen the internet become a key political battleground for the first time, with prominent bloggers standing as candidates and the government dispatching its own “cyber-trooper” to counter opposition campaigning”. Given the popularity of blogs, this study, thus, is intended to examine political discourse in a sample of Malaysian Blogs, which operate largely outside the system of close government supervision and monitoring of media content. This paper analyzes blogs quantitatively in terms of the nature of the blogs, the agenda raised and the stance of the posted messages. The study has revealed that blogging has developed new arena for political discussion especially among the partisan bloggers, given voice to more criticism on non-substantive issues and vent anger and frustrations towards the opponents.*

Political discourse is the formal exchange of reasoned views as to which of several alternative courses of action should be taken to solve a societal problem . It is a science and essence of democracy that has been used through the history of the United States (wikipedia). Political discourse consists of problems and persuasion and is used in many debates, candidacies and in our everyday life. The most popular medium of political discourses nowadays is weblog.

The political campaign communication has witnessed the increase of weblogs use among the candidates and public. In the US election of 2005, 17% of the public used the web to gather information and 19% used the web to help them vote, this is an increase from 5% and 6% in 2001 respectively

(wikipedia).According to AlJazeera (March 2008) The latest statistics indicates that about 60 per cent of Malaysia's estimated 28 million population, or about 15 million people, now have access to the internet."With that degree of penetration, politicians, activists and individuals have been using internet lobbying to push their wish-list of policies in the March 8 vote (AlJazeera).

Tarrant, (2008) wrote in the Reuter, Malaysia opposition win shows power of cyberspace. This indicates that the power of cyberspace has, indeed, spread into the Malaysian society in the midst of the 2008 election and has resulted in the shocking winning by several quarters of opposition parties.

## OBJECTIVES

1. The objectives of the study are to analyze political weblogs pertaining to:pp
2. The size and nature of the blogs
3. The agenda raised
4. The stance of the messages; attacking opponents, reacting to the attacks of others or commenting on or describing events

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Political Discourse and its roles are worth examining as it provides the foundation for online political discourse namely blogs. Then, the emergence of blogs in general and in the political realm which has created a stir especially in the newly developed countries like Malaysia, will be discussed.

### Political Discourse

Webster's dictionary stated that discourse has two meanings: (a) formal communication of thoughts about a serious subject through words (spoken or written) and (b) rationality or the ability to reason.

Thomas Jefferson, and the other founders of the American Republic, regarded political discourse as the heart of democracy. Jefferson believed that social rank within which a person was born is not the basis of influence within society but the discourse in a free and open discussion characterized by conflict among ideas and opinions. He noted, "Differences of opinion lead to inquiry, and inquiry to truth."

Political discourse aims to achieve a consensus among citizens as to which course of action will best solve a problem such as poverty, crime, drug abuse, racism .In political discourse, problem-solving is very significant.and solutions are attached to people. One of the platform of political discourse that has gained a massive popularity is Weblog.

## Weblogs

A “blog” or “Weblog” is a Web page containing brief, chronologically arranged items of information. Weblogs take a variety of forms – a diary, a series of book review, news service, reports of activity on a project, the journal of an expedition, a photographic record of a project, or any one of a number of other forms. What blogs have in common is that they consist of brief entries arranged in reverse chronological order that are updated frequently and regularly.

Weblogs (or blogs) are becoming a “new form of mainstream personal communication” (Rosenbloom, 2004, p. 31) for millions of people to publish and exchange knowledge/information, and to establish networks or build relationships in the world of all blogs, the so-called “blogosphere”. Weblog-building technologies (or blogging tools) bring new capabilities, such as web publication and communication, to average people, especially those non-technical users. They are designed to facilitate simple and fast creation of web content without much technical or programming skill. Recent releases of blogging tools have been further improved to provide enhanced features for between-blog interactivity; thus promoting the creation of social networks among bloggers. As an innovative social computing technology that enables web based word-of-mouth (through blogging activities), weblog was recently identified as among the top “10 tech trends to watch in 2005” by Fortune magazine (Vogelstein et al., 2005, p. 43).

