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No-holds-barred game of Malay politics on the Net

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ABOUT a week ago, the Bukit Bintang branch of Umno Youth made a bonfire out of stacks of the Pas newsletter, Harakah.

Actually, they had wanted to set fire to that most talked-about book in recent weeks, but changed their minds because that would mean buying copies of the book and enriching the author; so they settled for the cheaper choice.

Not to be outdone, Pas in Malacca went through the trouble of digging a hole in which its members buried bundles of the New Straits Times, Utusan Malaysia and Berita Harian.

The incidents were a typically intense show of force between two long-standing Malay political rivals but, as most Malaysians would know by now, the fiercest political fight is the one now being waged on the Internet.

For several months now, Malay politics has been played out on the Internet between the pro-reformasi set (they are blatantly pro-Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim) and the pro-Government group in a manner both unprecedented and stunning.

Whether spectator or participant, the surfer is spoilt for choice. There are more than 40 pro-reformasi websites versus about 20 pro-Government/Umno sites - and that's excluding the string of discussion and forum sites.

"Some of the stuff is very clever and witty but most of it is garbage," says a political aide who monitors these sites as part of his duties and for his own amusement.

But "the stuff" is often considered clever or nonsense depending on which side of the fence one is standing. Web politics is extremely polemic and there is quite little room for the middle ground.

That is not to say that there aren't reasoned and well-argued postings; there are, but they are too few and far in between. As a result, a great deal of the political material on the Net tends to border on the outlandish, even slanderous, and does not always make sense.

"It's anarchy ... they simply accuse anybody they like," says former journalist Rosnah Majid who is head of Wanita Umno's Merbok division.

If Rosnah sounds annoyed, it's probably because she was the subject of several anonymous postings in Laman Reformasi, a popular site, claiming that she was the editor of the new tabloid Eksklusif. It also claimed that the tabloid was funded by Tun Daim Zainuddin.

Rosnah ignored the allegations because "it's rubbish" but the tabloid's owners, Kumpulan Kraftangan, rushed to deny the connection because they knew all too well how such false accusations could damage their business.

But the former journalist got really riled up over another mischievous posting recently. Apparently, Wanita Umno Merbok hosts a social do every year at an old folks home in Kedah.

This time, the Merbok Umno division decided to join the Wanita wing at the centre and within days, the website in question had declared that Daim, who is Merbok MP, was so desperate that he was fishing for votes from the geriatrics.

"I was very annoyed," says Rosnah.

Partisanship is the order of the day where Net politics is concerned. Only the very naive would assume these websites to be an alternative media even though the pro-reformasi sites offer loads of material not available in the mainstream media, which explains in part the astonishing number of

hits they boast of over the pro-Government sites.

For instance, the schoolish Konspirasi has some 200,000 hits to date compared to the pro-Government Laman Adil (arch-rival to Laman Reformasi) which has just a little over 18,000 hits.

Often the main attraction of Net politics is the way they slug it out: outright accusations and counter-accusations, sly insinuations, character-assassination - basically things that could land one in court for libel if said in the newspapers.

"They hide behind the anonymity ... it's cowardice," says Umno Youth's Abdul Azim Mohd Zabidi.

It's not surprising then that Malay politics on the Web has been likened to a sophisticated form of surat layang.

The fact that Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad is the chief target of the pro-Anwar websites is a supreme irony considering that it is largely thanks to him that they are enjoying the facility.

For them, the equation is simplistically straightforward: Dr Mahathir equals Umno equals the Government. Thus, they think that if they lash out at Dr Mahathir, they whack the Government and Umno as well.

Other targets include Umno figures like Datuk Seri Sabbaruddin Chik, Datuk Mohamed Rahmat, Datuk Ibrahim Ali, Datuk Seri Megat Junid Megat Ayob, Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak and Datuk Hishammuddin Hussein.

Ibrahim, for one, is often portrayed as a frog (a reference to his party-hopping), an apple-polisher and a loudmouth to boot.

But all these insults wash over the Deputy Minister like water off a duck's back.

"It means I am making an impact ... that they give me so much attention," he declares.

