Executive Summary

Political Influencers in Malaysia: Growth, Methods and Policy Implications

The 15th General Election (GE15) in Malaysia saw a noticeable surge in the involvement of social media influencers in the political sphere. It highlighted the modern manifestation of an old phenomenon: the use of key opinion leaders to shape political discourse.

What distinguishes modern, digital influencers, however, is their commercial orientation. Where previously credible experts were sought to explain and promote issues of public importance — often without compensation — influencers are now coveted for their brand promotion and recognition and engaged with on commercial terms. Influence has become a business for hire and political actors see it as an avenue to reach a wider, often younger audience.

The increasing intersection of influencers and politics raises questions about the transactional and opaque nature of the relationships underpinning political influence, and, in turn, how such influence might harm democratic processes. In Malaysia, where rules for political financing and spending remain under deliberation and where influencers are not subject to journalistic standards, there are potentially significant implications for transparency, accountability, and democratic integrity in Malaysia's digital public sphere.

This paper explores and codifies (to the extent possible) the complex ecosystem in which influencers operate, encompassing funders, intermediaries, platforms, and audiences. It did so through interviews with influencers, political staff and industry experts. Influencers, or political influencers, increasingly operate within a sophisticated network including intermediaries such as public relations firms and specialised influencer marketing agencies. There is great variety within this network, ranging from transitory influencers to partisan-aligned messengers whose political leaning is clear. Funders wield significant influence over the delivery and framing of influencer content. This diffusion of power — spread across clients, intermediaries, and influencers — creates a blurring of responsibilities, making it difficult to trace the flow of financing and how content is produced and amplified.

Content creation is not driven by public education objectives, or even tangible political influence outcomes, but audience capture. Speed and 'virality' are more important than information accuracy, with the goal to benefit from algorithmic amplification, audience engagement incentives, and trending topics. The industry operates with near complete opacity, providing audiences with no clarity into the authenticity and accuracy of the content, nor the interest and actors behind it.

As this research is exploratory and the issues complex, the paper concludes with preliminary policy recommendations that are deliberately broad and designed to stimulate further conversation. Three key priorities are identified: transparency, accountability, and literacy. Transparency surrounding the financing of political influencers, the stakeholders involved and how they shape content; accountability requirements for influencers, political actors and social media platforms to increase ethical standards; and literacy through better equipping civil society actors and educators to inform and train content consumers with the skills to critically evaluate online information.