Hitherto the blogging phenomenon has become the most popular medium of communication. Weblog popularity has surged over the last few years, resulting in 6 million (www.technorati.com) active blogs worldwide by the end of 2004. According to Sifry (2004), founder and CEO of Technorati (well-recognized for its blog tracking/ranking service), over 12,000 new weblogs are created daily and an average of at least 4.6 weblogs are being updated every second. In a telephone survey of American Internet users, Pew Internet & American Life Project reported an increase of 58% weblog readership from February to November 2004, and reached 32 million readers (27% of the American online users) (BusinessWeek online, 2005). Blogosphere has become the world to millions of people who participate in political discourse communities everyday.

## Political Blogs

Blogs have played the major role in affecting the Malaysians in choosing their candidates. The impact has been stated by several prominent leaders like Y.A.B Dato’ Seri Rais Yatim and Y.A.B Datuk Seri Haji Mohd Ali Rustam in the daily newspaper immediately after the election and they have urged that the governments’ ministers must have their own blogs as well.

While there are millions of blogs it is difficult to ascertain with any accuracy the number of bloggers who regularly post messages on conventional politics, let alone the number of messages posted that are concerned with an event such as an election campaign.

The research that has been conducted on the blogosphere and the 2004 presidential campaign in the US ascertained that there were thousands of bloggers posting messages on various election-related issues (Williams et al., 2005). Political candidates, in particular, were fast exploiting blogs as a campaign tool. The 2004 election campaign was the first where candidates used blogs to relay their messages (Williams et al., 2005). During the Democrat presidential primaries all the leading candidates had blogs and in addition to the main candidates contesting office, there were countless pundits

making daily posts. The 40 leading pundit blogs posted about 18,000 messages during the campaign period (Cornfield et al., 2005).

## **METHODOLOGY**

The study employed a content analysis method. The list of 50 Top influential Blogs compiled by Sabahan.com basing on Technorati method was compiled. The blogs have been in existence from early 2007. From the list, 5 political blogs were identified. The entries were selected from the period of 7 Feb until 7th March 2008 a period of one month prior to the election. About 53 messages were printed out and analyzed.

1. Two coding schedules were designed by adapting Stanyer's ideas.(2004);The first schedule is as follows:
2. The ideological position of each blog. All blogs were categorized according to three categories: national party, opposition and neutral.
3. Identify whether each author was a member of an organization like a political party, media or others.
4. The second schedule concentrated on the agenda or issues of posted messages. In addition, the stance of each message was analyzed based on four criteria

Intercoder reliability was an important consideration in this analysis. Key terms and concepts were discussed by two coders. A sample of blogs was examined by the author and a research assistant. The reliability scores for the more straightforward variables stood at 100 per cent, whereas those for the variables that required subjective judgement were lower, at 80 per cent. Once any differences between coders had been overcome the full analysis was carried out.

## **FINDINGS**

### **The size and Nature of the Campaign Blogosphere**

Although by no means entirely comprehensive, this research found a total of some 53 blogs posting messages on the election campaign from the 6 blogs excluding the comments posted from other blogs. The difficulty faced was the problems in accessing the political websites as there might be problems due to firewall or denial of access from the government.

So was the blogosphere dominated by members of an organisation of one kind or another? How active were the public in expressing their views? The 2 blogs carrying posts on the campaign belonged to the candidates of the opposition parties, with 2 blogs belonging to members of the media. Another 2 blogs belongs to the public.