Umno Youth's own investigation, says Zein Isma Ismail, shows that of the 2,500 odd articles in the politics-related sites, more than half are critical of the Government and its politicians, the judiciary and the police.

"The opposition is behind all this. They have one single objective - to topple the Government," says Zein who presides over Umno Youth's Internet Committee.

The Umno side suspects that Laman Reformasi is backed by a pro-Pas group. The reason: although the website advertises logos of the four main opposition parties - Pas, Keadilan, DAP and PRM - its accompanying slogan is: Undilah Pas dan yang bersekutu dengannya (Vote Pas and its allies).

But many active web surfers just want to seek, contribute or exchange views rather than champion the cause of any party per se.

Sabri Zain, the "reformasi journalist", is one of them.

His Reformasi Diary - eyewitness accounts of the street protests - enjoyed a huge following largely because it was a real alternative to the thin accounts in the mainstream media.

"It's my aim, always, not to inflame hatred, racial bigotry and violence. But I don't try to hide my sympathies and I stick by what I say," he says.

Actually, Sabri's Internet excursions are among the more responsible of web postings, hence, it is an irony that he is now party to a libel suit.

And if Dr Mahathir is a villain to the pro-reformasi set, then Anwar is demon to the pro-Government group.

Very often, arguments occur on an-eye-for-an-eye basis or along the line of what Malays term as bantai or hentam (bashing). Their intention has less to do with establishing the truth than undermining each other through half-truths and slander.

For instance, says Sabri: "Personally, I don't believe this business about the Israel bank accounts of all those people. Neither do I believe

this thing that's all over the Net ... that Wan Azizah had filed for divorce."

Religion is also a popular weapon since challenging a Malay's credibility as a Muslim is the surest way to undermining him as a politician.

Racial bigotry is another disturbing feature of Net politics. There seems to be this latent racism that requires so little to bring out.

A recent example was Mohamed's racial remarks about Datin Seri Dr Wan Azizah Wan Ismail which upset many, especially the reformasi people who retaliated by hooting at Mohamed's own Chinese ancestry and the fact that his wife is Chinese.

But the pro-reformasi surely cannot deny that they have been harping on Dr Mahathir's mixed ancestry right from the start, suggesting that it had everything to do with his sacking of Anwar.

They seem oblivious to the fact that in doing so, they are alienating a large number of potential sympathisers of Indian origin just as Mohamed's remarks have slighted many Chinese Malaysians.

The pro-Government websites are not above their share of the same.

Says the same political aide: "Only three or four are credible. The rest are little better than most of the reformasi sites."

Incidentally, this is the sort of material that is being downloaded, photostated and freely distributed in mosques during Friday prayers.

The Malays, it has been often said, take their politics seriously. Still, one cannot help but be amazed at the speed and sophistication with which they have employed the Internet for politics.

But sociologist Saliha Hassan is unfazed because Malays, she says, have always had opinions about their leaders.

"There have always been the jokes, poking fun, nuances, a certain lack of respect ... except that it was voiced within their own circles. The new part is the medium. These views are now put on the Internet and they go out very quickly to a lot of people," she says.

But that does not mean that Malays have mastered politics. In fact, the manner in which Malays play politics, whether on the Internet or otherwise, suggests they have much to learn about politics as it is practised in a mature democracy.

According to Saliha, studies in political attitudes and culture have shown that one of the weaknesses of living democracies in Asia is that their citizens have not quite mastered the art of negotiation and conflict-resolution.

The Malays, and for that matter Malaysians, have some way to go in negotiating their anger and differences more rationally and unemotionally.

Some have dismissed the political debate on the Net to a phase, even a fad among the younger generation. Others say that Internet politics is in danger of losing credibility in the long run if it does not rise above the level of gossip and khabar angin.

The prospect of a more rational level of cyber-debate is definitely there, particularly after feelings cool down over the Anwar issue. But politics on the Internet is unlikely to fade off - it is simply too attractive and exciting a medium.

That is something which Malaysian politicians of the future will have to come to terms with as well as the fact that part of the solution to more responsible Internet politics lies in the way the mainstream media will be allowed to play its proper role.

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