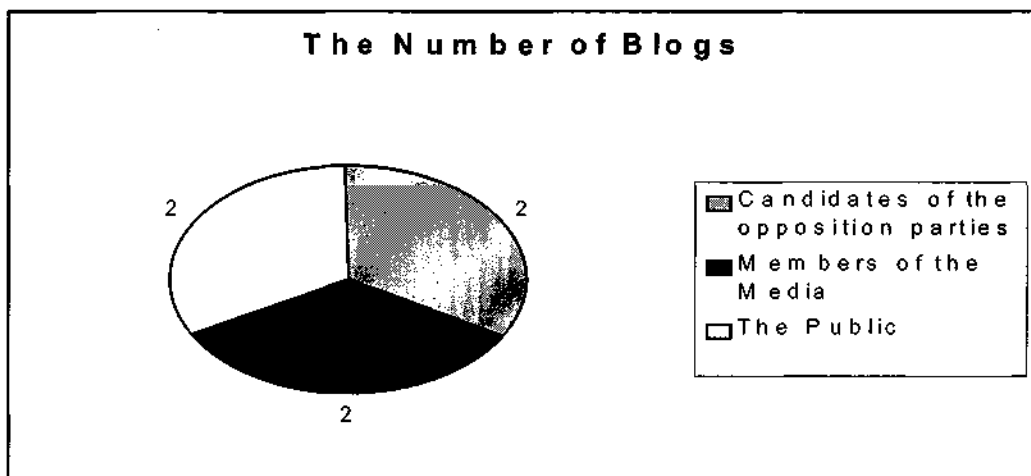


Figure 1: The number of Blogs

Was blogosphere dominated by overtly partisan actors? Altogether 2 blogs belonging to candidates of the opposition showed clear stance. With regards to the 2 blogs of the members of the media ; 1 shows no clear stance and 1 is the supporter of the opposition. Another 2 blogs belongs to the public, with the indication that one campaigned for a candidate of the ruling party but the content was full of satire about the government leaders while the other one showed a clear partisan stance; the opposition.

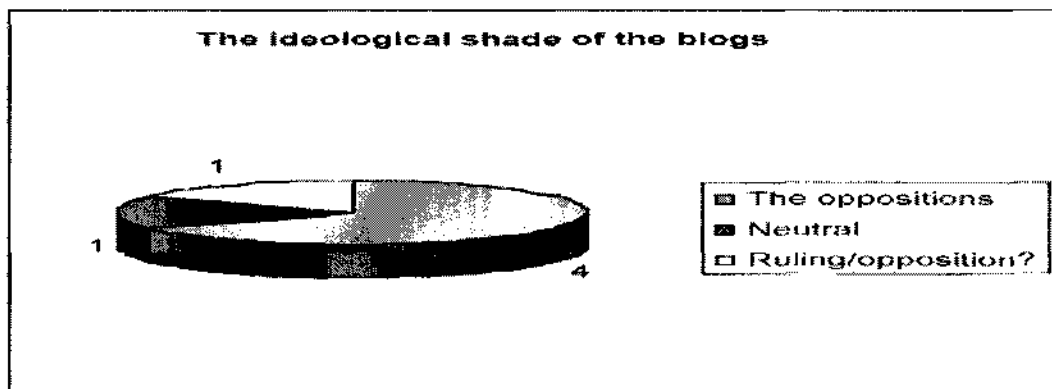


Figure 2: The ideological shade of the blogs

While the ideological shade of the blogosphere has been identified, who posted messages most frequently? Of the 53 posted messages analysed over the period 1st March to & 7 March 2008, 35.9% (19) were made by the public, 43.4% (23) posted by the members of the media and 20.8% (11) by the candidates .

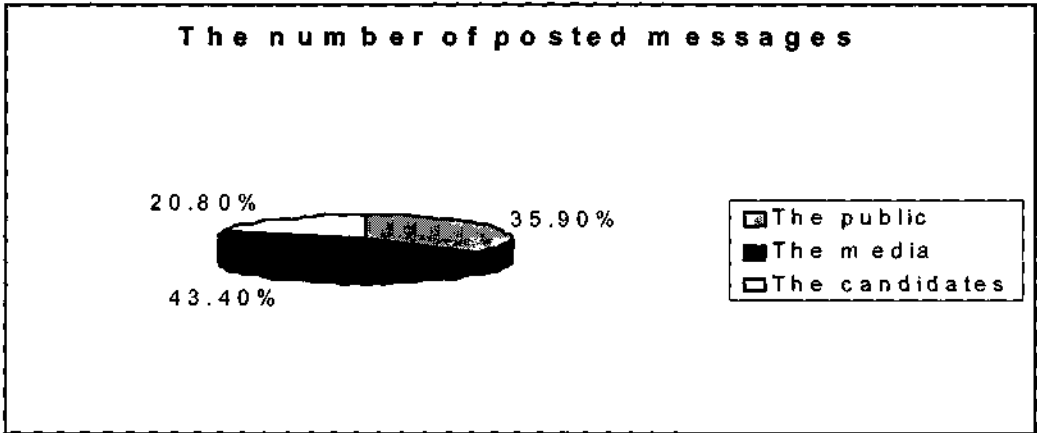


Figure 3: The number of posted messages

Partisan bloggers were the most frequent posters of messages (83% -44 messages.). Partisan bloggers made up of the public, the candidate and the media.and 17% (9) by members of the public and the media.with no clear discernible partisan/ideological stance.

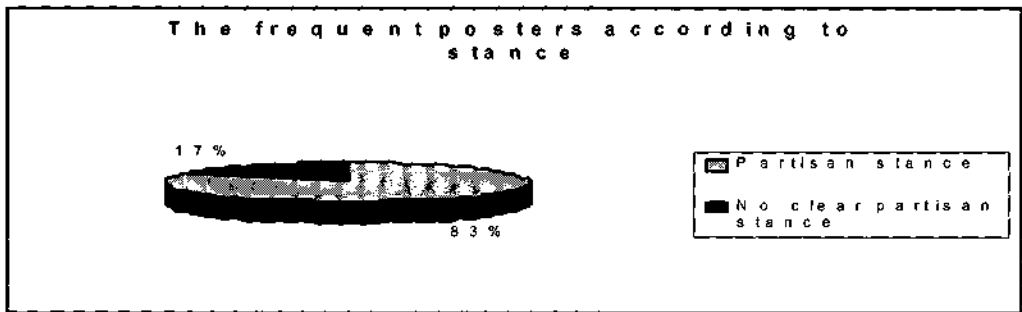


Figure 4: The frequent posters according to stance

**The Blogosphere Agenda**

The subjects of posted messages during the campaign period were analyzed.? When analysing the subject matter of posted messages, a distinction was drawn between substantive and non-substantive issues – substantive issues were ones such as the economy, health, tax, etc., and non-substantive issues such as campaign matters, election outcome and campaign events (Nossiter et al., 1995). The majority of the issues raised were non-substantive issues. The election campaign (campaign funding, style of campaigning, personality of leaders, campaign events, tales of media manipulation) accounted for 79 per cent of issues raised. 21 per cent involved substantive issues like education, religion, safety and economy.

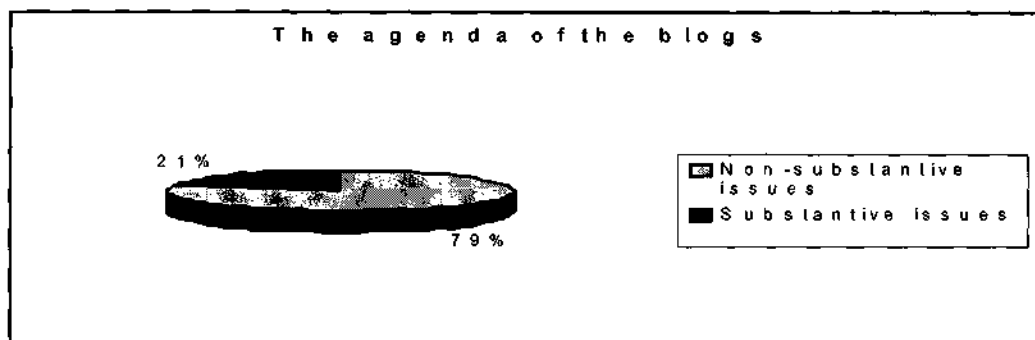


Figure 5: The agenda of the blogs

Did this overall picture mask any specific differences between the issues raised by the different groups of actors identified above? The short answer was that there was little difference between blogs belonging to members of the public and those belonging to members of an organisation. Of the issues raised by members of the public 24.5 per cent were non-substantive issues, with the figure for non-substantive issues raised by candidates and members of the media being 39.6 per cent.

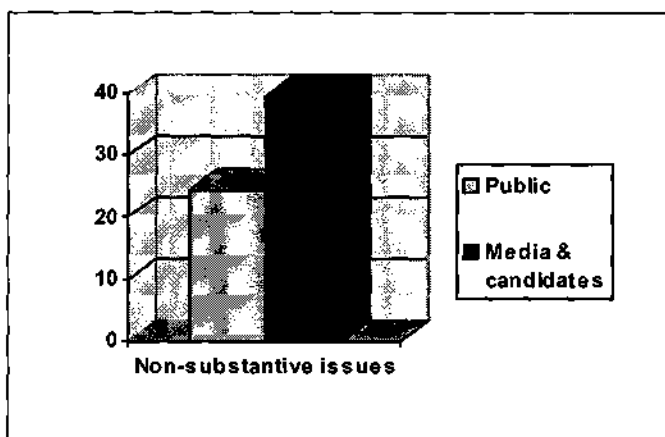


Figure 6: Non-substantive issues among the public, candidates and members of media

There was big difference between the focus of messages posted according to the political shade of the blogger. A total of 60.4 per cent of the issues raised by the partisan bloggers and non-partisan bloggers makes up for 15.1%, with the figure for non-substantive issues raised by both is at 75.5%.



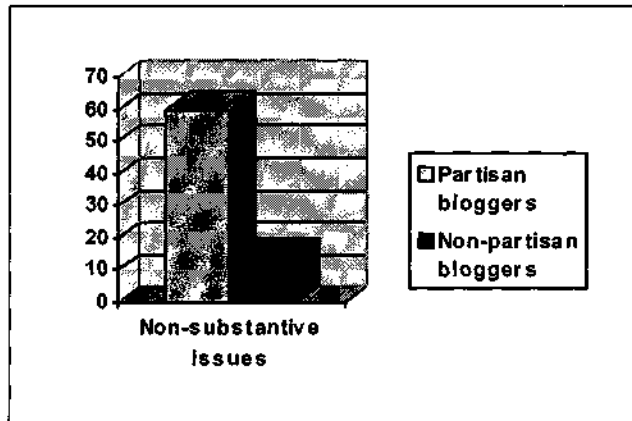


Figure 7: Non-substantive issues between the partisan and non-partisan bloggers

The messages of candidates of parties focus on substantive issues allied to their own manifesto or that of their rivals. On the messages posted by members of the parties (n=11) the issues raised were non-substantive (6) and substantive (5). The substantive issues that featured most highly were corruption, education and economy.

**The Stance of the Posted Messages**

The stance of messages were analyzed to ascertain the extent of the purpose of the message ; to comment on events during the campaign or to voice dissatisfaction or frustration about the campaign. The 53 posted messages were classified according to four possible stances: attacking opponents; reacting to the attacks of others; promoting their views or those of others; or commenting on or describing events. 34% were described as attacking/ criticizing their opponents. 11.3 % reacting to the attacks of others. 17% engaged in promoting their views and others” and 37.7% commenting on the campaign.

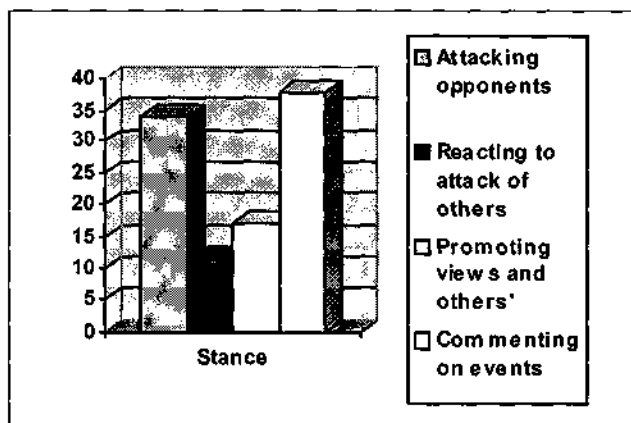


Figure 8: The stance of the posted messages

There were, however, some interesting differences between the various actors. Comparing posts made by the public (n=17) with posts made by members of an organisation (n=36) – namely party and media actors. Posts made by the candidates and the members of the media were more likely to be concentrating on the campaign events and attacking others (about 33%). Likewise, the public make up about 47 % on the related matters..Moreover, members of an organisation were more likely to be promotional (42% compared to 1%). There was big difference between both groups when it came to the number of defensive posts made, 5.6 per cent compared to 14 per cent.

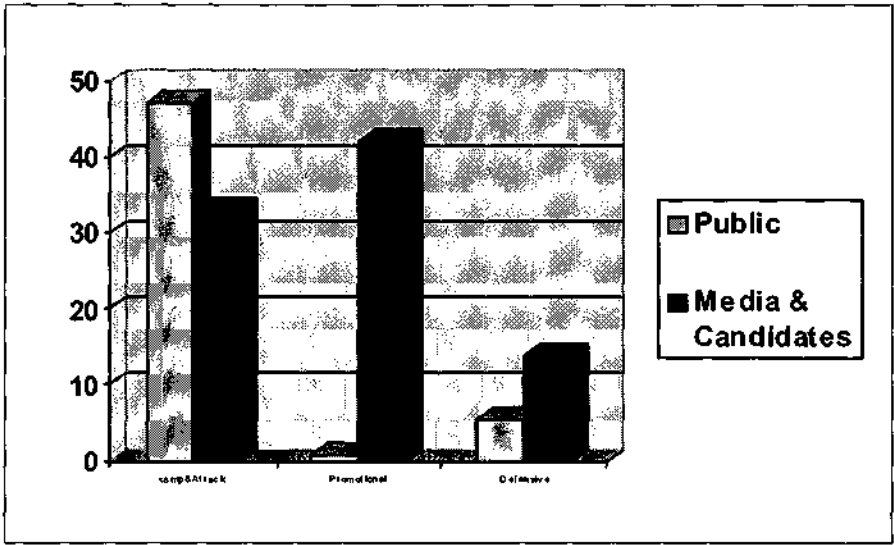


Figure 9: The stance of the posted messages according to groups

If we look at the posts by ideological shade, then partisan bloggers were the most frequent posters of critical messages attacking their opponents. Altogether, 32 per cent of messages posted on partisan blogs compared to 2 per cent of messages posted on sites of bloggers with no clear partisan stance. Most of the messages posted by the latter group (66 per cent) were commenting on the campaigns. This is close to 75 per cent for the partisan blogs. There was less difference between the groups in terms of the numbers of messages posted defending themselves, nil for non-partisan, 7 per cent partisan blogs, and promoting themselves 22% and 19.4%.

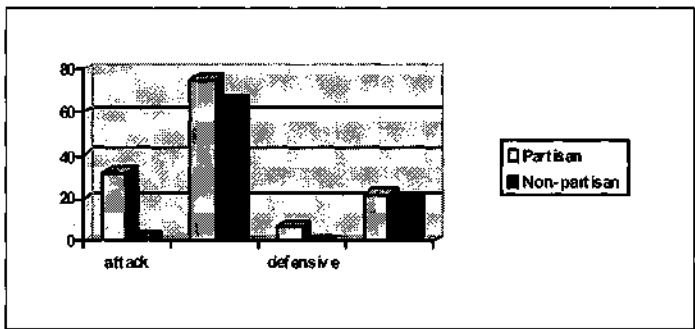


Figure 10: The stance of the posted messages according to ideological stance

## DISCUSSION

Of those blogs examined, the majority exhibited an overt ideological/partisan stance, and of those most were the opposition. This said, the greatest numbers of posts were made by actors with overt partisan stance. The posts were concerned with the substantive issues of education, corruption and economy.

The majority of posted messages concerned of non-substantive campaign issues. Over the entirety of the campaign there were only a few dedicated election blogs, these could be divided into those belonging to the partisan committed , politicians public and the media. Most of the bloggers seemed to be commenting on events, or particularly in the case of posts by , candidates , attacking other opponents. Most of the hostile messages were posted by partisan bloggers. The majority of posts by members of the public were observational and cautious.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, blogs are tools that have been used during the election period. The study used the content analysis method to assess the nature, agenda raised and the stance of the posted messages. More research should be done to assess its impact among the voters and election in general. Given that the study is limited in its size of sample, more blogs should be analyzed and taken from all quarters . Given that only partisan bloggers from the opposition parties dominate the blogosphere, we may suggest that the awareness of the ruling party of the power of the cyberspace should be increased in order to prepare a just battle in the future election.

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